The Ute Campaign of 1879: A Study in the Use of the Military Instrument

by
Major Russel D. Santala

50th Anniversary

COMBAT STUDIES INSTITUTE

FOREWORD

The Ute Campaign of 1879 is a study of linkages. Major Russel D. Santala's work not only explores the threads of continuity between engagements and campaigns but also examines the relationship of government policy to one of the instruments of that policy—the Army. Ten years before the events of this study occurred, General William T. Sherman made note of this connection. In a commencement address to the West Point class of 1869, he compared the Army to the steam engine and warned that it is "held together by an organization and discipline demanding great knowledge and labor, moved into action by causes more powerful than steam, and so intimately connected with the whole fabric of government that ignorance and mismanagement would result in a catastrophe more fatal than could result from the explosion of any steam engine."

This study chronicles the Army's role in the struggle between two cultures. At the same time, it serves to illuminate the problems of utilizing the military instrument in an environment of transitory national policy and competing national and local interests.



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CSI publications cover a variety of military history topics. The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

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INTRODUCTION

"The lance of the mightiest Plains Indian nation was shattered, and thereafter no Indians retained enough military power to resist the writ of Washington for long."[1] With this remark, Russell F. Weigley concludes a portion of his book on the American Army's campaigns against the Indian. These campaigns have been viewed by some historians as devoid of strategic or operational focus, save for the Army's continuation of its "war of annihilation" strategy that it had held since the Civil War. This work, however, examines the Army's focus—its strategic and operational framework as it related to the uprising of the Ute Indians of Colorado in 1879. The central question addressed will be, did the Army of this period have an operational strategy consistent with national goals?

Before this question can be answered, however, three secondary questions must be considered:

1. Did a national military strategy exist, and how did it relate to the conduct of the Indian campaigns?

2. How was the execution of the national military campaign constrained?

3. And how did operational and tactical plans conform to the national military strategy?

In addressing these questions, this study will first examine the Indian policy of this period as it reflected U.S. security strategy in support of the national objective of Western expansion. The War Department's evolving military strategy in support of U.S. security strategy also will be scrutinized.

In addition, the execution of military policy at the operational (military department) level and tactical (battlefield) level will be evaluated. This study will examine the process of implementing strategy as it was executed from the strategic or national level, through the operational or departmental level, to the tactical or battlefield level (see figure 1). At the same time, the Army's methods of implementation will be examined in relation to the constraining factors acting on them internally and externally. Specifically, this work will examine the application of military power in support of government policy as it relates to the Ute campaign.

Before beginning an analysis of the national strategic policy and its impact on military strategy, this work, in chapter 1, will begin by providing some background material pertaining to events that were

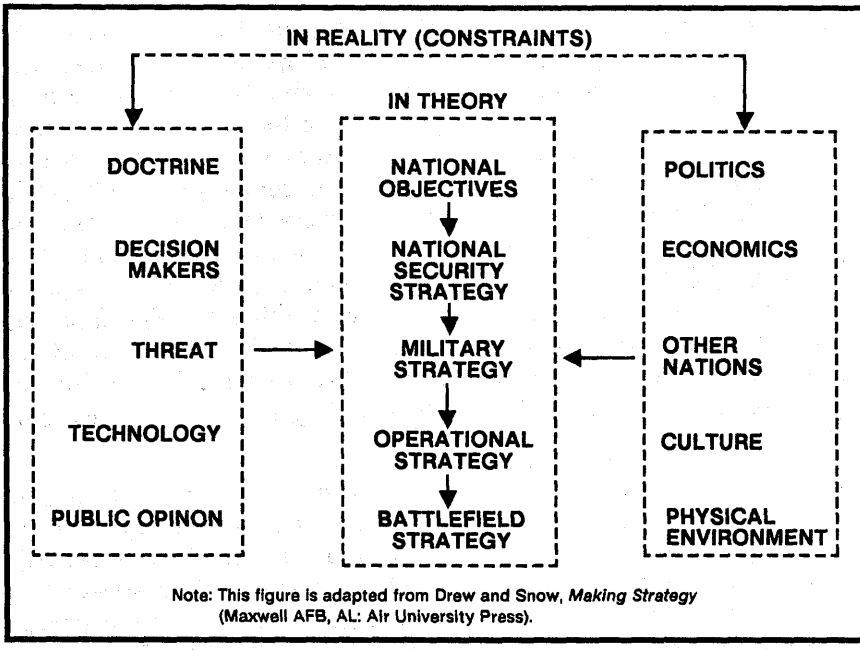


Figure 1. The strategy process

unfolding in Colorado and examine some of the elements of the Ute crisis. This will assist the reader in focusing on larger strategic and operational matters and provide insights concerning the Utes and the violent actions in which they took part.

Chapter 2 considers the national security strategy of the Rutherford B. Hayes' administration (1877–81) and the corresponding national military strategy of the War Department. Conflicting views exist in the current body of literature concerning the impact of the government on the utilization of military power in relation to Indian policy. To place this dispute in proper focus, Indian and military policy in the West from 1865 to 1880 will be analyzed and delineated. The purpose of this inquiry is to articulate the national Indian policy of this period as it related to the national military strategy (or doctrine) required to implement that policy.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of the operational strategy selected to achieve the goals of the U.S. Indian policy. This chapter focuses on the operational-level military organizations and nonmilitary government agencies responsible for the application of armed force to achieve political goals within the theater of operations. The military organizations examined are the Division of the Missouri, the

Department of the Missouri, and the Department of the Platte. The nonmilitary elements within the theater of operations included the state of Colorado and representatives of the federal government operating within the state (i.e., agents of the Indian Bureau). It is at this level that an absence of a clear military strategy is apparent, largely the result of the personalities of the senior Army officers in command. (The commanders of the Departments of the Platte and Missouri, Brigadier Generals George Crook and John Pope, held significantly different views on the role of the Army and the conduct of campaigns than did their superiors, Generals William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan.) This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the operational strategy that guided tactical-level commanders within the departments and provided them with specific guidance for the conduct of the Ute campaign.

Chapter 4 focuses on the tactical events of the Ute campaign. These actions included the battle at Milk River and the show of force executed by Colonel Wesley Merritt that intimidated the Utes into coming to the bargaining table. Local factors operating as constraints on the tactical-level commanders during the conduct of the campaign will be discussed. In addition to the explanation of battlefield events, the goal of this chapter is to relate tactical events with the operational considerations influencing them.

Chapter 5 concludes this study by establishing that the Army did have an Indian policy that was internalized throughout the command structure. This policy, which provided for the application of military power (within budgetary and manpower constraints), was a reflection of the national security objectives of the Hayes administration. If the military strategy was not mutually supportive throughout the strategy process model, the likely cause was the differing views of senior Army leaders at the national and departmental levels.

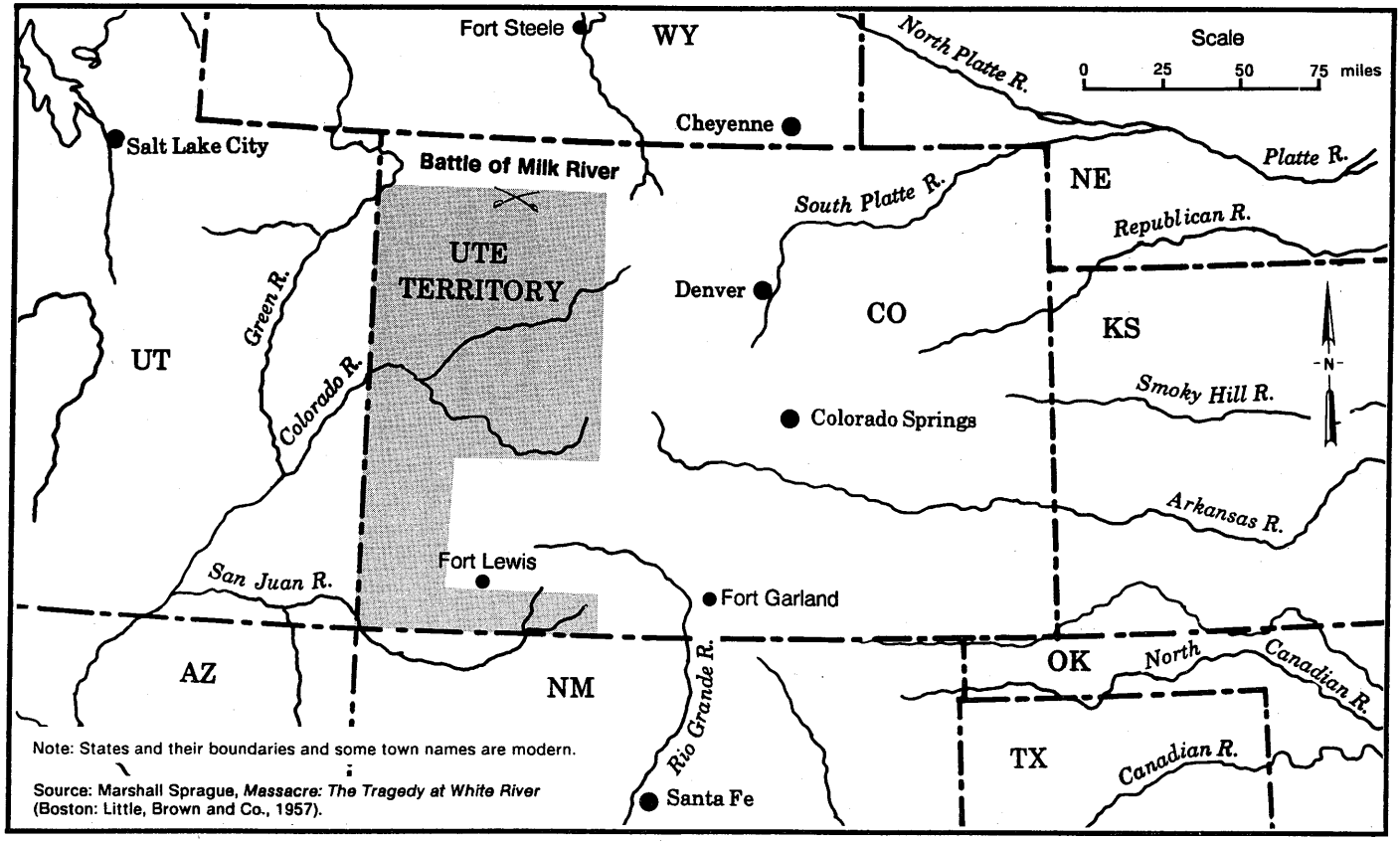
I. THE CONTEXT OF THE UTE CAMPAIGN

In September 1879, three troops of the 5th U.S. Cavalry under the command of Major Thomas T. Thornburgh left Fort Steele, Wyoming, for the White River Agency in northwest Colorado. Thornburgh was operating under orders from the commander of the Department of the Platte, Brigadier General George Crook, to proceed to the agency and assist the reservation agent, Nathan C. Meeker. Meeker had been appointed agent to the White River Agency on 18 March 1878 after actively pursuing the position through political acquaintances, both in Colorado and in Washington, D.C. Meeker's goal was to transform his Indian agency into a kind of utopian state that combined his religious views and the lessons from the Union Colony, a cooperative agrarian experiment in Greeley, Colorado. (For the location of the White River Agency, see map 1.)

The appointment of Indian Bureau agents had long been a part of the political spoils system. With a change in administration, a whole series of covert and overt appointments were made to reward political service. This inept system of appointments caused many problems at the agencies and had become a sore point with the War Department. Since 1849, the Department of the Interior controlled Indian affairs, and particularly under the Grant administration, this arrangement had come under criticism from both the reform movement and senior officers within the Army who believed they were better qualified at managing Indian policy for the nation than were mere political appointees. General Sheridan commented "that it is not the Government that is managing the Indians, it is the contractors, traders, and supply interests."[1]

Shortly before his appointment, Meeker received an encouraging letter from Colorado Senator Henry M. Teller describing the senator's discussion with Commissioner of Indian Affairs Edward A. Hayt on 3 January 1878. The letter read:

> I went to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and posted your claims for an agency and designated White River Agency as the one I wanted for you. Now I think I have a good show. The Commissioner said he was not at all satisfied with the agent at White River who knows nothing of irrigation or farming in the west. I am anxious you should have it because I feel you should do something that would be of benefit to our people and to the indians. There I believe the indians can be taught to raise cattle and I have an idea you are the man to do it. Now if you had the place it would pay you $1,500 a year and you would have a house to live in free, a garden and so forth. So I think you can save something. It is only 100 miles from the



Map 1. The area of operations

railroad and quite easy. If you accept I will commence work. Let me hear soon.[2]

The Utes took an entirely different view of their new agent. Largely oblivious to the whites' violations of the treaty of 1873 (which had secured for the Utes 4,000,000 acres of Colorado), they viewed themselves as allies to the United States government. As Ouray, the most prominent of the Ute chiefs expressed: "The army conquered the Sioux. You can order them around. But we Utes have never disturbed you whites. So you must wait until we come to your ways of doing things."[3]

Both the representative of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and the government of the state of Colorado did not provide for the assimilation of the Ute tribe into mainstream American culture. Rather, they advocated the isolation of the Utes. Because of this, the relationship between Meeker and his "charges," the White River Utes, had deteriorated to the point that Meeker felt his life was in jeopardy. Finally, Meeker was confronted by the Utes, who suspected him of direct involvement with the anti-Ute movement in the state.

At this time, articles headlining "The Utes Must Go" were being prepared by members of the staff of Governor Frederick W. Pitkin. Pitkin was a former miner who used his wealth (acquired from a gold mine in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado) to influence the revision of the Ute treaty in 1873 and to become the first governor of Colorado on its statehood in 1876. His view of the Utes was an expression of the statewide view among whites that they were an impediment to the development of the richest part of the state and should be removed to the Indian Territories or elsewhere. William Vickers, an adviser to the governor, wrote in the *Denver Tribune:*

> The Utes are actual, practical Communists and the Government should be ashamed to foster and encourage them in their idleness and wanton waste of property. Living off the bounty of a paternal but idiotic Indian Bureau, they actually become too lazy to draw their rations in the regular way but insist on taking what they want wherever they find it. Removed to Indian Territory, the Utes could be fed and clothed for about one half what it now costs the government.
>
> Honorable N. C. Meeker, the well-known Superintendent of the White River Agency, was formerly a fast friend and ardent admirer of the Indians. He went to the Agency in the firm belief that he could manage the Indians successfully by kind treatment, patient precept and good example. But utter failure marked his efforts and at last he reluctantly accepted the truth of the broader truism that the only truly good Indians are dead ones.[4]



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

An early photograph of Chief Ouray shows him wearing a peace medal from a treaty negotiation

Into this situation, Major Thornburgh and his three troops of cavalry arrived to mediate a dispute that had its roots in the Indian policy of the previous twenty-five years. Thornburgh's orders gave him only the broadest instructions. Meeker had requested assistance on 10 September 1879 by sending a telegram to Commissioner Hayt. The message reached Hayt on 13 September 1879.

The request for troops was seen by Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz, Secretary of War George W. McCrary, and ultimately by General of the Army William T. Sherman. Sherman approved the request for troops and instructed the commander of the Division of the Missouri, Major General Philip H. Sheridan, to order "the nearest military commander" to send troops to White River.[5] Following some confusion at Sheridan's headquarters, the order was sent to Fort Steele near Rawlins, Wyoming, and then to Thornburgh. While the troops at Fort Steele were the closest to the White River Agency, they had not operated in Colorado before, as the Colorado-Wyoming border delineated the boundary between the Department of the Missouri and the Department of the Platte.[6] By the conclusion of the campaign, troops from both departments were committed against the Utes.

The commander of the Department of the Platte, Brigadier General George Crook, gave the following order to the forces at Fort Steele: "You will move with a sufficient number of troops to White River Agency under special instructions."[7] Crook's special instructions directed Thornburgh to contact the agent on the scene and "develop" the situation. Thornburgh began his march to the White River Agency on 22 September 1879 with a total of 153 soldiers and 25 civilians.

By 25 September 1879, they arrived within fifty-three miles of the agency and camped on the banks of Fortification Creek. Thornburgh dispatched a letter to Meeker, reporting:

> In obedience to instructions from the General of the Army, I am enroute to your agency, and expect to arrive there on the 29th instant, for the purpose of affording you any assistance in my power in regulating your affairs, and to make arrests at your suggestion, and to hold as prisoners such of your Indians as you desire, until investigations are made by your department.
>
> I have heard nothing definite from your agency for ten days and do not know what state of affairs exists, whether the Indians will leave at my approach or show hostilities. I send this letter by Mr. Lowry, one of my guides, and desire you to communicate with me as soon as possible, giving me all the information in your power, in order that I may know what course I am to pursue. If practical, meet me on the road at the earliest moment.[8]

After dispatching the letter, Thornburgh continued the march toward the agency and met a delegation of eleven Utes from the agency, who denounced Meeker and voiced their concern over the arrival of troops.[9]

The consternation of the Utes was understandable, both in light of their perception of the Army's role in the suppression of the other large Colorado tribe—the Cheyenne—and in their own previous support of the Army. The Utes had joined "the rope thrower," Kit Carson, during his earlier campaigns against the Navajo and had taken a role in support of the Army against their traditional enemy, the Cheyenne.[10] They had not faced an active U.S. campaign against them in the past, having relied on their remoteness to protect them from the expansion of the Western movement.

The Utes had also benefited by having a relatively sophisticated leader, Chief Ouray. After being invited to Washington by the Indian Bureau to negotiate the Ute Treaty of 1868, Ouray took his cause to the Eastern press. Ouray remarked: "The agreement an Indian makes to a United States treaty is like the agreement a buffalo makes with his hunters when pierced with arrows. All he can do is lie down and give-in."[11] Although only a chief of the Uncompahgre branch of the Utes, Ouray was viewed by both state and federal officials as the de facto leader of the entire tribe.

The response from Meeker to Major Thornburgh's earlier letter gave an accurate appraisal of the Indians' mood at the agency. The 27 September 1879 letter stated:

> Understanding that you are on the way hither with United States troops, I send a messenger, Mr. Eskridge, and two Indians, Henry (interpreter) and John Ayersly, to inform you that the Indians are greatly excited, and wish you to stop at some convenient camping place, and then that you and five soldiers of your command come into the Agency, when a talk and a better understanding can be had.
>
> This I agree to, but I do not propose to order your movements, but it seems for the best. The Indians seem to consider the advance of the troops as a declaration of real war. In this I am laboring to undeceive them, and at the same time to convince them they cannot do whatever they please. The first object is to allay apprehension.[12]

Upon receipt of this letter, Thornburgh decided to continue toward the agency and, at some undetermined point, stop the main body and proceed alone with a small escort.[13] But Thornburgh and his force never reached the agency. The Utes attacked his command at Milk River, and Thornburgh was killed. For seven days, his command was besieged by the Utes, until a relieving force under Colonel Wesley

Merritt arrived on the scene. For the next month, the Army played a cat-and-mouse game with the Utes, attempting to locate their camps, while the Utes retreated deeper into the mountains.

The Army was walking a tightrope, attempting to cow the Utes by a show of force with troops from both the Departments of the Platte and the Missouri, while avoiding a confrontation to safeguard the lives of the hostages that had been taken from the agency after the battle at Milk River. While the Army continued to look for the Utes, General Charles Adams, acting as a special envoy of Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz, was negotiating with Chief Ouray and the Uncompahgre Utes to intercede with the White River band of the tribe to release the hostages. Adams was well respected by the Utes and trusted by the state's two most powerful political figures—Teller and Pitkin. Earlier, Adams had warned Secretary Schurz of the inherent danger of sending troops to resolve the Ute question. Schurz responded that a "calamity" on the White River would delight Teller and other Grant Republicans and provide them with an excuse to dump President Rutherford B. Hayes from the 1880 presidential ticket. Furthermore, the Army would be pleased to have a fresh disaster to use as a basis for new demands to transfer the Indian Bureau to the War Department.[14]

Varied constraining factors were at work during this period affecting Indian policy and military strategy. Most writers on the subject agree that political, economic, and social factors played a large role in determining the national Indian policy. They disagree whether this was an articulated policy or merely an ad hoc expression of the spirit of Manifest Destiny. Additionally, there exists no consensus on the impact of either the stated or unstated Indian policy on the application of military power in support of national goals and objectives.

Robert Wooster argues in his book, *The United States and Indian Policy: 1865—1903*, that post-1865 politics played a clear role in defining the military strategy that the Army followed. He concludes that while a wide variety of influences influenced the role of the Army, lack of concern by national political and military figures precluded the development of a lasting policy or doctrine.

Russell F. Weigley in *The American Way of War* attributes our military strategy in combating the Indians to the experiences of the Army's senior leadership during the Civil War. As Weigley states: "If the conduct of the Civil War had prepared the United States Army to employ a strategy of annihilation, sometimes with frightful literalness, in its wars against the Indians, the strategy was much in

harmony with post-Civil War national policy."[15] Weigley says that Sherman, in the Civil War, practiced a kind of total war that eclipsed earlier U.S. historical models in terms of terror and destructiveness. This type of war was to reach a zenith during the winter campaigns against the Indians.

A balance between the two views seems a more prudent position. Certainly, General of the Army William T. Sherman carried a reputation for wars of annihilation with him into his leadership of the Army in the West, but whether this was the general doctrine of the Army can be questioned. Nonetheless, Sherman, as a member of the Peace Commission of 1867, made clear his view to Red Cloud and the Sioux "that he had little tolerance for their demands. Whatever they said, they were doomed. The United States, with its expanding population, its railroads, and its army, was the face of the future."[16]

One of those who opposed Sherman's view of Army strategy as a form of Social Darwinism was Brigadier General John Pope. Pope, in the words of a twentieth-century U.S. politician, favored a "kinder and gentler" reservation policy. In an address in May 1878, Pope did not question the displacement of the Indians from their lands, only that it should be accomplished with the least suffering. He typified the views of the Army officer thusly:

> To the Army officer a state of peace with the Indians is, of all things, the most desirable, and no man in all the country east or west would do more to avert an Indian war. To him war with Indians means far more than to anyone else except the actual victim. He sees its beginning in injustice and wrong to the Indian, which he has not the power to prevent; he sees the Indian gradually reach a condition of starvation impossible of longer endurance and thus forced to take what he can get to save himself from dying of hunger, and cannot help sympathizing with him for doing so; but because he does so the officer is ordered to use force against him. With what spirit a humane, or even a decently civilized man, enters into such a war, may be easily understood, and yet in nearly every case this is precisely the feeling with which Army officers begin hostilities with Indians.[17]

It is with this paradoxical and ambivalent view that this study will begin an analysis of the strategic and operational framework of the Army in the context of the Ute campaign of 1879. Is there an alternative to the Weigley model of the "war of annihilation" strategy? Or, according to Wooster, was a policy not even necessary, as "no emergency existed" in the campaign against the Indian.

The conduct of the Ute campaign and subsequent Indian campaigns may have denoted a shift in United States military policy that returned the Army to its frontier roots and away from the

conventional Army that was created as a result of the Civil War. The period also marked a transition in Army leadership that would prepare the Army for the next century. Ultimately, the strategy in the West was something more than "a series of forlorn hopes."[18]

II. STRATEGIC SETTING

The relationship between a government's policy and the strategy of its military is not often clear. The political origins of military strategy often serve to confound the historian as well as the soldier. Historian T. Harry Williams states:

> Once a government has decided on a policy, it turns to strategy to achieve its objective. The government, to cite the American experience, informs the military of the objective and indicates the human and material resources it can make available. The military then takes over the planning and execution of a strategy to accomplish the policy; in effect, it takes over the running of the war. This is the concept of strategy that appeared in early modern writings on military theory and that prevailed in America's first wars. There was always, however, a gap between theory and practice.[1]

From the conclusion of the Civil War through the end of the Rutherford B. Hayes administration, the national objectives of the United States were to promote economic development and settlement in the Western regions. Accomplishment of these objectives required the federal government to formulate an Indian policy that would deal with the inevitable conflict of the two cultures. To accomplish these objectives, three goals were incorporated into Indian policy: first, the removal of Indians from the major east-west immigration trails where they were an obstacle to the development of the transcontinental railroad routes; second, the increase of the reservation system to reduce contact and conflict between the races; and third, the use of the reservation system to assimilate the Indians into mainstream American culture. This Indian policy focused Army operations and became a cornerstone in national security policy during the period.

In retrospect, this security strategy is readily apparent and recognizable, but at the time, the strategy was not expressed in an annually produced document as is the current practice. As General William T. Sherman prepared to attend the August Peace Commission of 1867— which was expected to open the plains for settlement and the railroad—his concern was on defining the Army's role in relation to government policy. He stated:

> I dont [sic] care about interesting myself too far in the fate of the poor devils of Indians who are doomed from the causes inherent in their nature or from the natural & persistent hostility of the white race. All I aim to accomplish is to so clearly define the duties of the Civil & Military agents of Govt so that we wont [sic] be quarrelling all the time as to whose business it is to look after them.[2]

The conclusion of the Civil War brought the focus of the United States back to national expansion beyond the Western frontier and

into the vast Western interior. Indeed, the "national objective" of the United States for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century can be characterized as a "final rush of American energy upon the remaining wilderness."[3] Consequently, the federal government was faced with the need to develop a security strategy that would support the movement of industry and immigrants east from California and west from the second tier of trans-Mississippi states—Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Challenging the inexorable march of America's "Manifest Destiny" was the Indian; Indian policy was the federal government's answer to this challenge.

By 1865, the first prewar attempt at a solution to the "Indian question" had been overtaken by events and the continuing western expansion of the nation. This early attempt at physical separation, using the Western trans-Mississippi River states for Indian territory, had become untenable. The early security strategy—the westward transfer of the Eastern Indian tribes, clearing the area east of the Mississippi River for "civilization"—no longer fulfilled the national objective of settlement from "sea to shining sea."

The prewar national policy of separation had been created by the ratification of the Indian Removal Bill on 28 May 1830. Two actions during this period would affect further relations between the United States and the Indian. First, the Indians who had supported the United States during the War of 1812 were stripped of the lands that had been previously guaranteed them by treaties "as long as the grass shall grow and the water flow." As Chief John Ross, of the Cherokee nation, commented:

> What a pernicious effort must such a document . . . have on the interests and improvements of the Indians? Who shall expect from the Cherokees a rapid progress in education, religion, agriculture, and the various arts of civilized life when resolutions are passed in a civilized and Christian legislature (whose daily sessions, we are told, commence with a prayer to Almighty God) to wrest their country from them, and strange to tell, with the point of the bayonet, if nothing else will do? Is it the nature of things, that the Cherokees will build good and comfortable houses and make them great farms, when they know not but their possessions will fall into the hands of strangers and invaders? How is it possible that they will establish for themselves good laws, when an attempt is made to crush their first feeble effort toward it?[4]

The second outcome of the initial separation policy was the result of a Supreme Court decision. In 1831, Chief Justice John Marshall and the court ruled in favor of the Cherokees in the case of *Cherokees versus the State of Georgia.* The court's decision stated that the Indians were not subject to state law. But it also found that they were not an

independent nation. The court defined the Indian's relation to the federal government by calling him a "domestic dependent nation in a state of pupilage."[5] Ultimately, these decisions to dispossess the Indians and consider them dependent "nations" of the federal government would require the involvement of the Regular Army as the primary military instrument necessary for enforcing Indian policy in the West. This role would break with the established American tradition east of the Mississippi River, which had relied on the presence of local militias to control the Indian tribes.

The next attempt to control the Indians and allow unimpeded Western settlement was the reservation or concentration policy. As early as the 1840s, efforts were begun to use reservations as a tool of Indian policy. To ensure the security of the area west of the Mississippi River, the government shifted from the policy of separation to one of concentration. In 1848, the government discussed the idea of creating Indian colonies on the Western plains. In February of 1851, Congress passed the Indian Appropriation Act, mandating the new policy and providing monies to negotiate treaties.

By 1865, the principal features of U.S. Indian policy were in place. These features would remain, in various forms, until the end of the nineteenth century. The policy called for the forced relocation of Indians and the drastic reduction of areas in which the Indians were free to practice their culture. Implementation of the reservation system was at hand and would precipitate the longest and most violent Indian wars the nation had known.

Following the Civil War, the reservation system was the paramount means of implementing national policy, as the United States turned again to resolving the continuing challenge of the Indians to national security and Western expansion. Secretary of the Interior James Harlan dispatched two groups of commissioners in August 1865 to negotiate the new parameters of U.S. Indian policy with the Indians of Kansas, the Indian Territory, and the Plains tribes.[6]

This policy was a hybrid of the separation policy. It sought to "concentrate" the Indians at several large reservations and remove them from the immigration and railroad routes. The Indian Territory would serve as one of the large reservations, with a second reservation located on the northern plains. From 1865 until 1876, this single policy served as the foundation for the national security strategy of the United States in response to the Indians.

This approach became known as the "Peace Policy" during the Grant administration, as it attempted (at least on the surface) to rely on diplomatic rather than military means to accomplish its objectives. The view of the Indians as wards of the federal government was central to this strategy and ultimately would unhinge it. Even in 1865, the commissioners dispatched by Secretary Harlan were instructed that "these treaties might be amended by the Senate and such amendments would not require the concurrence of the Indians."[7]

The Peace Policy did not adopt the pure form of the original policy of concentration. While still focused on the overall national objectives, treaties were not geared toward displacing the tribes to the large colonies originally envisioned. Instead, a desire to avert potential hostilities left negotiators a wide band of options. Political expediency would determine which tribes were to be left in traditional areas or were to be removed to the Indian Territory. The result was a patchwork of reservations throughout the Western area created on an ad hoc basis.

The notion of dealing with the Indians by diplomatic rather than military means was debated in both political and military circles. Senior members of the military establishment actively campaigned for the control of Indian affairs to be transferred to the War Department where they believed management of national policy would be more efficiently served. The Army saw itself removed from the corruption and inconsistent administration that plagued the Bureau of Indian Affairs as administered by the Department of the Interior. In 1867, a bill to return the Department of Interior's Indian Bureau to the War Department passed the House but failed in the Senate.[8]

President Grant led the element opposed to the military's control of Indian strategy and favored the employment of other means. Grant's view was a great disappointment to senior Army leaders who had believed he would strongly advocate Army control of Indian policy. On 4 March 1873, at his second inaugural address, he stated:

> My efforts in the future will be directed to the restoration of good feeling between the different sections of our common country . . . by a human course, to bring the aborigines of the country under the benign influences of education and civilization. It is either this or war of extermination. Wars of extermination, engaged in by people pursuing commerce and all industrial pursuits, are expensive even against the weakest people, and are demoralizing and wicked. Our superiority of strength and advantages of civilization should make us lenient toward the Indian. The wrong inflicted upon him should be taken into account and the balance placed to his credit. The moral view of the question should be considered and the question asked, Can not the Indian be made a useful and productive member of society by

> proper teaching and treatment? If the effort is made in good faith, we will stand better before the civilized nations of the earth and in our own consciences for having made it.[9]

While sounding a high moral tone, Grant had addressed the economics of a strategy of extermination, which he saw as the alternative to the diplomatic solution executed under the auspices of the Department of the Interior. This economic concern reflected the growing hostility within the Congress for appropriations toward a standing Regular Army.

A peacetime political struggle to maintain an Army force structure to meet security objectives was not a new phenomenon in American history. Proponents of fiscal conservatism within the Congress had found allies for a long time among congressmen and other Americans who questioned both the utility of a standing Army and feared it might be used for some dark political purpose. The reduction in force conducted at the end of the Civil War was both rapid and deep. As historian Edward M. Coffman describes:

> The Civil War was over. Some Americans assumed that this meant elimination of the military. In 1885, when a colonel was introduced to a cultivated, urban Eastern woman, she was astonished: "What, a colonel of the Army? Why, I supposed the Army was all disbanded at the close of the war!" Most of it was. Within six months, 800,000 of the million men in blue were civilians again. By 1875 the permanent strength had leveled off at 25,000 . . . In comparison with foreign armies, this placed the size of the American army in the 1880s at slightly less than half that of Belgium's, a seventh that of Britain's, and a twentieth of the French army's size.[10]

It was a period often called the "dark days" of the Army, and it would shape the Army's planning of a national military and operational strategy in the West.

Beginning in 1869 and 1870, President Grant initiated the most well-known aspect of the Indian Peace Policy when he abdicated, to a large degree, federal control over the Indians to religious and reform groups that had emerged in the 1850s, primarily under the leadership of Bishop Henry Whipple of the Episcopal Church. Whipple and other reformers believed that the rapid adoption of Christianity and the culture of the white man was the only means to preclude extinction of the Indian. This view was similar to that held by the proponents of the reservation system within Grant's administration. Differences in opinion, however, were expressed over the intended management of the Indians on the reservations.

Whipple and the reformers believed that the current corruption in administration of Indian policy had reached such proportions that no

progress could be made in civilizing the Indian. He proposed establishing an honest administration of Indian reservations by employing the "Friends of the Indian," as the reformers later became known. Whipple predicted that if the corruption of the Indian Bureau was not swept away, "a nation which sowed robbery would reap a harvest of blood."[11]

With Grant's approval, churches began to nominate people to serve as Indian agents. Congress created a Board of Indian Commissioners to manage the Indian Bureau and act as a watchdog on corruption within the reservation system. Initially, the board was controlled by wealthy Protestant philanthropists, but as difficulties arose over staffing the reservations, many churches lost interest and left for other missionary adventures.[12] The Peace Policy brought little improvement, according to Army officers and, in fact, invited disaster: Indians, being enamored with the warrior mystique, would only respect other warriors. Statements, such as Colonel Richard Irving Dodge's, were common: "Christian-appointed agents were a fitting climax to the preposterous acts which for a century have stultified the governmental control and management of Indians. To appoint Nathan Meeker, however faithful, honest, and christian in bearing he might be, to an agency in charge of a set of wild brigands like the Utes, is simply to invite massacre."[13]

While not well received by the military, the reformers themselves were perhaps a greater threat to the Indian than the threat of direct military action. Professing a strong belief in Indian equality with the white man, reformers felt any shortcomings of the Indians were due to their arrested cultural development. If the Indians were to be assimilated, therefore, their cultural heritage must be completely destroyed. If necessary, the Indians must be forced to this alternative for their own good. With this religious bent, the reformers were powerful adversaries in the world of nineteenth-century Indian policy politics.

The management of Indian reservations by reformers, as a means to institute a program of forced assimilation, was an abject failure. Political infighting between religious denominations, the remaining political appointees, and elected officials failed to produce an improvement in reservation conditions or a cessation of hostilities between the Indian tribes and the growing white population. The failure of this program shifted blame to the reform movement, away from the Grant administration, while fueling continued demands for

direct control of Indian policy by the Army—a view that was held almost universally by senior Army officers.

The 1876 inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes brought a subtle change to national security strategy. In his inaugural address, Hayes laid a philosophy of "pacification" on the nation's political plate that sought to bring the reconstruction period to a close.[14] The national objective, in terms of the Indians, was to be a continuation of the Grant administration's emphasis on a policy that relied on diplomacy. Hayes' administration shifted its focus away from the relocation of Indian tribes to the reservations. Instead, it emphasized assimilation of the Indian into white culture.

The shift away from the reservation policy did not occur immediately. The Hayes administration continued the Peace Policy, using reservations and citing the perceived benefit of protecting and civilizing the Indians. Meanwhile, the reservation system continued to be modified, as it had been during the Grant years, away from the concentration of the Indians in large centralized locations. Instead, the reservations were smaller entities incorporating the Indians along loose tribal lines, and this "small reservation approach" was the cornerstone of the Hayes strategy. As a result, after President Hayes took office in 1877, "over sixty tribes resettled in the Indian Territory, while many more were shifted from their homeland to new locales."[15]

The reservation system that Hayes inherited was largely created on an ad hoc basis. As discussed earlier, the two central themes guiding the institution of the reservation system were separation of the Indians from the major immigration routes and their removal as an impediment to the progress of the transcontinental railroad. These ambitions were further amended to include removal of Indians from areas that had gained importance due to the discovery of various natural resources (e.g., gold in the Black Hills). As a result of the discovery of gold and silver, the treaty between the federal government and the Utes of Colorado would be revised three times, accounting for each new mineral discovery.

The task that fell to Hayes and his Army was to develop a security and military strategy that would address the failure by earlier policymakers to control the Indian tribes in the long term. The pure separation policy had been invalidated since the Civil War by the continued expansion of the country. Meanwhile, the Peace Policy had not met expectations in terms of assimilating the Indians into white culture. In fact, the institution of the Peace Policy corresponded with the beginning of a ten-year period during which some of the most

dramatic conflicts between the races had occurred. At the time, the Army viewed this as a cause and effect relationship. Improvisation became the key to the formulation of a new national strategy. As historian Richard White describes: "American officials, in attempting to halt conflict between Indians and whites, prevent expensive wars, and open up lands to white settlement, created reservations the way survivors of a shipwreck might fashion a raft from the debris of the sunken vessel. Reservations evolved on an ad hoc basis as a way to prevent conflict and enforce a separation of the races."[16]

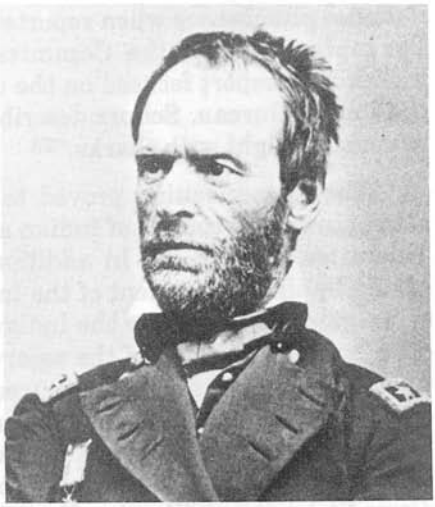
When Hayes inherited the "Indian question" from the Grant administration, a long series of military campaigns had just been completed, culminating in the destruction of Custer and his command. Many throughout the country, including Commanding General of the Army William T. Sherman, saw the need for a complete revision of the security strategy or the Indian policy. The religious and philanthropic groups that Grant had formally promoted to the forefront in his effort to civilize the Indian on the reservation were challenged by both the "Westerners" and the Army. Both elements charged that the management of the Indian by these religious societies and the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior was a total failure. Calls for the War Department to manage the Indians again reached Congress in 1877.

Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz stated much the same view as General Sherman when he assumed office. His exposure to Indians prior to assuming office was limited, and he held a view in keeping with the popular ethnocentrism of the times. He stated:

> The underlying support of this proposition [War Department control] was the conviction that the Indian could never be civilized and that the only possible solution of the problem which he embodied was to confine him, under strict military supervision, on reservations from which all uplifting contact with white men was barred, till he should become extinct by virtue of his own incurable barbarism.[17]

Schurz' views, however, changed as he gained an appreciation of the issues at hand. While a joint committee of Congress reviewed the strategy of the Peace Policy, Secretary Schurz issued a statement on 6 December 1877 that reaffirmed that strategy and outlined additional measures to be undertaken to speed the assimilation of the Indian.[18]

Schurz' strategy called for continued use of the reservation system along with a program of guiding the Indians toward self-support. By training the Indians in "modern" agricultural means, Schurz felt the Indians would gradually replace their traditional life-style with that of



Commanding General of the Army
William T. Sherman

white culture. In the long term, he saw the "Americanization" of the Indians as a means to eliminate the need for the maintenance of federal reservation lands.[19] Eventually, the reservations would wither away, being replaced by private land held by Indians practicing agricultural pursuits. Still, in his first annual report in November 1877, he expressed the view that, even with the application of the modified reservation system, the recurring conflict between the advancing frontier and the Indians could not be eliminated entirely because of the proximity of the races.[20] The Army's role in this strategy was to be limited. Schurz stated:

> Such a policy would be the most conducive to peace and the most economical. It ought to be retained and developed; but the army would be no proper agency for its execution. Military men and methods were indispensable for emergencies; the long, slow process of raising the red men out of barbarism, however, required qualities in those who guided it that the army could not supply.[21]

The rivalry over the management of Indian affairs had been in question since the transfer of the Office of Indian Affairs from the War Department to the Department of the Interior in 1849.[22] Schurz did, however, take direct action on one of the Army's long-standing complaints against the Department of the Interior by reorganizing the Indian Bureau. A long-time advocate of civil service reform, he entered office with a mandate from President Hayes to clean up the Department of the Interior and, in particular, the Indian Bureau. An investigation initiated by Schurz into the business practices of the Indian Bureau was completed in August 1877. The report gained

national prominence when reported by the *New York Times* and led to the replacement of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs within a month. The report focused on the corruption and abuses that plagued the Indian Bureau. Schurz described his dealings with the bureau as "a constant fight with sharks."[23]

The housecleaning proved to be enough to defeat the Army's attempts to gain control of Indian affairs through a joint congressional committee in 1878–79. In addition to continuing control of Indian affairs by the Department of the Interior, the reforms alleviated some of the grievances held by the Indians and served to reduce the level of open hostility at some of the reservations. Schurz' efforts in cleaning up corruption in the Indian Bureau even won admiration in Army circles. The Division of the Missouri commander, Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan, commented that "the service of Indian affairs was finally lifted out of the mire of corruption that had long made it a discredit to our civilization."[24] While a symbolic step in the right direction, the effect of the Schurz reforms still had not addressed corruption at the grassroots level or the problems of the management of reservations by competing religious groups.

Given the political environment addressed above, the Army had to determine the best means of applying military power in support of the Indian policy and national objectives. In the spring of 1865, the Army returned its attention to the security of the West, a role it had abdicated to state and territorial militias during the Civil War. That year, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported the number of Indians as "civilized, 97,000; semicivilized 125,000; wholly barbarous, 78,000. Of these, 180,000 had treaties with the United States and were consequently involved in relatively stable and mutually understood relations with the government; another 40,000 lived on reservations and were more or less under the control of the Indian agents; about 55,000 were totally uncontrolled."[25]

The Army faced additional problems that had developed during the Regular Army's preoccupation in the East during the Civil War. The relationship between whites and Indians (in particular the Plains tribes) had deteriorated because of the increased pace of emigration and the conduct of operations by territorial militias.

The massacre of Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne at Sand Creek by the Colorado territorial militia in 1864 was one of the most flagrant examples of militia excess. In this case, the Cheyennes had gathered at a point designated by the territorial governor and were using a prearranged signal denoting them as "not hostile." In spite of



Commander of the Division of the Missouri, Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan

complying fully with the directive of the governor, including flying an American flag, they were set upon brutally by the Colorado territorial militia under the command of Colonel John M. Chivington. During testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, Indian casualty figures were reported as varying between 70 to 450 dead.[26] The episode resulted in further reprisals and alienation on both sides.

Sand Creek became the rallying cry for humanitarian groups throughout the country. An investigation of its events discredited the effectiveness of the Colorado militia, specifically, and the use of militia troops, in general. Two separate investigations were conducted, one by the U.S. Senate and one by the Army. Neither adjudged any responsibility for the incident or preferred charges, but clearly Chivington was at fault. Ultimately, Chivington fled the state and returned to his native Ohio. As a result of the chronic mishandling of Indian affairs by local militias and the established precedent for treating Indians as "wards" of the federal government, the Regular Army eventually became the military instrument responsible for the enforcement of U.S. policy in the West.

The movement of people to the Western frontier had increased during the Civil War years. Migration continued to increase later, as many sought to find a new start in mining ventures in the West or in the promise of free land created by the Homestead Act of 1862. The

population west of the Mississippi River grew by one million between 1860 and 1870 and an additional two and one-half million by the end of the Hayes administration.[27] This increase in population compounded the Army's dilemma, as it placed greater demands on it for security of the immigrants but also increased the need for measures to protect the treaty arrangements guaranteed to the Indians by the federal government.

As the Army examined the situation west of the Mississippi River in the spring of 1865, it was confident in its ability to subdue the Indians as an obstacle to national objectives. As General Sherman announced in November 1865, "as soon as the Indians see that we have Regular Cavalry among them they will realize that we are in condition to punish them for any murders or robberies."[28] This sort of confidence was perhaps due more to unfamiliarity with the problem at hand than an accurate assessment of the strategic situation. Nevertheless, as the forces that had reunited the country took two days to parade before the reviewing stand in Washington, the Army's leadership prepared for operations on the frontier.

A few military "giants" dominated the direction of national military strategy. The office of the commanding general of the Army, filled by Generals Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan respectively from the end of the Civil War to 1886, dominated the strategic application of military power in the West. This is not to imply that the commanding general was in an all-powerful position to exercise complete executive power from his office. The Army had yet to institute the reforms of the general staff system, instead relying on the ten administrative and technical bureaus established by the Army Act of 1866.[29] This system created two chains of control within the army—the staff and the line.

This division of responsibility split the Army. The bureau chiefs reported to the Secretary of War and dealt with administrative and technical matters. Operational command was exercised from the president through the commanding general. The nature of this arrangement, at any given time, was largely a measure of the personalities of the president, Secretary of War, and the commanding general. Its impact on operational considerations was felt across the Army. As Robert M. Utley comments:

> Although Sherman held the post of commanding general of the army and profoundly influenced its character, he did not actually command it. The army staff—more exactly, the War Department staff—remained resolutely outside Sherman's army. And the complications that the staff's

> independence created for the commanding general in turn made his authority over the line more nominal than real.[30]

The key uniformed decision makers of the line at the strategic and operational levels were intimately aware of each others' strengths and weaknesses. Past associations during the conduct of the Civil War assisted strategic- and operational-level commanders in the formulation of a centralized plan for the conduct of Army operations and campaigns in the West.

In the spring of 1865, General Grant was determined to utilize available manpower to conduct offensive operations on the Western plains to gain the strategic initiative. There were two reasons Grant wished to execute these operations quickly. First, the largest tribes of Plains Indians—the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho—were raiding immigrant trains and homesteads in reaction to the previously discussed militia excesses, and this problem needed to be addressed expeditiously. Second, although Grant was hopeful of maintaining a standing force larger than at pre-Civil War levels, he anticipated congressional troop reductions and a requirement for increased Army presence to support the reconstruction effort in the South. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton estimated that the standing Regular Army would be about 50,000 men, only triple the 1860 strength.[31] General Pope advised Grant: "I think the government will find it true economy to finish this Indian war this season, so it will stay finished. We have the troops enough now on the plains to do it now better than hereafter."[32]

An offensive including 12,000 troops was planned to begin in April 1865 but was delayed until the summer. When the offensive commenced, troop strength and quality had been so dissipated that the original objectives were unattainable. Less than 5,000 troops were employed, and the majority of forces were territorial and state militias rather than Regular formations.[33] Grant's plan to bring the Indian wars to a decisive conclusion through a strategic offensive failed. The combined effects of the reduction in Army strength and the demand for troops in the South, and later on the Mexican frontier, would prevent further considerations of a general offensive.

The strategic design for the conduct of the Indian wars was ultimately the product of one man, General William T. Sherman. The demands of supporting national objectives with severely limited resources forced Sherman and the Army onto the strategic defensive in the West. Earlier, Sherman had seen the potential for using the railroad as a means of promoting the operational offensive. Based on

his Civil War experience, Sherman realized that the Army could concentrate troops rapidly by using the inherent mobility provided by the railroad and, at the same time, remain on the strategic defensive. After viewing progress on two sections of the railroad, Sherman wrote to the War Department and General Grant in the fall of 1865 on the importance of the railroads in the West: "I gave both a close and critical examination . . . because I see that each will enter largely into our military calculations."[34] As Sherman employed Army tactical formations and positioned forts in the West, he would work closely with the major railroad companies to synchronize the progress on routes into the proper operational areas.

The Army's strategy in the West benefited from the careful definition by the nation's leaders of the objective. By understanding the objective—securing freedom of movement for the expansion of settlers along the major trails and rail lines—the Army was able to define its primary area of operations. The national security strategy called for the removal of the Indian tribes from these critical areas, thus allowing the Army to deal with the Indians piecemeal—first by focusing on one tribe and then utilizing the rail network to mass against subsequent challenges. The strategy that developed from the stated political objectives was the only course left to the Army based on its limited resources. The Army had to remain on the strategic defensive while using its superior organization and technology to gain the operational and tactical initiative when required.

The military plan that defined the U.S. Army's strategic role in the West was linked to both the national objectives and the national security strategy as defined by the federal government's policy toward the Indian. The Army's role, to a large part, was a result of its absence from the West during the Civil War. In the meantime, the other branches of the federal government had established their agendas in regard to the Indians. By the time the Army returned its focus to the West, its part was simply to salute and carry out its mission.

III. THE OPPONENTS

"For the time and the place they weren't bad—not to compare with Johnny Reb cavalry or Cardigan's Lights or Scarlett's Heavies or the Union horse in the Civil War, or Sikhs or Punjabis either, but then these were all soldiers at war, most of the time, and the 7th weren't."[1] So stated the fictional Captain Harry Flashman in assessing the ability of the 7th Cavalry in 1876. What were the capabilities of this Army of the West and its opponents? It is the purpose of this chapter, as Professor Michael Howard would state, to provide the context to the "conflict of societies," to the struggle between the American and Ute cultures.[2]

The predominant mission of the Army after the end of the Civil War was to subjugate the Indians. Throughout the period, this mission tested the very limits of the capabilities of the Army. In 1879, the year of the Ute campaign, 20,300 troops garrisoned the West, representing 66 percent of the total Army strength.[3] The demands of the geographic area and the nature of the mission would largely dictate the means the Army chose to gain ascendency.

While the organization of the Indian "forces" that the Army fought was very transitory (if they were organized at all), the system created by the U.S. Army to contain the Indians reflected the need for well-defined geographic boundaries and the designation of responsibilities. The system of geographically defined "divisions" and "departments" was a continuation of a method dating back to the reorganization of the Army in 1853.[4]

On 11 August 1866, the Army reorganized its command structure into three divisions west of the Mississippi River. This structure would remain in effect and carry the Army through the Indian wars. This basic organization would delineate command authority, with minor modifications, for the next twenty-five years. The Division of the Missouri was the largest of the three created divisions. It encompassed the Great Plains area, which would be the focus of military action against the Indians.

From 1869 to 1883, the Division of the Missouri was further divided into five departments: Dakota, Platte, Missouri, Texas, and Gulf (see map 2). The Department of the Gulf remained in the division from 1875 to 1877.[5] With headquarters initially at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and then at Chicago, Illinois, the Division of the Missouri was commanded, throughout the period, by the second highest-ranking officer in the Army. Its area of responsibility was vast. As General

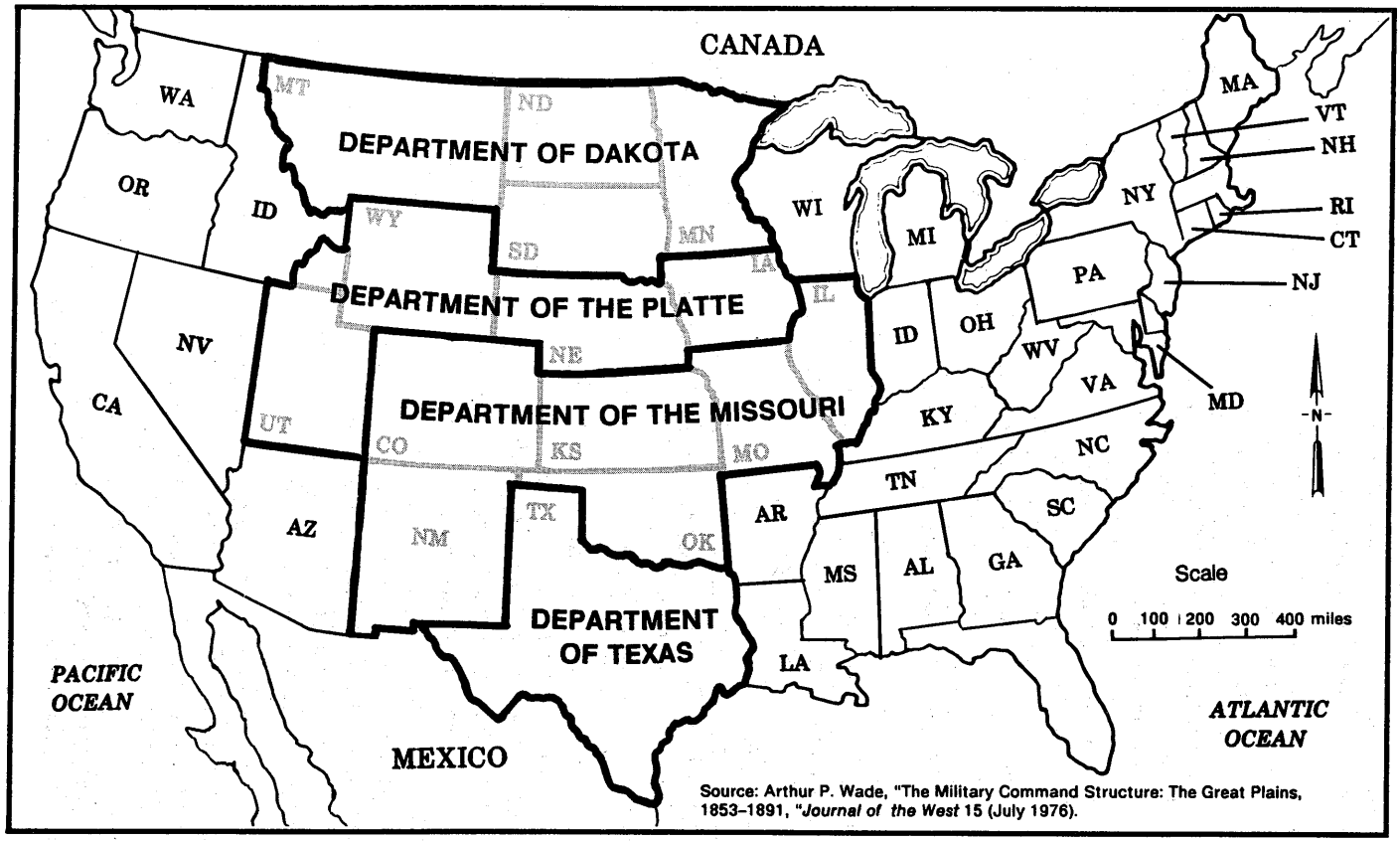
Sherman stated in his 1866 annual report (before areas east of the Mississippi River were incorporated into the division):

> In order to [come to] an understanding of the great military problems to be solved, I must state in general terms that this military division embraces the vast region from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, of an average breadth (east to west) of one thousand three hundred and fifty miles and length (north to south) of over one thousand miles, viz: from the south border of New Mexico to the British line. On the east are the fertile and rapidly improving States of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas. Immediately on the west are the Territories and States of Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Indian Territory . . . Next in order are the mountainous Territories of Montana, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. Between these mountainous Territories and those of the river border lie the great plains of America . . . [which] can never be cultivated like Illinois, never be filled with inhabitants capable of self-government and self-defense as against the Indians and marauders, but at best can become a vast pasture-field, open and free to all for the rearing of herds of horses, mules, cattle, and sheep.[6]

The designation of the departments within the Division of the Missouri was based on several factors. To facilitate civil-military cooperation, department boundaries were drawn to equate roughly with the boundaries of territories and states. In addition, the east-west orientation of the departments corresponded with the routes of the major lines of communication (LOC) to the west. Throughout the period of the Indian wars, the boundaries of the departments and the placement of the forts internal to the departments shifted with the changes in the use of immigrant trails and the railroads.

The War Department also believed that the boundaries of the departments corresponded with the areas controlled by the major tribes of hostile Indians.[7] By defining an area of responsibility that allegedly incorporated the range of a particular tribe, it was believed that problems of command and control between departments would not arise. The actual justification of the number and size of the departments seemed to be dependent on the Army's force structure after the Civil War. After 1866, the geographic command structure was reorganized more to meet the changes in Congressional appropriations than in response to changes in the Indian situation.[8]

The two departments involved in the 1879 Ute campaign were the Departments of the Platte and Missouri. Both reflected an organization that was focused on protecting the LOCs through their respective area and on the utilization of these lines as a means to conduct operations to control the Indians. Headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, the Department of the Platte, by 1875, controlled an area including the state of Iowa; the territories of Nebraska, Wyoming, and



Source: Arthur P. Wade, "The Military Command Structure: The Great Plains, 1853–1891, "*Journal of the West* 15 (July 1976).

Map 2. Division of the Missouri

Utah; and a portion of Idaho Territory. Initially, the department was concerned with protecting immigrant trails, such as the Bozeman, but with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in May 1869, the majority of its troops were detailed to protect this singular national link.[9]

The Department of the Missouri had a similar mission. With its headquarters at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the soldiers of the department were to protect immigrants along portions of the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. By 1870, the department had witnessed the destruction of the major Indian opposition in its area, largely due to the work of professional hunters, who, in the course of two years, removed the great southern buffalo herds upon which the Indians based their subsistence.[10] The department was responsible for an area that covered the states of Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and part of Arkansas—as well as the Colorado, New Mexico, and Indian Territories. The department was well supplied with railroads, including a line of the Kansas Pacific that connected Denver from the east and ran north to the Union Pacific line at Cheyenne, Wyoming.[11]

The manpower afforded Lieutenant General Sheridan and the Division of the Missouri, however, was hardly sufficient for the area. In 1879, the aggregate strength of the division was 15,517 officers and men, who were responsible to garrison seventy-one permanent posts and twenty-two temporary encampments. This structure provided for a force ratio of one soldier for every seventy-five square miles in the Departments of the Platte and the Missouri.[12]

The demands of safeguarding rail and other lines of communication, in addition to the mission of controlling Indians and protecting them (at least marginally) from white depredations on reservations and treaty land, led the Army to establish the fort system. This system positioned small Army contingents, usually of company or troop size, along the paths of advancing "civilization." As General Sheridan described:

> To thoroughly and effectively perform the duties devolving upon us compels us many times to overwork our troops, and not unfrequently obliges us to take the field with small detachments, which have heretofore occasionally been overmatched and greatly outnumbered by our foes. This is not as it should be; but so long as our companies are limited to their average strength (fifty men to a battery of artillery, sixty men to a company of cavalry, and forty men to a company of infantry), it cannot be avoided . . . Compelled as it is to keep in advance of the wave of civilization constantly flowing westward, and to watch the Northern and Southern borders and guard them from incursions of savage foes, and also to be in readiness to repress any outbreaks upon the Indian reservations, to say nothing of

> having to make new roads, erect forts, and furnish escorts for surveying and exploring parties, it is, as I have said, overworked, on account of its inadequate strength for the service required.[13]

Because of both the demands placed on the Army of the West and its small size, the feature which has come to characterize the Indian-fighting Army arose: the fort. Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming, not only played a key role in the Ute campaign but was characteristic of all Western forts. Established in June 1868 in the Wyoming Territory at an intersection of the North Platte River and the Union Pacific line, it served as part of a system of forts for the protection of the railroad and the Overland Trail and as a replacement for the abandoned Bozeman Trail posts.[14]

The railroad provided a degree of operational mobility to the fort system, enabling the Army to overcome any superiority in numbers the Indians could achieve. By utilizing the railroad and telegraph, the Army could move troops and equipment to pursue and punish hostile bands. General Sherman was among the earliest to realize the potential of the railroad in the Western campaigns, but he was not alone. The annual reports from both divisional and departmental commanders included an update on the status of the most recent rail lines established in their area of responsibility. General Sheridan commented on the close relationship between the Army and the railroads in his 1880 Annual Report: "Amongst our strongest allies in the march of civilization upon the frontier are the various railway companies who are now constructing their new lines with great rapidity."[15]

The advantage gained by technological superiority was not easily brought to bear in the Indian campaigns. The railroad and its complementary system, the telegraph, facilitated military campaigning, but "those miles away from the railroad were still horseback miles [away from the action]."[16] Moreover, the area that was the predominant region of operations was on the fringes of "civilization" and not easily influenced by the explosion of technology during the nineteenth century. Mobility of men and supplies, in the tactical sense, still relied primarily upon foot and horse.

Army firepower, furthermore, did not enjoy an advantage over the Indians on the tactical battlefield. While the cavalry had abandoned the repeating carbines in the early 1870s in favor of single-shot breachloaders, the Indians favored the repeaters when they could be acquired. The single-shot, .45 Springfield rifle was selected by an arms board in 1872. Headed by General Terry, the board tested over one

hundred types of rifles and carbines to determine the standard model for U.S. Army service.[17] The tactical effect of this improved weaponry was the same in the Indian campaigns as it had been in the Civil War: it conferred the relative advantage to the tactical defense. In fact, the Indians, because of their long-standing unconventional style of warfare, adapted to the impact of the "modern" rifle much faster than did the Army. With sufficient quantities of breachloaders, the Indian had rendered the charge ineffective—unless the element of surprise was achieved to a sufficient degree. As historian Thomas W. Dunlay describes: "In the 1870s the army increasingly fought against enemies who could not be seen; only the smoke and flash of the concealed Indian's gun indicated his presence. This was a major reason for the surprise attacks on Indian camps; it was the only way the soldiers could make a decisive attack at all."[18]

The fort system was not the preferred means of operation by the Army. The predominant view was that the piecemeal allocation of troops resulted from both the limited size of the Army and the political demands placed on it. Moreover, the system was seen as a detriment to decisive action against the Indians, and because its use was politically and economically sanctioned, it precluded the Army from taking a more offensive role against the Indians. General Sheridan remarked:

> The fact that our army is so small adds greatly to its expense, for whenever it becomes necessary to use a force of any magnitude whatever against the Indians, we are compelled to send troops by rail or steamboat from a large number of small posts, to enable us to take the field with any prospect of success, and the cost of transportation incurred by these concentrations becomes a serious item in our annual expenditures. Our frontier is so extensive that for the present we are compelled to adhere to a system of small posts, though it is both inconvenient and costly.[19]

The alternative being proposed by some within the Army was the abandonment of a large number of the smaller forts and the consolidation of the bulk of the Army's combat troops at a few large posts. This alternative was not given serious weight until 1879–80 because the railroad network in the West had not been developed sufficiently to support the rapid movement of these "flying columns." Major General John Pope, commander of the Department of the Missouri from 1870 to 1883, was a supporter of this proposal. He remarked:

> The abandonment of many of the small posts, and their consolidation with larger posts, I have recommended so often that I content myself now with saying that every year which passes more and more makes apparent the good policy, in every view, of dispensing with the small posts, and concentrating troops in large garrisons. Economy and efficiency of the

> military forces in this department would be greatly promoted by such a system, and I again respectfully invite attention to my previous recommendations on this subject.[20]

By the outbreak of the Ute uprising in 1879, the Army had a well-defined approach to fighting an Indian campaign. The adoption of Pope's proposal was still forthcoming, and the central issues became when to strike the hostiles and how to concentrate sufficient combat power to defeat them. The employment of the bulk of the Army in the Western theater astride railroad lines became the answer to the latter question. The question of the optimum timing of a campaign was answered through a process of trial and error.

A winter campaign was seen as the best means to subdue the Indians. This denoted a change in the conduct of campaigning from the pre-Civil War era in the West and was brought about by the expansion of the railroad, which could be used in support of operations. The common experiences of the officers who became senior leaders after the war also suggested this course. Of the division and department commanders in the West in 1866, only one had previous command experience in the theater—General Philip St. George Cooke—and he was relieved following the Fetterman massacre in December of that year.[21]

The capabilities of a modern field army that developed during the Civil War were in stark contrast to previous Army operations on the frontier. Historian Paul A. Hutton describes the experiences of General Sheridan:

> Sheridan's first campaign against the Indians was a pathetic affair. A detachment of 350 regular troops and a regiment of Oregon mounted volunteers was dispatched under the command of Major Gabriel Rains in October 1855 against the Yakimas. Although the campaign gave Sheridan his first look at warriors massed for battle—"a scene of picturesque barbarism, fascinating but replusive"—it yielded no results . . . Winter snows ended the campaign, and the officer's conversations quickly degenerated into recriminations about who was to blame for the failure.[22]

The lessons of the Civil War were not lost on the Army's leaders in its aftermath. Before the Civil War, the focus had been exclusively on the destruction of the opposing military's forces. Later, a shift occurred that incorporated the destruction of all the enemy's war-making potential in the process. This expansion of the scope of warfare would be evident on the plains of the West, and the Civil War would be used as a precedent for the conduct of total war. War became more than a contest between warring forces; it encompassed a struggle between opposing societies, between two divergent cultures.

Army leadership was determined to find an answer to the Indian problem. The Army's very raison d'etre hung in the balance, and the answer must not rely on the adoption of Indian methods. Instead, the Army had to select methods that were in keeping with the use of decisive military force as the primary instrument of national power. The Army had to find the answer to the Indian problem as a means to justify its own existence. As Thomas W. Dunlay describes:

> In a period when the army believed that it was being starved by the Congress and ignored or scorned by the nation, the suggestion that it could not cope with the Indians without Indian aid was especially repugnant. Officers wanted to believe that they and their men did their best and were the best soldiers possible under the circumstances. They might dress like cowboys or mule skinners in the field . . ., but they took pride in the uniform and in their regiments. It was painful, therefore, to hear suggestions that they could not cope with savages.[23]

It is an oft-heard remark in the modern Army that the character of a unit is a reflection of the personality of its commander. The Army that fought the Indians may not have reflected the personalities of its senior commanders, but the policies and tactics within the respective divisions and departments certainly did. By 1879, the major players—Sheridan, Pope, and Crook—were well tested by the rigors of Indian campaigns. Their views on the military solution to the Indian riddle rested on the spread of settlers and the use of "modern" technology. As one commander commented, "as experience of late years has most conclusively shown that our cavalry cannot cope with the Indian man to man."[24]

The failure of the Army to achieve a decisive victory in the campaigns against the major Plains Indian tribes had driven the senior leadership into seeking solace in the familiar glow of technology and organization. The Army found new confidence in the modern appliances of war and saw in them a means to counteract the tactical acumen of the Indian. After listening to a litany of inherent advantages possessed by the Indian warrior, General Nelson A. Miles remarked that "though all that said about their skill and enterprise and energy was true, yet with our superior intelligence and modern appliances we ought and would be able to counteract, equal, or surpass all the advantages possessed by the savages."[25]

By the initiation of the 1879 campaigns, grand strategy had evolved in the minds of the senior commanders. The combination of the winter campaign and large converging columns as a means of achieving a decisive battle with the Indian had been invalidated by the Army's failure in the Great Sioux War. Ultimately, however, success

would become possible by applying relentless pressure on the Sioux through the application of harassing tactics.

While the Army had been outmaneuvered in its only attempt at a conventional campaign, it nonetheless retained both the winter campaign and the converging columns as a means of initiating a ruthless, unceasing pressure on any offending Indian bands. As Sheridan reported to Sherman, "I have never looked on any decisive battle with these Indians as a settlement of the trouble . . . Indians do not fight such battles; they only fight boldly when they have the advantage, as in the Custer case, or to cover the movement of their women and children as in the case of Crook, but Indians have scarcely ever been punished unless by their own mode of warfare or tactics and stealing on them [surprising them]."[26] Success depended on a new operational paradigm consisting of the combination of the railroad, organization, and the application of steady, disciplined pursuit.

The nature of campaigning changed in the aftermath of the Sioux War. Thereafter, the Indians were on the operational defensive, never able to field a force in sufficient numbers to challenge the Army. The advance of the Western frontier meant that the Army found itself occupying forts that ringed the different reservations. From these forts, soldiers were poised to respond to any Indian outbreaks. As Sheridan stated in 1879, "Indian troubles that will hereafter occur will be those which arise upon the different Indian reservations or from attempts made to reduce the number and size of these reservations by the concentration of the Indian tribes."[27]

The execution of Army strategy in support of national objectives was often colored by the central Army figures on the scene. The three central commanders involved in the Ute War are interesting studies, both in their similarities as well as their differences. The conduct of campaigns and the execution of Army policy in the West was perhaps more representative of its leaders' personalities than any doctrine or official policy.

In March 1869, Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan was appointed commander of the Division of the Missouri. His views on the Indian problem were similar to Sherman's. While at times he appeared sympathetic to the plight of the Indian in the face of expanding civilization, he, like Sherman, held the view that the Indians, as an inferior culture, were doomed. He was a supporter of the reservation system and a strong advocate for the return of the management of Indian affairs to the Army. As he stated, "I have the interest of the Indian at heart as much as anyone, and sympathize with his fading

race, but many years of experiences have taught me that to civilize and Christianize the wild Indian it is not only necessary to put him on Reservations but it is also necessary to exercise some strong authority over him."[28]

Sheridan's conduct of campaigns was shaped from his experiences in the Civil War and lessons learned in the field against the Indian. During his tenure as a division commander, he had conducted successful campaigns against the Cheyennes (1868—69) and the Comanche in the Red River War (1874—75). He believed earlier failures to subdue the Indians were due to a preoccupation with humanitarian concerns. Sheridan made no moral judgments of the policy that, in his opinion, had predetermined open war with the tribes. He reported to General Sherman:

> In taking the offensive, I have to select that season when I can catch the fiends; and if a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack. During the war did any one hesitate to attack a village or town occupied by the enemy because women and children were within its limits? Did we cease to throw shells into Vicksburg or Atlanta because women and children were there?[29]

As previously stated, Sheridan believed that the nature of the Indian wars had changed by 1879. The requirement for taking the field in offensive operations had ended with the destruction of the great Plains tribes. Maintenance of Army forces along the railroads, positions ready to counter Indian incursions off the reservations, would be the required remedy.

Sheridan's two principal subordinates, Generals Crook and Pope, were markedly different from him in their styles of command. Both were experienced Indian fighters and astute soldier-politicians who cultivated political favors and supporters. Pope and Crook, however, possessed different views on the responsibility of department commanders during the conduct of a campaign. Nonetheless, to a large degree, they shared similar perceptions and sought the same goals. Unlike Sherman and Sheridan, both are remembered as "humanitarian soldiers," moved by the plight of the Indian but compelled to deal with the problems they presented. Whether Pope and Crook were truly compassionate or were using this image to gain support among Eastern politicians is open to discussion. Certainly, they never offered alternative policies on Indian issues, and in the conduct of operations, neither instituted tactical changes that would reflect a higher level of sensitivity to the Indian. Nonetheless, their



National Archives, 111-SC-89518

General George Crook and his scouts, Fort Bowie, Arizona, 1885

opinions captured the imagination of the Eastern press and won both men admirers among philanthropic groups and humanitarians.

Crook is often noted as one of the most effective field commanders the Army had during the period and as a "reluctant" warrior who was well respected by the Indians.[30] On the other hand, his soldiers tended to view Crook as a publicity-hungry leader more concerned with his image than fighting Indians. A soldiers' ditty that was popular in Crooks command went:

> I'd like to be a packer,
> And pack with George F. Crook
> And dressed up in my canvas suit
> To be for him mistook.
> I'd braid my beard in two long tails,
> And idle all the day
> In whittling sticks and wondering
> What the New York papers say.[31]

General Pope was equally concerned about his public image but did not cultivate the image of an active field commander. Pope preferred to remain at his department headquarters or at a location that afforded him the use of both the railroad and telegraph. His command method put him in the position to monitor operations from afar while maintaining contact with superiors and Eastern political acquaintances.



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

The Utes, once an impoverished tribe, flourished and aroused the fear of their enemies after acquiring horses

The three commanders were not working at cross purposes, but each conducted operations in relation to his own special circumstances. This situation was characteristic of officers throughout this period, and echoes of this orientation can be recognized in the current U.S. Army.[32] All three generals practiced the mechanical aspects of Indian warfare in the manner that characterized Army operations and tactics of the day: reliance on technology, use of converging columns, winter campaigns, and a "total war" devoid of rules of engagement or restrictions on either side.

The origins of warfare, as viewed by the Ute tribe, are summarized in the legend of their creation:

> Once there were no people in any part of the world. Sinawaf, the creator, began to cut sticks and place them in a large bag. This went on for some time until, finally, Coyote's curiosity could stand the suspense no longer. One day while Sinawaf was away Coyote [a figure representing evil or a troublemaker] opened the bag. Many people came out, all of them speaking different languages, and scattering in every direction. When Sinawaf returned there were but a few people left. He was angry with Coyote, for he had planned to distribute the people equally in the land. The result of unequal distribution caused by Coyote would be war between the different peoples, each trying to gain land from his neighbor. Of all the people remaining in the bag, Sinawaf said, "this small tribe shall be Ute but they will be very brave and able to defeat the rest."[33]

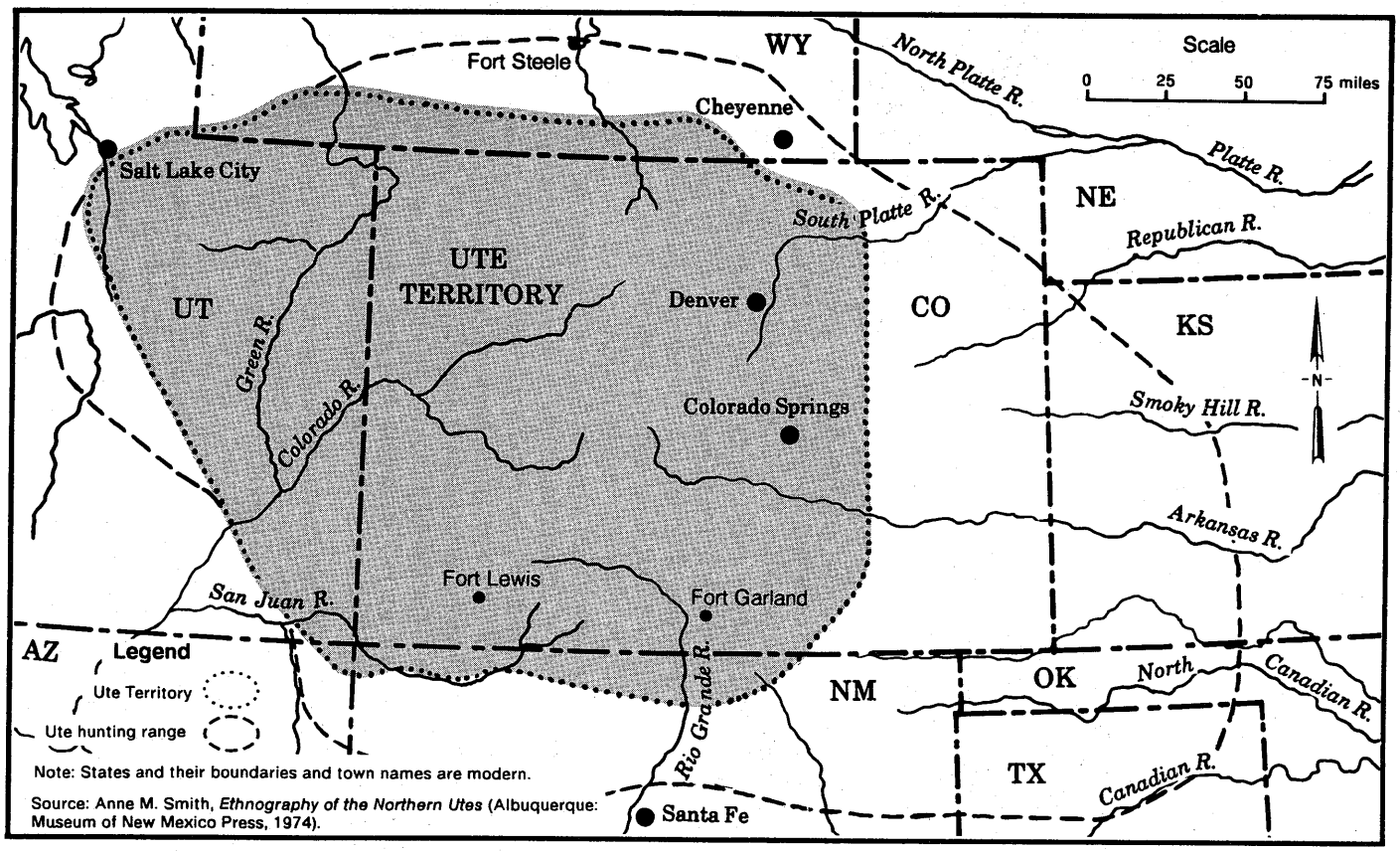
For centuries, the Utes were successful in defending their mountain bastion, while ranging to the east and south on forays for horses and game. The arrival of the U.S. Army on the Ute range was

not, at first, a cause for great concern among the tribe. In the past, the Utes had been very successful in fighting European-style armies. Since the expansion of the Spanish empire into the southwest, the Utes had proven adept at mobile warfare in difficult terrain.

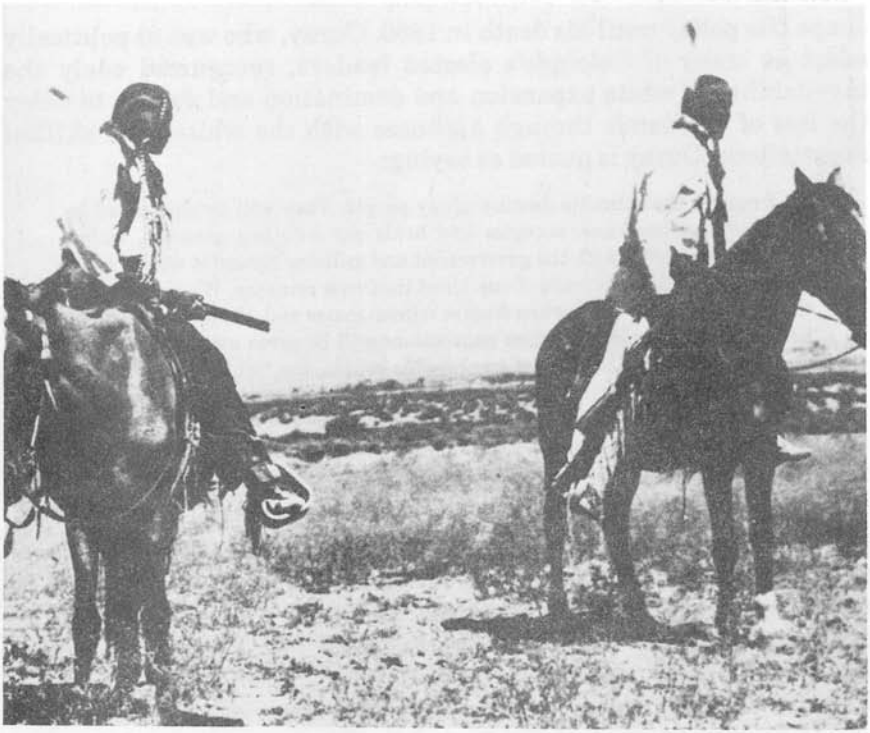
The occupation of New Mexico by Spain in 1598 began the "golden era" in the Utes' history. As with other Plains tribes, the Utes' culture experienced a significant change through the acquisition of the horse from the Spaniards. The Utes' rapid adaptation of the horse greatly increased their mobility and expanded their hunting range (see map 3). Hunters could now leave the mountains and return with sufficient buffalo meat and skins to maintain themselves through the winter. The creation of an economic surplus through more efficient hunting made it possible for scattered Ute family groups to form larger bands under more centralized leadership.[34]

From 1838, with the establishment of Bents Fort along the banks of the South Platte River, the Utes had regular contact with "American" culture. The general lack of problems between the Ute tribe and those expanding the frontier derived from the Indians' unique geographic position. The Utes benefited from the fact that the large immigrant trails and efforts of the transcontinental railroad skirted their mountain home. The one point of friction between the white and Ute cultures originated with the movement of settlers from New Mexico into the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado. The Army was quick to respond by establishing Fort Massachusetts in 1852 (later relocated and renamed Fort Garland in 1858). Fort Garland remained a critical location in the relationship between the Utes and the Army until the ultimate removal of the tribe from the area in 1883. The fort was garrisoned throughout the period by a combination of Regular Army and Colorado militia. At the same time, the post acted as a "leadership laboratory" for future Ute warriors as they observed and served with the Army in campaigns against the Navajo, Sioux, and Cheyenne. As it was described in 1870:

> Eight thousand feet above sea-level, at the foot of snow-covered mountains, towering six thousand feet higher, on the western slope of the Rocky Mountain Range, in about 106 longitude and 37 latitude, a favorite range for the indomitable Utes, and a favorite haunt for elk, deer, bear, panther, and beaver, difficult to access from nearly all directions—Fort Garland, Colorado, though the point of strength and the protecting hope of many a small settlement and isolated rancho flourishing on those sweet trout streams, the Trinchero and Sangre de Cristo, has eminent right still to be called a frontier post.[35]



Map 3. Ute Territory, 1806



Courtesy Denver Public Library

Ute hunters (here using stirrups)

Early in the relationship between the United States and the Utes, the Ute tribe seemed to realize the futility of active resistance and instead sought to adopt a policy of negotiation. Two campaigns were conducted against the Utes in Colorado—the Ute War of 1854—55 and the Ute War of 1879. The first began on 25 December 1854, when a small band of Mouache Utes, under the leadership of Tierra Blanca, killed four trappers. The Army gathered a force of twelve companies of Regulars and militia at Fort Garland to pursue the Utes but quickly came to the conclusion that winter was not the best season for active campaigning in the Rockies. The size of the Army force, however, impressed the Utes, who had avoided contact with the troops by melting away into the mountains.

A peace was negotiated in the fall of 1855, with two consequences that would shape the Ute perception of the Army in the future. First, while the Army could not penetrate the Ute mountain range in the winter, the continual pressure the Army exerted on the Utes for nine months made a lasting impression. Second, a young observer of the conflict was Ouray, who would become chief of the Utes and would

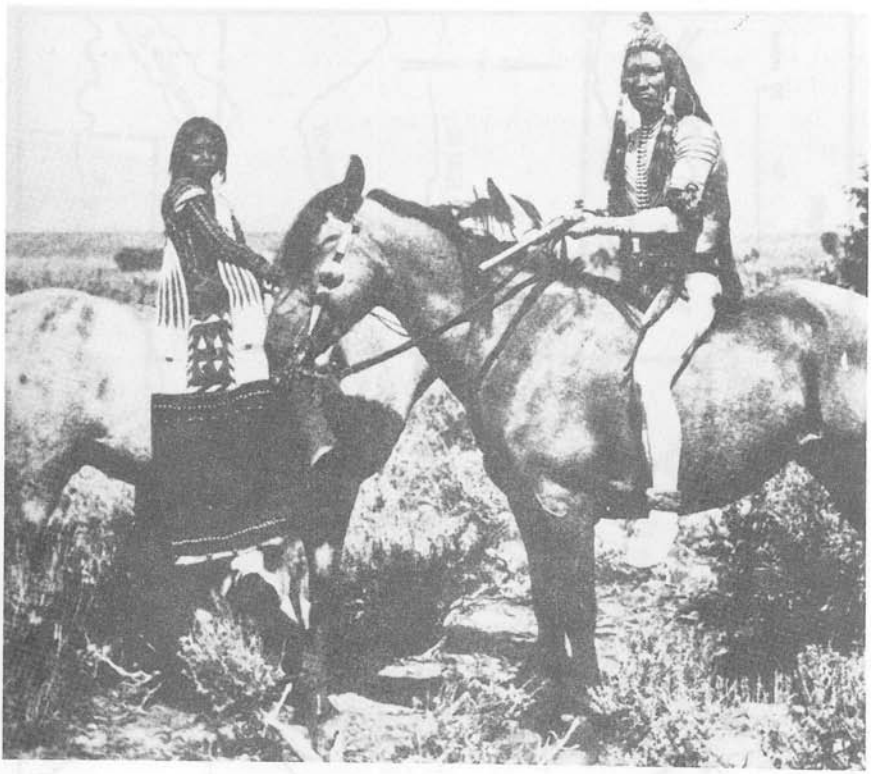
shape Ute policy until his death in 1880. Ouray, who was as politically adept as many of Colorado's elected leaders, recognized early the inevitability of white expansion and domination and sought to delay the loss of Ute lands through alliances with the whites and skillful negotiations. Ouray is quoted as saying:

> I realize the ultimate destiny of my people. They will be extirpated by the race that overruns, occupies and holds our hunting grounds, whose numbers and force, with the government and millions behind it will in a few years remove the last trace of our blood that now remains. We shall fall as the leaves from the trees when frost or winter comes and the lands which we have roamed over for countless generations will be given over to the miner and the plowshare. In place of our humble tepees, the "white man's" towns and cities will appear and we shall be buried out of sight beneath the avalanche of the new civilization. This is the destiny of my people. My part is to protect them and yours as far as I can, from the violence and bloodshed while I live, and to bring both into friendly relations, so that they may be at peace with one another.[36]

Relations between the Utes and white Americans prior to the War of 1879 were remarkable in the restraint shown on both sides. In reviewing records of Army actions from 1860 to 1879 in Colorado, no incidents involving the Utes were recorded.[37] Indeed, the focus of Army action in Colorado was against the traditional enemies of the Utes. The Utes proved a steady ally for the Army during this period, providing men to serve as scouts and auxiliaries against other tribes on the plains and to the south against the Apaches.[38]

The Ute warrior was a valued addition to any Army expedition. He prided himself on two things: marksmanship and horsemanship. Ute culture, perhaps because of the highly defensible nature of their home terrain, emphasized the ability of the sniper and never developed the concept of "counting coup" or hand-to-hand combat like the Plains tribes. The wealth of a man was measured by the number and quality of his horses, but his worth as a warrior was in his marksmanship.[39] The primary armament of the Ute by 1879 were the Henry or Winchester repeaters, which were effective for hunting in the mountains where volume of fire was more useful than range in the broken terrain. The Utes were pragmatic about the conduct of warfare. The practice by other tribes of institutionalizing war honors (i.e., taking scalps) was not followed by the Utes. The taking of horses or prisoners was a matter of expediency to the Utes, but they scorned standing fights. Among their Indian enemies, the Utes had a reputation as a particularly difficult adversary to kill. The Army would have to learn the same lesson on its own.

As it served with the U.S. military, the Ute tribe gained an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Army and of

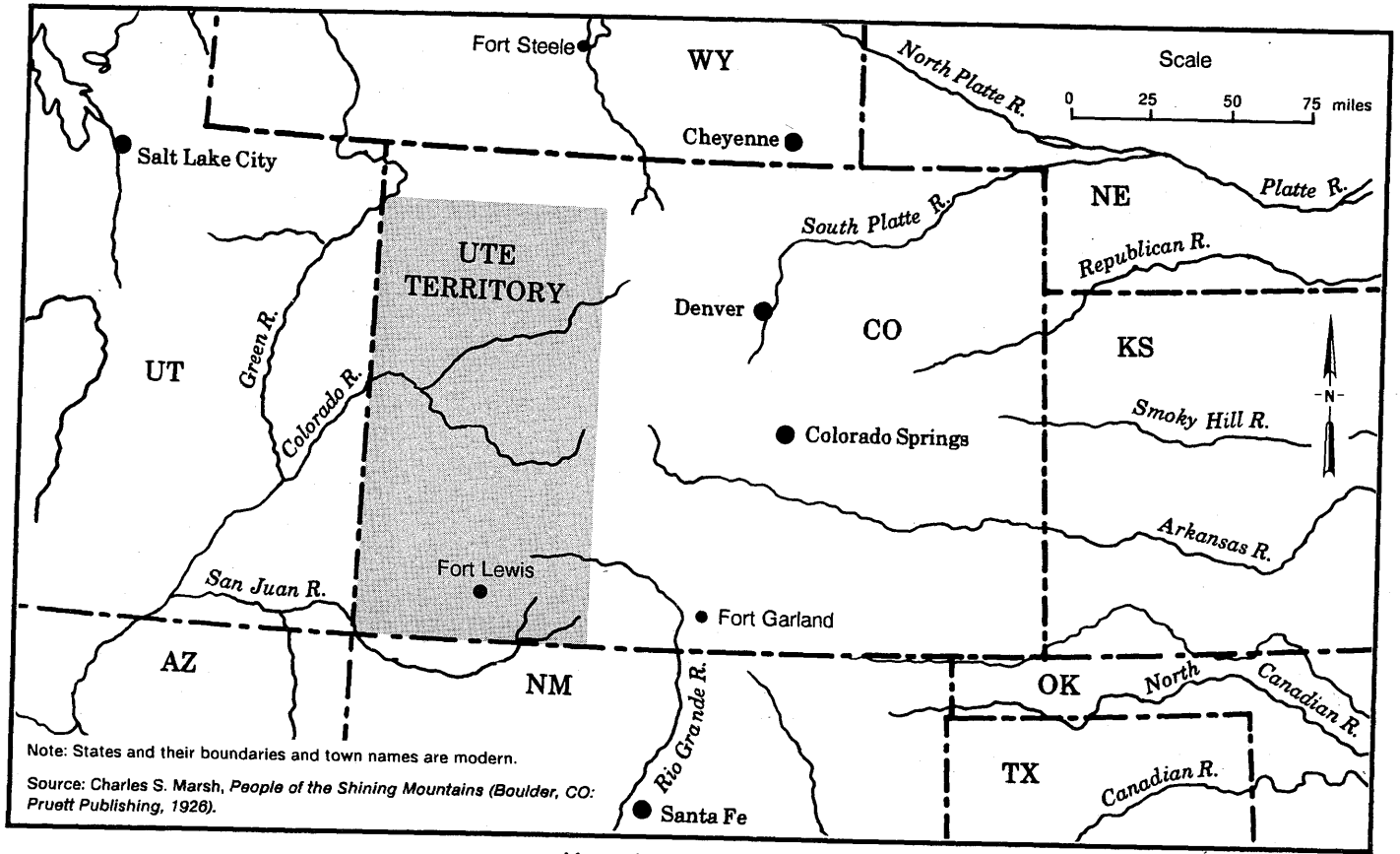


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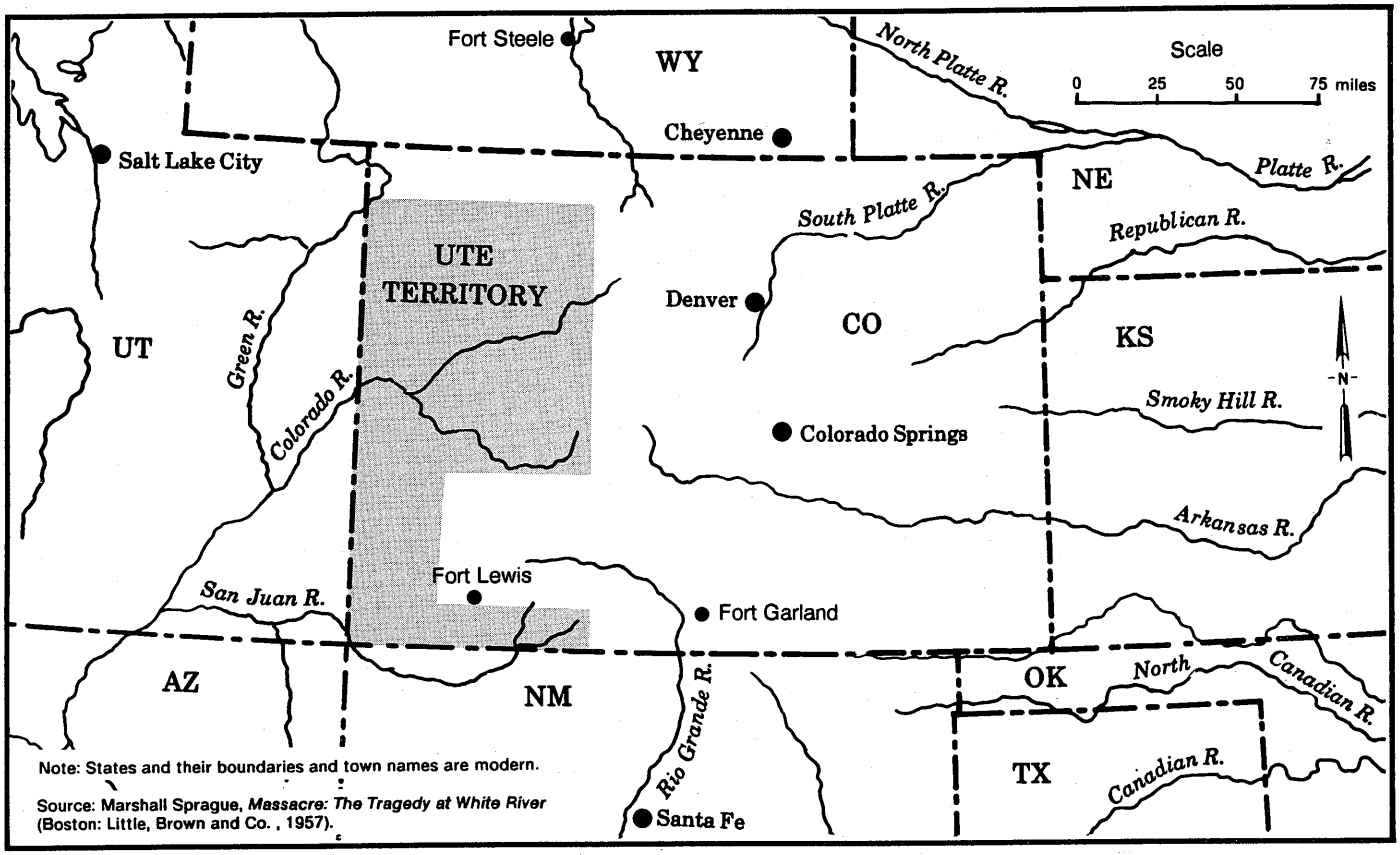
A Ute warrior in war paint

government policy. The massacre at Sand Creek in 1864 and the winter campaign of 1868 against the Cheyenne would, to a large degree, serve as the framework by which the Utes would understand the threat to their tribe. The Utes sought to avoid similar results through negotiation and treaty.

The success of the Utes' policy of negotiation was determined by the "boom or bust" economic cycle that characterized Colorado as a territory and in its early years of statehood. The revision of existing agreements between whites and Indians corresponded with each newly discovered mineral bonanza on Ute-controlled territory. The Ute view of this activity was an acceptance of prospectors and miners, with vain attempts to limit the development of permanent communities and farms. The Utes were unprepared for the onslaught that would follow the discovery of precious minerals.



Map 4. Ute Territory, 1868



Note: States and their boundaries and town names are modern.

Source: Marshall Sprague, *Massacre: The Tragedy at White River* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1957).

Map 5. Ute Territory, 1873

The discovery of gold at Cripple Creek and at Cherry Creek in 1859 would bring about the first definition of Ute lands by the federal government. The end of the Civil War brought gold seekers and settlers to Colorado at an unprecedented rate. The federal government, utilizing the special relationship that Kit Carson held with the tribe, negotiated a treaty in 1868 that guaranteed the Utes an area of approximately 16,000,000 acres and "was binding and final forever"[40] (see map 4). The federal government designated Ouray as the primary Ute chief, which served to consolidate his position within the tribe.

"Forever" arrived earlier than anticipated by the Utes. By 1872, the discovery of silver in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado caused the settlers in Colorado to agitate for revision of the 1868 agreement. The Colorado delegation to Congress complained that this vast amount of land was underutilized by the lazy Ute people. Ouray, at a meeting of the McCook Commission stated, "We work as hard as you do. Did you ever try skinning a buffalo?"[41] (The McCook Commission was a three-member panel convened in 1872 to renegotiate the boundaries of Ute Territory. McCook was a former territorial governor appointed by U. S. Grant. McCook is remembered in Colorado history for his introduction of the spoils system within the state.) [41]

In 1873, the Brunot Treaty was signed, cutting the San Juan region from the Ute lands (see map 5). The area that the Utes controlled was still impressive—over 11,000,000 acres for a total population estimated at between four and six thousand. Ouray was disappointed, however, by the continued reduction of Ute Territory, but his tribe was faring better than most Indians in their attempts to stave off complete destruction. Indeed, the federal government had intervened twice on behalf of the Utes, sending troops to remove miners who were in violation of the treaty.

The strategy of negotiation and alliance with the Army was working for the Utes for the time being. But by 1879, the destruction of the federal government's major Indian opponents and the continued pressures of Colorado settlement and industry would unhinge the Ute strategy. The power of the combined federal and state governments soon would be brought to bear on the Utes with telling effect.

IV. MASSACRE AND BATTLE

"Either they [the Utes] or we go, and we are not going. Humanitarianism is an idea. Western empire is an inexorable fact. He who gets in the way of it will be crushed."[1] Early in 1879, an editorial in the *Denver Times* stated what had become obvious to most white Colorado residents. Since the 1873 Brunot Treaty, pressure had continued to mount for the removal of the Utes from Colorado. Within the state, the publication of Hayden's atlas of 1877 supposedly demonstrated that a large portion of land was still controlled by a "non-producing, semi-barbarous people."[2] Outside Colorado, Eastern humanitarians held off legislation introduced by the Colorado delegation to Congress in 1878 that was designed to remove the Utes forcibly from Colorado to the Indian Territory. But the Utes had not yet provided the grounds for military action against them.

The spark that would provoke the war was provided by the Ute agent, Nathan C. Meeker. In March 1878, Meeker was appointed as the agent to the White River Agency in northwestern Colorado. Meeker saw his appointment as an opportunity to continue his version of social engineering. A deeply religious man, Meeker was determined to pursue his vision for assimilation of the Utes into white society, through force if necessary. As Colorado Governor Pitkin would later state, "A purer and better man than Meeker was never appointed to an Indian agency." As an afterthought, however, he added, "He did not understand Indians sufficiently."[3]

Meeker sought to transform his agency overnight. He saw agriculture as the means to Ute self-sufficiency. He proposed plowing grassland and converting it to farmland, although this made no sense to Indian culture, which measured wealth in horses. Despite strong resistance to his methods, Meeker remained ever hopeful. He reported in July of 1878:

> These Ute Indians are peaceable, respecters of the right of property, and with few exceptions amiable and prepossessing in appearance. There are no quarrelsome outbreaks, no robberies, and perhaps not a half dozen who pilfer, and these are well known . . . On the whole, this agent is impressed with the idea that if the proper methods can be hit upon they [the Indians] can be made to develop many useful and manly qualities and be elevated to a state of absolute independence.[4]

Despite Meeker's favorable reports, other elements in the state were opposed to mediation with the Utes. Beginning in 1877, the Department of the Missouri had been caught up in the increasing pressure between the cultures. In August 1877, citizens petitioned



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

Nathan C. Meeker, Indian agent to the White River Utes

General Pope to station a company of cavalry permanently in the area of Middle Park to control the Utes, "believing trouble will surely be averted thereby."[5] In the summer of 1879, Pope sent troops—D Company, 9th Cavalry—to stabilize the situation, but with mixed results. According to Frank Hall, adjutant general of Colorado: "At length General John Pope sent a single company of colored cavalry to scout in the Middle Park. Now if there is anything on the face of the earth that an Indian hates above another it is a negro, and especially a nigger soldier. Therefore, this movement, instead of quieting their hostility, merely inflamed it."[6]

Pope's efforts to defuse the growing crisis went largely unappreciated in the polarized environment of the times. In the meantime, he found an unlikely ally for his idea of consolidating the Utes under the control of the Army. Prior to the outbreak of open hostilities, the Army had received support from the Indian Bureau in its effort to consolidate the tribes to facilitate control by the military. In the case of the Utes, the Indian Bureau, in its annual report of 1878, supported moving them to the Indian Territory. This proposal reflected the need to centralize the management of the different tribes to better provide for at least the minimum amount of subsistence for them. The Utes presented a particularly thorny problem because of the mountainous nature of the terrain they occupied. The White River Agency was only accessible two months out of the year by teamster



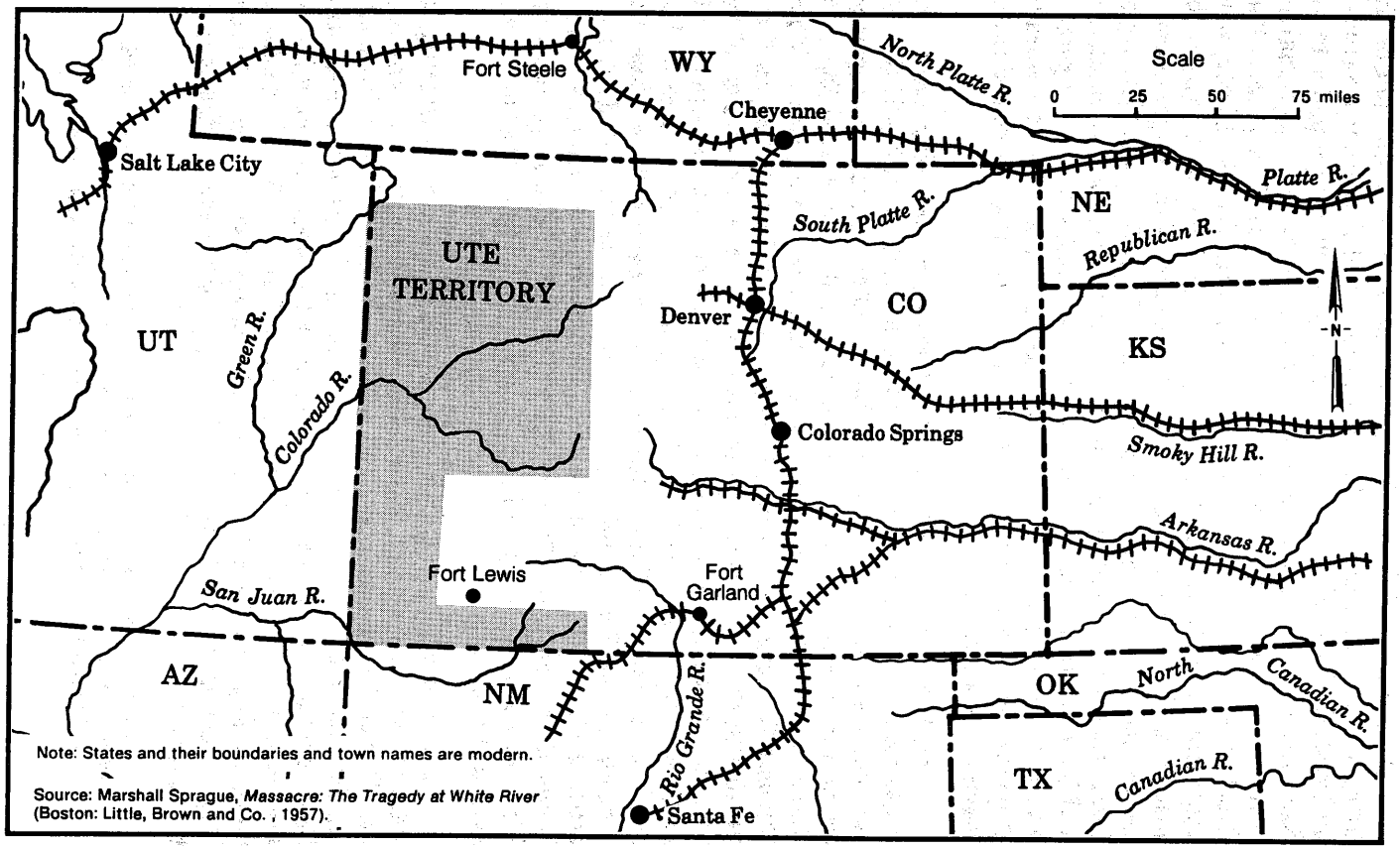
Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

Chief Colorow, one of several chiefs who contended for control of the Northern Utes

wagons. Thus, the Indian Bureau presented its desire to relocate the tribe as a matter of military and practical expediency. Commissioner Ezra A. Hayt stated:

> The reason I favored it [transfer of the Utes to Indian Territory] is this: The Indian Territory has enough fertile land to enable those Indians to settle down comfortably. It has a superabundance of fertile land. Again, the country is not broken, ridged, and labyrinthine like this region in Colorado; it is a country where the Army could use artillery; and wherever our troops can use artillery the Indians know very well that it is useless for them to go upon the warpath, so that, as a defensive measure, I think it would be wise to take them out of their fortresses and put them where they will be less formidable . . . I think, then, if we wish to avoid expensive wars and to save the lives of our soldiers, it is very desirable to put these Indians out of their fortresses in Colorado.[7]

On 4 February 1878, the Colorado delegation introduced the first of three bills designed to remove the Utes to the Indian Territory. The bills called for the transfer of the Utes and for the revocation of any title to the Ute lands. House Resolution 351 was typical of the three. It empowered the Secretary of the Interior to negotiate with the Utes and "establish by law the extinguishment of title to their lands, removal from their present locations and consolidation on certain reservations."[8]



Map 6. Theater railroads, 1878

The location of the White River Agency was at the end of the Army's operational reach. While the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad had pushed a line past Fort Garland to bring in mining supplies to the San Juan Mountains, the northwestern portion of the state remained remote (see placement of theater railroads, map 6). Troops from Fort Steele, Wyoming Territory, within the Department of the Platte, were approximately 150 miles from the agency. The closest troops to the agency, within the state and under the control of the Department of the Missouri, were at Fort Garland about 176 miles away. The Army found itself able to contain the Utes away from the population centers and lines of communication within the state and along the Wyoming border but not able to control events in the hinterland of Colorado. Superior operational mobility was not an advantage if containment was not the objective.

The Army's command and control structure, as delineated by the departments, may have contributed to the outbreak of hostilities. As tensions rose and reports of Ute violations of the peace were reported, citizens of northwestern and northcentral Colorado crossed the state line and demanded action from the commander at Fort Steele, Major Thomas T. Thornburgh. Thornburgh did not act for two reasons. First, he viewed the Ute problem as an issue within the jurisdiction of the neighboring department. Second, while the Ute range was primarily in Colorado, the Utes did travel in Wyoming Territory, and he had received no reports of problems from Wyoming ranchers. Thus, the commander of Fort Steele solicited reports on Ute conduct from settlers within 100 miles of the post. All indicated the Utes were well-behaved. Nonetheless, Thornburgh questioned the stories, since the Utes were blamed for myriad problems on one side of the border and none on the other.[9]

Coordination between Army departments was occurring as tensions were increasing. Meeker had sent a message to Thornburgh on 17 July 1879, concerned that a band of White River Utes was heading north on a raid to acquire weapons and possibly to meet with Sioux hostiles. By 26 July 1879, the report had been relayed from the Department of the Platte headquarters at Fort Omaha, Nebraska, to General Pope at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.[10] General Crook, Department of the Platte commander, reported to General Sheridan on the incident:

> . . . Major Thornburgh's report with these statements are forwarded herewith. From these statements it will be seen:
>
> 1. That besides killing game the Indians committed no depredations.



Courtesy of NARA, Washington, DC, Record Group 82332

General George Crook

2. That the post commander of Fort Steele, Wyo., did not receive timely information of the presence of the Indians referred to.

I ask attention to the fact that it is impossible for the military, placed as they are at such great distances from the agencies, to prevent Indians from leaving without authority, unless warning in due time by the Indian authorities is given. Nor can a post commander force them to return without running the risk of bringing on a war, for which he would be held accountable.

For this reason the post commander is required to refer the matter to higher military authority, which also involves delay. Unless troops are stationed at the agencies they cannot know in time when Indians are absent by authority; nor can they prevent the occurrence of troubles, for which they are frequently and most unjustly held responsible.[11]

In addition to problems along the Colorado-Wyoming border, the Colorado-Utah border added another factor into the equation. The long standing animosity between the federal government and portions of the Mormon community in Utah had the potential to escalate any Ute outbreak into a more protracted insurgency. As tensions between the Utes and the government were rising, unidentified whites from Utah were arriving at Indian camps inciting the tribe to take action.

Throughout the summer of 1879, events and rumors on both sides were beginning to take on a life of their own. The unsubstantiated stories of depredations of whites and Indians were splashed across the



Governor Frederick Pitkin of Colorado

Courtesy Denver Public Library

front pages of Colorado's daily newspapers (see table 1). The Utes were operating under an agreement, the Brunot Treaty, that had been signed by President Ulysses S. Grant only four years earlier. The trustee of this agreement, the Indian Bureau, both at the local and national levels, was openly suggesting the annulment of the document. Meanwhile, the state government, led by Governor Pitkin, was calling for the removal of the Utes.

On 5 July 1879, Governor Pitkin sent the following telegram to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Ezra A. Hayt:

> Reports reach me daily that a band of White River Utes are off the reservation, destroying forests and game near North and Middle Parks. They have already burned millions of dollars of timber, and are intimidating settlers and miners. Have written Agent Meeker, but fear letters have not reached him. I respectfully request you to have telegraphic order sent troops at nearest post to remove Indians to their reservation. If general government does not act promptly the State must. Immense forests are burning throughout Western Colorado, supposed to have been fired by the Utes. I am satisfied there is an organized effort on the part of Indians to destroy the timber of Colorado. The loss will be irreplaceable. These savages should be removed to the Indian Territory, where they can no longer destroy the finest forests in this state.[12]

Pitkin's action, or more specifically his lack of action to defuse the crisis, was adding to the tension between the Utes and the citizenry of the state. The request for troops to control the Utes was based on

violations attributed to the Utes, rumors, and the concerns of Agent Meeker.[13] On 20 August 1879, a delegation of Utes from the White River Agency, led by the chief of that band, Douglas, arrived in Denver for a meeting with the governor. The Utes assumed that the governor would take action against Agent Meeker once their grievances were known. The Utes explained that they no longer had confidence in Meeker and, to avert trouble, a replacement was needed. At the time of the meeting, Pitkin had been informed that his earlier request for troops had been approved by the Indian Bureau and had been turned over to the War Department.[14] The governor took no action.

Table 1. Sample News Headlines from the Rocky Mountain News (1878–79)

1878	
2 January	"Indian Hostilities"
3 March	"Utes on Rampage, Whites Fear Uprising"
5 March	"Utes Kill Cattle on Snake River"
18 April	"Ute Massacre in Pagosa Springs"
23 April	"Rumors of Ute War"
28 April	"Utes' Gold Locations Secret from Whites"
24 May	"Utes Rebellious Through Neglect of Indian Bureau"
21 July	"Movements of Ute Indians"
3 August	"Utes Kill Joe McLane, Stockmen Seek Revenge"
1 September	"Ute Uprising Feared in Grand County"
12 September	"Utes in Trouble over Murder of Settlers"
1879	
1 January	"Utes Make Trouble in Middle Park"
27 June	"Utes Threaten Miners in North Park"
9 July	"Ute Hostile Attitude Excites State Officials"
16 July	"Shall We Kill or Starve the Indians? [editorial]"
6 August	"The Indians Must Go"
14 August	"Utes Arrested and Charged with Arson"

10 September	Letter to the editor from Meeker complaining of his treatment by the Utes

Through the summer of 1879, Meeker was becoming aware of the White River Utes' personal animosity toward him. Nonetheless, he found solace in the belief that his program would ultimately be successful. Meeker believed the Indians must be brought down to the level of basic survival in order to guide them to correct, civilized, and agrarian lifeways. Meeker had reported to his Senate sponsor, Senator Teller, "I propose to cut every Indian down to the bare starvation point if he will not work." Later, he stated, "the most hopeful thing is that there are several families complaining bitterly of cold, and they want houses."[15]

The only agency that appeared to be operating within the framework of national policy was the Army. While the Army was not a friend to the Ute, it was attempting to maintain itself above the realm of partisan politics and experiments in social engineering. General Pope had one company of cavalry patrolling the Colorado mountains trying to maintain the peace; he had previously demonstrated that the Army would intervene on the Utes' behalf in support of existing treaty arrangements. Pope traveled to the state on 6 August 1879 to meet with Governor Pitkin and assess the requests for additional troops. The steady stream of requests from the state and the reports from both the Departments of the Platte and the Missouri led him to the conclusion that a crisis was unfolding. Fort Lewis, Colorado, was established by the summer of 1879 near Pagosa Springs to contain further violations of Ute lands in the San Juan Mountains area by whites.[16]

In 1879, Major Thornburgh had become aware of problems at the White River Agency. Meeker had written him twice, on 7 and 11 June, regarding problems at the agency.[17] In addition to official message traffic, small groups of Utes had traveled to Rawlins, Wyoming, in an attempt to locate long-delayed supplies for the agency. At Rawlins, the railhead for the White River Agency, supplies had been awaiting transportation for as long as one year. Thornburgh had sent a message to Meeker informing him of this problem and requesting that the agent resolve the matter through Indian Bureau channels. Thornburgh did not live to learn of the answer.

The event that finally led to the collision of the competing interests has been the subject of popular legend in the state of Colorado. The most widely held belief is that Agent Meeker plowed up the ground that the Utes used as a racetrack. Regardless of the reason, on 10 September 1879, Meeker telegraphed the Indian Bureau that he had been physically assaulted by a Ute and was in fear of his life and the safety of other agency employees.[18]

Meeker's message was received on 14 September 1879 at the Indian Bureau. By the next day, the War Department had ordered troops to the scene. On the same day, Commissioner Hayt sent a message to Meeker that troops had been requested for his protection. Hayt also instructed Meeker to have "leaders" arrested upon the arrival of the Army. Meeker responded on 22 September: "Governor Pitkin writes, 'cavalry on the way. Dispatch of 15th will be obeyed.' "[19]

By the 15th, Pope had troops moving to resolve the reported problems at the agency. He had sent orders to Captain Dodge, Company D, 9th Cavalry, at Sulphur Springs, Colorado, to "settle matters" at White River.[20] The movement of these troops was halted, however, as Generals Sheridan, Crook, and Pope discussed the best options to deal with the problem. Sheridan directed Crook to send troops from the Department of the Platte because of the relative proximity of Fort Steele and the Union Pacific railhead. His order to Pope was that the Department of Missouri "need not take any action in reference thereto."[21] With orders issued to Thornburgh's command on 16 September 1879, Sheridan recommended to General Pope: ". . . no action in so far as the military are concerned, except simply to quell the existing disturbances and then to await such final decision as may seem best by the Indian Bureau."[22]

On 21 September 1879, Major Thornburgh departed Fort Steele with E Company, 3d Cavalry; D and F Companies, 5th Cavalry; and B Company from his own 4th Infantry. Included with the column as it left Rawlins, Wyoming, were thirty-three supply wagons and 220 pack mules—a line which was strung out over several miles. The force carried with it rations for thirty days and forage for fifteen days, which, in the words of a later report by General Sherman, "was considered by everybody as sufficient for the purpose."[23] For the next seven days, with about 200 men, Thornburgh marched toward the agency while reporting his progress to General Crook.

The trail to the agency was difficult and progress was slow. Numerous rivers and streams, plus the Continental Divide, had to be negotiated en route. After crossing the divide, Thornburgh left the



Major Thomas T. Thornburgh, the commander of U.S. forces at Milk Creek, who died in the fighting

Courtesy Denver Public Library

infantry company and twenty-five wagons at Fortification Creek to serve as a supply base for his command. It had taken him until the 24th to arrive at Fortification Creek, where he rested the column and sent a messenger to the agency with details of his mission.

On the 26th, with no news from the agency, the column resumed its march. As Thornburgh moved toward the agency, the Utes became very agitated. Meanwhile, Chief Douglas confronted Meeker about his role in calling for troops. Meeker denied any knowledge of the troops but assured Douglas that he would intercede and halt the advance short of the agency boundary—Milk River.[24] The message dispatched to Meeker from Thornburgh had already arranged this course of action. On 26 September 1879, Thornburgh reported from the Bear River (now known as the Yampa River) to the Department of the Platte: "Have met some Ute chiefs here. They seem friendly and promise to go with me to agency. Say Utes don't understand why we have come. Have tried to explain satisfactorily. Do not anticipate trouble."[25]

The Utes, in the meantime, perceived that the march of the troops meant that war had been declared on them. Ute emissaries met with Major Thornburgh twice during his movement, but in spite of his best efforts, their fears and concerns were not allayed. On 28 September,

Thornburgh changed the plan that he had previously communicated to Meeker. Concerned about the prospect of being separated from his command if trouble ensued, he decided to push beyond the Milk River boundary. He wrote Meeker:

> I have, after due deliberation, decided to modify my plans as communicated in my letter of the 27th instant in the following particulars:
>
> I shall move with my entire command to some convenient camp near, and within striking distance of your agency, reaching such point during the 29th. I shall then halt and encamp the troops and proceed to the agency with my guide and five soldiers. . . .
>
> Then and there I will be ready to have a conference with you and the Indians, so that an understanding may be arrived at and my course of action determined. I have carefully considered whether or not it would be advisable to have my command at a point as distant as that desired by the Indians who were in camp last night, and have reached the conclusion that under my orders, which require me to march this command to the agency, I am not at liberty to leave it at a point where it would not be available in case of trouble. You are authorized to say for me to the Indians that my course of conduct is entirely dependent on them. Our desire is to avoid trouble, and we have not come for war.[26]

As the column resumed its march on 29 September, it soon descended into a small valley that contained the Milk River. As the troops moved into the valley, soldiers noticed that the grass was burning along the bottom land. They also noted the presence of a large number of horse tracks.[27] Thornburgh halted the column along the river long enough to water the stock. As he was now preparing to violate the agency boundary, the major sent a lieutenant and ten troopers to scout ahead as the command resumed its movement into Ute Territory.

The advance guard of the formation, under the command of Lieutenant S. A. Cherry, crossed the Milk River and took up a position between one-half to three-quarters of a mile in front of the main body. Instead of following the dirt track that followed the course of the river to the agency proper, Cherry began climbing a low ridge to the south of the track. At the top of the ridge, Cherry saw three Indians disappear over the next ridgeline. He proceeded down into a small gully and began to climb the second ridge. Thornburgh's concern for an ambush heightened, and he led the main body along the advance guard's route, bypassing the river track. As Cherry now topped the ridge, he observed:

> I discovered the Indians on top of the second ridge, I saw them lying down with their guns in their hands behind the ridge. I was within a hundred yards of the Indians, and I could see them lying down, occupying

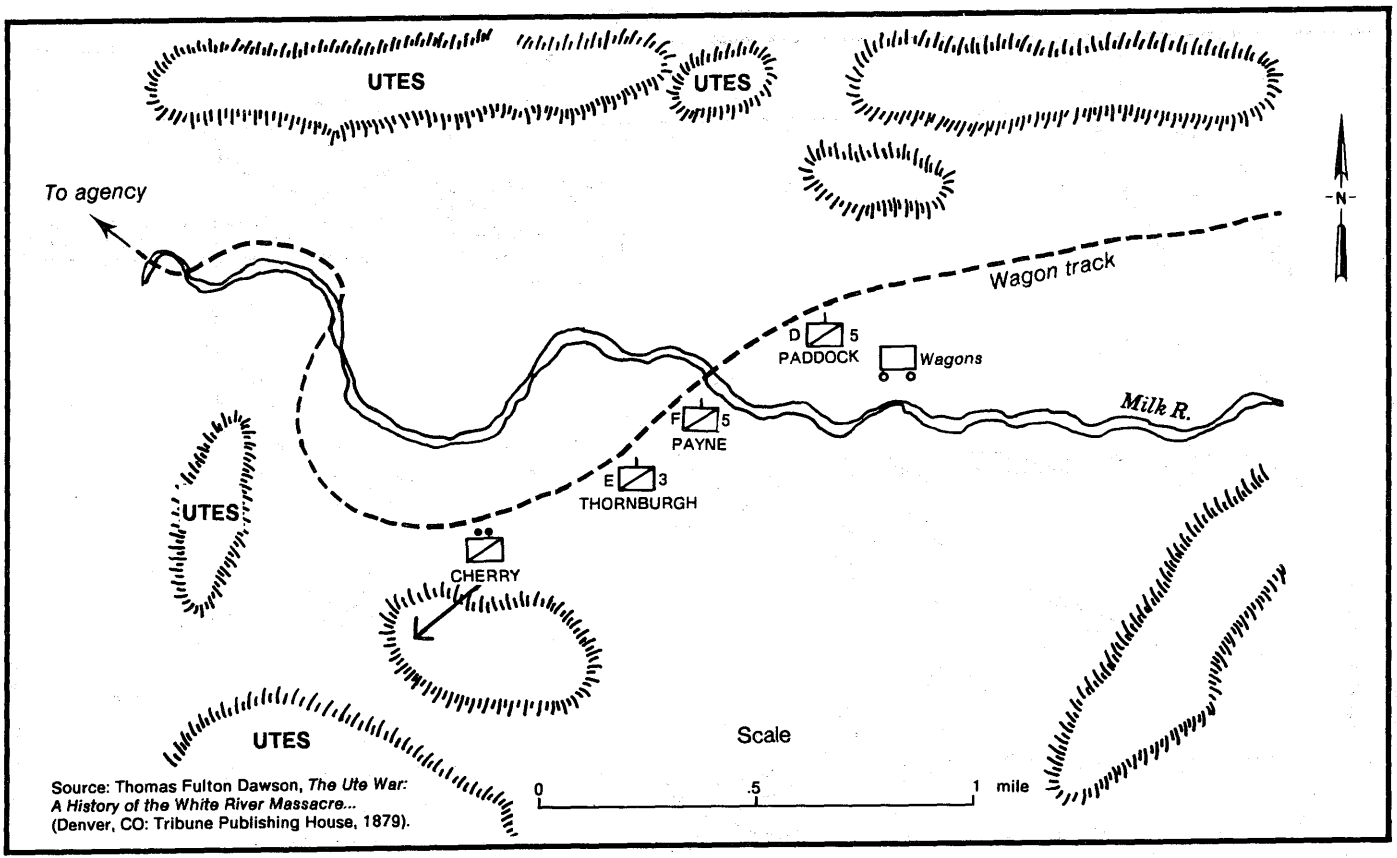
not more than a yard of space each; was near enough to see that they were packed as close as they could be, their line extending at least 400 yards.[28]

Upon observing the dismounted force of between 300 to 400 Utes (see map 7), Cherry turned and rode hell-bent for Thornburgh at the lead of the main body. As he viewed the frantic ride of his advance guard, Thornburgh deployed the two lead companies, D and F, 5th Cavalry, along the first ridgeline. The remaining company was still near the Milk River with the wagons. The Utes watched the two lead elements deploy and, based on their previous service with the Army, immediately assumed that this called for an imminent charge.

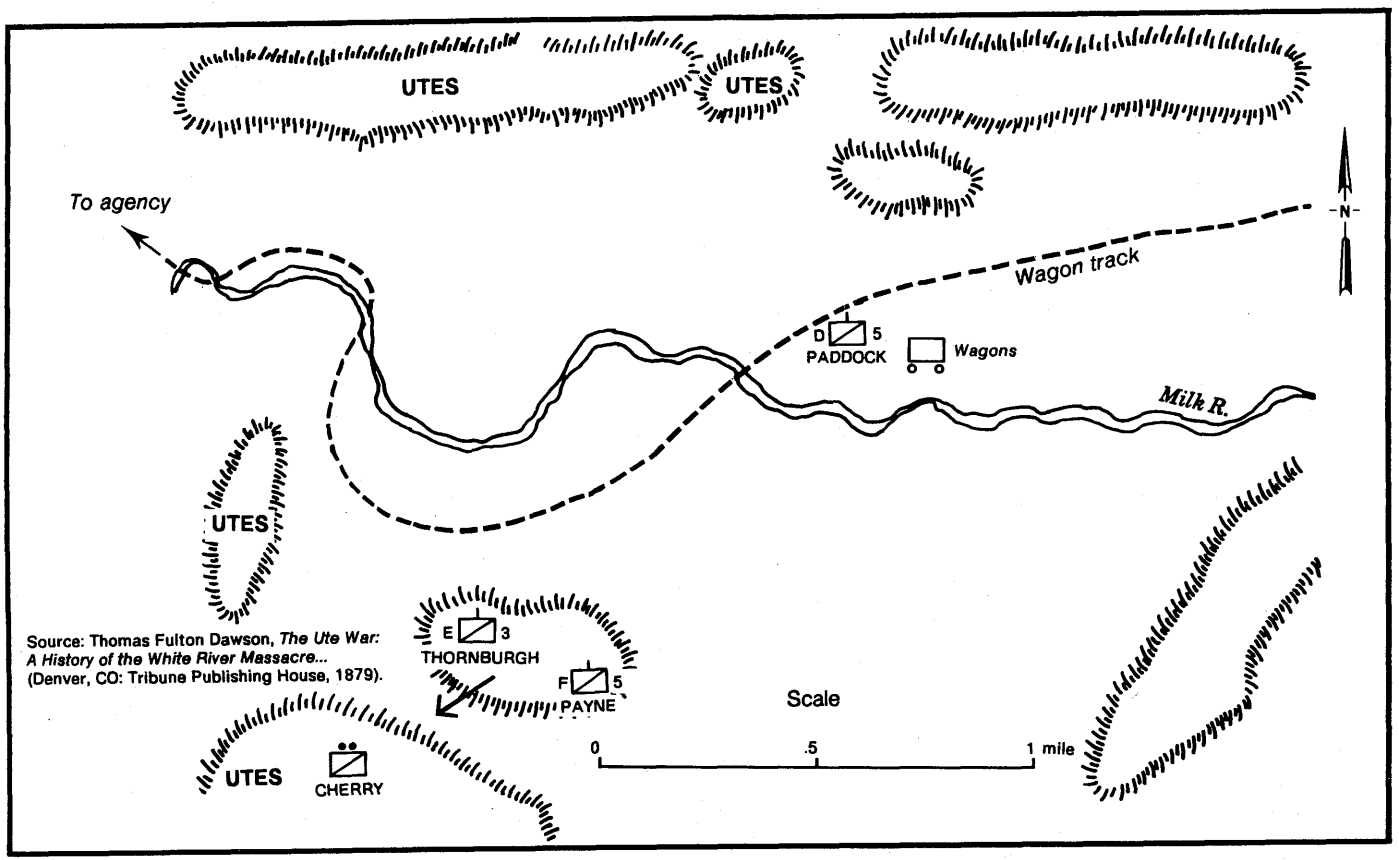
The advance guard arrived at Thornburgh's position, and Cherry made his report. Thornburgh then sent Cherry with orders to the two lead companies to "dismount and hold fire until he gave the order."[29] Once the orders were delivered to the companies, Cherry and his advance party were told to advance and attempt to parley with the Utes. Upon delivering his orders, Cherry rode toward the second ridge and encountered a small group of Utes (see map 8). As he waved his hat, he was met by a hail of bullets that cut down a trooper ten feet from him.[30]

Cherry's party came tumbling back to the skirmish lines formed by the two companies, and rifle fire erupted from both sides. Although Thornburgh had successfully avoided the Ute ambush set for his command along the river track, he now took a heavy volume of rifle fire in his current position. Futhermore, as mounted Utes were attempting to envelop his position, he was in danger of being cut off from his supplies and his third company along the Milk River. Thornburgh, therefore, executed a slow dismounted withdrawal back to the north side of the river to the relative safety of the wagons. At one point during his withdrawal, he observed Utes concentrating for a mounted attack and quickly executed a spoiling attack with one of his companies.[31] As the command was falling back to the river in a swirling battle of rifle fire, Thornburgh was killed and command succeeded to Captain J. Scott Payne of the 5th Cavalry (see map 9 for the route of withdrawal).

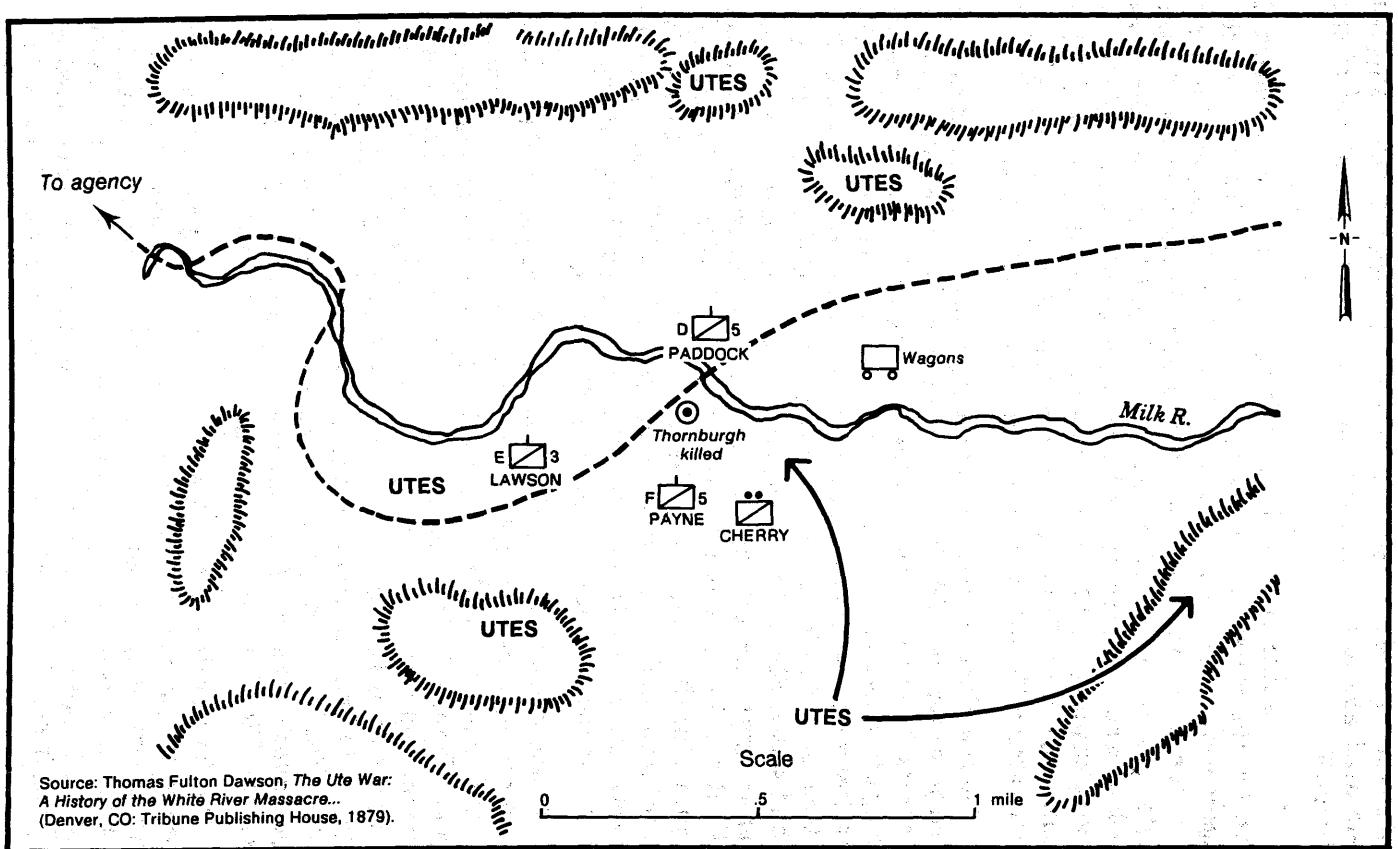
Payne assumed command as the three cavalry companies arrived at the wagons on the north side of the river. Now, the soldiers began using wagons, grain sacks, dead horses, and dirt to establish temporary breastworks and a corral for the surviving animals. Meanwhile, the Utes occupied the high ground north and south of the river. Using this advantage and the superior range of their rifles, they kept up a steady pressure on the troops with constant sniping. The roll



Map 7. Cherry's initial advance



Map 8. First contact



Map 9. Thornburgh's withdrawal

call on the night of 29 September revealed that twelve of the command were dead and forty-three wounded, including all but one of the officers.[32]

With the outbreak of fighting, affairs at the agency took a marked turn for the worse. Ute messengers rode back with news of the engagement, and the tension that had been building for months burst forth in a wild orgy of violence that resulted in the murders of eight white male employees of the agency. Included in this number was Meeker, who was later found by troops with his skull smashed, a logging chain around his neck, and a barrel stave driven through his mouth and skull.[33] The four white female residents of the agency were taken captive. These included Meeker's wife and daughter.

On the night of 29 September, the besieged troops fought off an attempt to overwhelm their defenses, but their situation still remained desperate. The Utes, continuing their harassing fire, had succeeded in killing all of the soldiers' horses and mules. Any movement within the breastworks drew well-placed fire from the invisible snipers. The problem of sustaining the defense was compounded by the soldiers' lack of water. Since the distance from the defensive position to the river was approximately 200 yards, attempts by the troops to reach the Milk River during daylight were impossible. Exacerbating the situation, the Utes moved up to the river at night to interdict resupply, further compounding the water problems. The Indians next set fire to the surrounding vegetation, while the troops stood idly by attempting to conserve their ammunition to ward off more attacks.[34]

At approximately midnight on 29 and 30 September, Payne sent out four volunteers to go for assistance.[35] On 1 October, one courier met D Company, 9th Cavalry, which was en route to the agency. Captain Francis Dodge rode with his company toward the besieged command and sent out messages reporting the situation. Meanwhile, the troops at Milk River continued to suffer from the effects of the siege, including attempts by the Indians to draw out foolhardy soldiers. The Utes had taken up positions along the river bottom and began taunting the soldiers: "Come out, you sons-of-bitches, and fight like men—Utes kill 'oor 'orse and mool and kill oo."[36]

On the morning of 2 October, the spirits of Payne's troops were raised by the arrival of D Company, 9th Cavalry. Unfortunately, the additional company did not change the situation, except for bringing proof that a messenger had succeeded in getting word to the outside world. Although D Company arrived at the battlefield undetected by the Utes, it ran the last 600 yards under the gauntlet of heavy fire.



Courtesy Denver Public Library

The monument commemorating the Battle of Milk Creek and the U.S. soldiers who died there

Reaching the breastworks, the company settled into the defense and awaited further reinforcements.

At noon on 2 October, the relieving force that Payne's command was waiting for swung into action. From Fort D. A. Russell, Colonel Wesley Merritt, commanding the 5th Cavalry Regiment, departed for the Milk River battle with eight companies (a force of about 500 men).[37] The rate of Merritt's march stands in sharp contrast to the march of the original expedition to the White River Agency. Over a distance of 170 miles, Merritt's force traveled 30 miles on 2 October, 50 miles on 3 October, and, with a nonstop march, completed the last 70 miles on the morning of 5 October 1879.[38]

At 0500 on the 5th, the weary troops on Milk River heard the strains of a bugle sounding "Officer's Call," announcing the end of their ordeal. The advance elements of Merritt's force soon reached the breastworks. Meanwhile, the Utes had detected Merritt's column and had retreated south into the confines of Ute Territory. Merritt' s troops were not the only force riding to the sounds of the guns. General Sheridan had dispatched troops from the Department of Texas, as well as troops from the Department of the Missouri, to the scene. Colonel Merritt soon found himself in control of three converging columns. Six companies of the 4th Cavalry, under Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie from Fort Clark, Texas, and five additional companies of the 9th Cavalry, under Colonel Hatch from Forts Garland and Union, were moving rapidly toward White River. Merritt's combined force would number over 1,500 men.

The size and speed of the Army's response filled the Utes with trepidation. The emotions that had driven them to attack their agent and U.S. Army units were now replaced by fear and apprehension. The White River Utes retreated deep into the mountains to await the expected onslaught of the Army.

V. AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSIONS

The 5th Cavalry never got the opportunity to directly avenge their fallen comrades. The campaign was instead concluded through a negotiated settlement that would lead to the removal of the majority of the Ute tribe from the state. The culmination of the Ute campaign illustrates that, in spite of misgivings about the national Indian policy, the Army had linked the design and conduct of its operational strategy to this policy. Political reality, patterns of economic development, limited budget and manpower resources—all served to shape the conduct of the Ute campaign.

After resting his force and dealing with the dead and wounded, Colonel Merritt pushed on to the White River Agency. Arriving at the agency on 11 October 1879, Merritt buried the bodies of the victims of the massacre and made preparations for a pursuit of the Utes to the south. While still at White River, reinforcements sent from the Departments of the Platte and Missouri arrived, bringing Merritt's strength to about a thousand effectives.[1]

On 14 October, Merritt began his pursuit to overtake the Utes and to rescue the female hostages. In addition to Merritt, the 4th Cavalry under Mackenzie had been reinforced to about 1,500 men and was preparing to depart Fort Garland, Colorado.[2] Hatch's 9th Cavalry, with a complement of 450 men, had been ordered to Fort Lewis, Colorado, near the Southern Ute Agency.[3] The plan was relatively simple: the 4th and 9th Cavalry Regiments would strike to the west and north, splitting the White River Utes from the southern Ute bands. Meanwhile, Merritt's 5th Cavalry would push south, trapping the Utes against the other columns.

The campaign would be conducted in winter, due to the demands for immediate action from the state and the advantages winter offered Army forces. The demand for logistical support of the troops in the theater would change little, whether they remained as currently deployed or took the field against the Utes. Because of the limited access to railroad lines, the rugged area of operations would certainly challenge the Army's ability to sustain operations. But the Ute's sustainment problem was drastically more difficult in the winter. The alternative for the Army—waiting for the snow to melt the following June and then having to chase a highly mobile force through the mountains—was far less appealing.

Before Merritt crossed the first range of mountains and as he climbed out of the valley created by the White River, the columns were



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

This portrait of Chief Ouray, made in the late 1870s, shows him in white man's clothes. Later, before his death, he reverted to Indian dress.

called to a halt. Upon arriving in Denver, Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz had intervened in an attempt to save the hostages and defuse the crisis. He designated Charles Adams as a special envoy because he was known and trusted by the Ute's Chief Ouray. Adams was authorized to negotiate for the release of the hostages. As early as 2 October, Ouray had sent messengers north, urging the White River band to release the women and to cease fighting.[4] On 9 October, Ouray and Agent William M. Stanley of the Southern Ute Agency at Los Pinos, Colorado, reported to Schurz that the White River band ". . . will fight no more unless forced to do so."[5]

Schurz, sensing an opportunity to avert a costly fight, warned Ouray that "the troops are now in great force, and resistance would result in great disaster to the Indians."[6] Schurz telegraphed General Sherman with news of the ongoing efforts to mediate the conflict. On 14 October, Merritt received the following dispatch sent through General Sheridan from General Sherman:

> The honorable Secretary of the Interior has, this 10.30 a.m., called with a dispatch, given length below, which is communicated for your information, and which should go for what [it] is worth to Generals Crook and Merritt. The latter, on the spot, can tell if the hostiles have ceased fighting. If so, General Merritt should go in every event to the agency to ascertain the actual condition of facts. All Indians who oppose must be cleared out of the way if they resist. If they surrender their arms and ponies, they should be held as prisoners, to be disposed of by superior orders.

> The Secretary of the Interior will send a special agent at once to Ouray, who is believed to be honest and our friend. He may prevent the southern Utes from being involved, and the Interior Department can befriend him afterward by showing favor to some of his special friends. But the murderers of the agent and servants must be punished, as also those who fought and killed Major Thornburgh and men.[7]

Merritt returned to the encampment at White River and, along with the other troops in the state, set about preparing for the onset of winter while awaiting news of Adams' mission. Emotions within the state were explosive. Apprehensive at the prospect of a full-scale Indian war, citizens from areas throughout the state overwhelmed the governor's office with requests for arms and troops. Two companies of the Colorado militia were called up to patrol the Uncompahgre valley near the Southern Ute band. John C. Bell, a member of the Pitkin Guards from Lake City, Colorado, later recalled: "The Governor called them into service, and war-order No. 1 was bring in, dead or alive, all hostile Indians found off the reservation . . . consider all Indians off the reservation hostile, and bring them in, dead or alive, and we will determine their docility afterward."[8]

The ultimatum that Adams brought to the White River Utes consisted of two demands: first, release the hostages unharmed, and second, surrender the individuals responsible for the murders at the White River Agency. If the Utes agreed to these conditions, military action would be forestalled and hearings on Indian grievances would be held at a later date. On 21 October, Adams returned to Ouray's camp with the unharmed hostages.[9] Adams reported that the second condition had not been agreed to by the Utes and that he was returning for further discussions. On 24 October, Sherman, growing anxious at the delay, sent the following message to his field commander:

> . . . Let all preparations proceed, and be ready the moment I give the word to pitch in. Should Agent Adams fail in his mission I understand that the civil authorities will stand aside and military will take absolute control of this whole Ute question and settle it for good and all. Meantime, humanity to the captive women and the friendly Utes, even of White River, justifies this seeming waste of time.[10]

Sherman was tiring of the lack of progress in the negotiations. He saw the situation as the direct result of the lack of Army control in establishing policy. His view that the management of Indian affairs should reside in the War Department was the source of his frustration in handling the Ute problem. As Sherman wrote to Sheridan:

> . . . as the Govt [sic] of the U.S. and if the Christian policy has failed it had not been for want of effort but because the problem is insoluble—unless the



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

Chief Jack, leader of the successful attack on Thornburgh

> Indian will change his nature and habits, select his spot on earth, and become as a white man he is doomed. It is not because the white man is cruel, inhuman and grasping but because it is the Law of Natural Change and Development—the wrong began at Plymouth Rock and will end in the Rocky Mountains.[11]

Four days later, on 29 October, Adams reported that the Indians appeared willing to surrender the guilty parties if the accused would be afforded the same treatment as whites under similar circumstances. On 10 November 1879, twenty chiefs of the White River Utes, including Chiefs Douglas and Jack, accepted the government's terms.[12] A commission was immediately created and began at once to sort out the details of the events leading up to the uprising.

The commission's hearings lasted for another year and ultimately failed to address the problems surrounding the events of 1879 to the satisfaction of Colorado citizens or the Utes. In the meantime, the Army remained in force in Ute country for the next two years. By July 1880, Merritt's cavalry at White River was replaced by six companies of the 6th Infantry Regiment. The 4th and 9th Cavalry Regiments were likewise relieved by companies from the 4th, 7th, 9th, and 14th Infantry Regiments.[13] The infantry regiments established a new series of forts that tied in with the expanding rail network through Ute Territory.[14] The development of this line of posts, beginning at White River and extending south to Bayard, New Mexico—with the corresponding development of the new railroads—was the culmination of the small fort system in the West. As Department of the Missouri commander, General Pope, remarked: "This line of military posts

begins to reach the settlements of Utah and Arizona and the extreme points occupied by the military forces advancing from the west, so that with the line through Colorado and New Mexico the military system of defense south of the 40th parallel would appear to be completed."[15]

The results of the 1879 campaign were mixed. On the positive side, the Indian policy changed in emphasis in the years following the Ute uprising. This change reflected the realization that the reservation system and the resulting segregation of the Indian was a bankrupt policy. While a direct correlation between this shift in policy to the events of the Ute uprising cannot be reasonably deduced, the personal involvement of Carl Schurz in the events of 1879 and his subsequent role in shaping a new policy cannot be discounted. The events surrounding the Ute crisis, coupled with the earlier Nez Perce uprising, added weight to the arguments of Eastern humanitarians who favored a new direction in policy. The remaining years of the Hayes administration saw a new emphasis on the assimilation of Indians into mainstream white culture. In his 1881 message to Congress, President Hayes stated that ". . . the time has come when the policy should be to place the Indians as rapidly as practical on the same footing with the other permanent inhabitants of our country."[16]

The attitude within the state of Colorado, however, took a decidedly different turn. In the view of Colorado citizens, the events of 1879 proved that the Utes were both dangerous and an impediment to progress. With the results of Schurz' commission still unresolved, Governor Pitkin established three military districts associated with each of the three Ute agencies. Even with the release of the hostages, Pitkin commented to the press: "It will be impossible for the Indians and whites to live in peace hereafter . . . This attack had no provocation and the whites now understand that they are liable to be attacked in any part of the state . . . My idea is that, unless removed by the government they must necessarily be exterminated."[17]

The Utes, largely through the efforts of Chief Ouray, tried to stop the momentum toward their removal as best they could. Ouray managed to halt the proceedings of the commission by successfully appealing to Schurz that the Utes could not receive a fair hearing within the state. A second problem that confronted the initial commission was that Ouray refused to accept the testimony of the only survivors of the White River massacre because they were women. The hearings received a change in venue to Washington, D.C., and concluded with the July 1880 treaty that forced the removal of the Utes to new areas in Utah. The demands for justice by the whites were soon mitigated as it became apparent that the Utes would indeed leave



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

From left to right: Chief Ignacio of the Southern Utes; Carl Schurz, Secretary of the Interior; Woretsiz; Chief Ouray; General Charles Adams; and Chipeta. This photo was taken in 1880 during treaty negotiations in Washington that forced the Utes to move to present-day Utah.

the state. Only one Ute, a veteran of Crook's Sioux campaign—Chief Jack—was punished by imprisonment at Fort Leavenworth for a period of one year. On 7 September 1881, escorted by the Army, the last band of Utes crossed the Grand River into Utah Territory. General Pope wrote of the occasion: ". . . the whites who had collected, in view of [the Utes] removal were so eager and unrestrained by common decency that it was absolutely necessary to use military force to keep them off the reservation until the Indians were fairly gone . . ."[18]

In the aftermath of the Ute campaign, the Army changed little. The period of large-scale Indian wars had ended—even before 1879. The conduct of the campaign followed what had become the standard operational pattern of the Army. This pattern was not developed as part of a large centralized plan but came about instead as the result of changing conditions and policies. While it may be judged an ad hoc strategy that evolved over time, it probably represented the only practical alternative at the time. The lack of clarity and consistency in the national Indian policy left the Army with the difficult task of formulating strategies in a rapidly changing environment.

The network of forts that were utilized to support Army operations had been established to support the expansion of the national objective—the economic development of the West—and to control white and Indian transgressions. Fort Steele, Wyoming Territory, represents an example of the former, while Fort Lewis, Colorado, represents the latter. The employment of troops by Generals Pope and Crook from these two installations suggests that the military was serious in its efforts to act as a disinterested mediator in disputes between whites and Indians (in support of the national Indian policy).

The Army leadership publicly expressed frustration with the handling of Indian affairs by the Department of the Interior, but the Army, nevertheless, continued to conduct operations in support of national policy. This is not to suggest that the national policy was a singular coherent document; rather, it was vague and disjointed in its construction and execution. From this amorphous strategic setting, the Army attempted to bring uniformity and purpose.

In this effort, the Army benefited from the lengthy terms of its senior leaders. The lack of physical documentation of strategic and operational plans and goals was offset by the long tenures of the senior leaders who maintained a central purpose in the conduct of operations. The views of Sherman and Sheridan would determine the national military strategy during the period, and the construction of this strategy would set the framework that produced the operational design.

The primary goal of the national strategy was the support of the settlement of the West, with the supplementary goal to support the national Indian policy. With these as the central themes of national strategy, the operational strategy to implement these objectives became the establishment of a series of forts that would quite naturally be complemented by the construction of adjoining railroads.

Given the political demands for troops throughout the West and faced with an austere manpower and budget picture, the Army's operational design quickly evolved toward the creation of a large series of small garrisons that would be massed for field operations and were in close proximity to the rail system. The drawback in this system was the location of the Indians. As the reservation system was developed, it became a natural result to place them in areas that were not desirable to whites—namely places that would not likely attract the development of a railroad. Because of this, the Army was not always in position to deter outbreaks as they arose but instead was forced to react to events after the fact.

The alternative of positioning the Army alongside the Indians, while seemingly attractive, was not feasible on several counts. First, it was not practical in terms of the size of the Army at the time; second, it was unlikely that the Army could have successfully constrained all the bands as the reservation system was then arrayed. In addition, if the troops had been located at the reservations, they would not have been in position to defend the centers of white population and economic development.

The other feature of the Army's operational design that was central to the conduct of the Indian campaigns, in general, and the Ute campaign, specifically, was the use of converging columns. The use of this method owed itself to the relative positioning of troops and to the nature of the threat. Given the large number of small garrisons scattered over a large area, the quickest means to get them into the field was to mass them at several different points and then to concentrate them at converging points. Also, by doing this, the limited rail network was not overtaxed in supporting operations from a central point. The advantage held by the Indians in tactical mobility was offset by the use of converging columns by the Army. Having succeeded in using this method on some occasions, the Army considered it the answer to Indian mobility.[19]

These methods served as the Army's primary operational tools for combating the Utes and the other Indian tribes. The Army received criticism for not formalizing the lessons of the Indian campaigns through the military education system or other means. As historian Robert Wooster laments: "Those strategic debates that did occur almost always concerned conventional warfare more applicable to the battlefields of Europe than to those of the American West. The absence of routine meetings, regular correspondence, or open discussion of military strategy toward Indians also discouraged individual initiative."[20]

The arguments expressed by Wooster, however, demonstrate more his own lack of understanding of a military organization than they present proof of a failure on the part of the American Army. It is precisely because of the Army's lack of formal discussions of Indian tactics that initiative became a survival skill for tactical leaders. Any attempts by the Army to draw any centralized doctrinal lessons from the Indian campaigns might have been damaging, as this assumes that the Army was fighting a common and predictable enemy. It is likely that such efforts might have produced an outcome similar to General Crook's fate in his futile attempt to transfer lessons from the Red River campaign to his Rosebud campaign. The use of a few central



Courtesy Colorado Historical Society

Chief Ignacio of the Southern Utes, after the Ute War, when he became a chief of police and eschewed normal Ute attire

operational methods provided the Army with enough commonality of intent when fighting a divergent enemy over a wide area to achieve success.

The Army's focus on fighting a European-style war is largely explainable as its means of preparing for the most dangerous potential threat to the nation. The military view is always to prepare for the most dangerous enemy, and at no time was the nation seriously challenged by any group or groups of Indians. The scope and intensity of the Indian wars remained limited insofar as the national government was concerned. Certainly, in the view of many Indians, the policy of the government and its execution by the Army resembled total war. The initial operations of the Spanish-American War, however, vindicate the U.S. Army's focus on "conventional war." The Army's attention remained on the defense of the nation, and the Army did not become consumed by what can be categorized as an "economy of force" mission.

This argument has probably the most enduring value for the modern officer. As in the Indian-fighting Army, the challenge today is to sort out priorities during a period of constrained resources. It could become easy to focus on the smaller, more pressing issues and to lose sight of the Army's overall purpose: the defense of the nation. The period between wars has always been characterized by debate about how best to prepare for the next conflict. While it is always tempting to be caught up in a transitory "policy du jour," it is essential that the

Army strive to maintain central themes that define its purpose and missions.

It is doubtful that any change in the Indian policy or of the Army's role in supporting its execution would have made any difference in the ultimate outcome of the Ute campaign. The primary lesson to be learned by the Army from this experience is the value of early Army involvement in the structuring of national strategy and the Army's continual assessment of the government's commitment to that policy. If the Army's input, in the end, fails to mediate the views of our political leaders, it appears that the words of Sherman, as he awaited the result of Agent Adams' mission to the Utes, may echo again: ". . . we are left in the heart of the mountains with our hands tied and the danger of being snowed in staring us in the face. I am not easily discouraged, but it looks as though we had been pretty badly sold out in this business."[21]

NOTES

Introduction

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18. Ibid., 73.

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27. Ibid., 93.

28. Ibid., 85.

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30. Revisionist historians attribute the favorable view of Crook to the adoption of his biography by his long-standing adjutant as the definitive work on the subject. John G. Bourke, *On the Border with Crook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

31. James T. King, "Needed: A Re-evaluation of General George Crook," *Nebraska History Magazine* 65 (September 1964):229.

32. The currying of political favor was a continuation of a tradition that reached its peak during the Civil War. In 1879, Crook held the ultimate political trump card as President Hayes had served under him in the Civil War. Moreover, Hayes reputedly had a portrait of Crook hanging in his office in the White House. Coffman, in *The Old Army*, provides an excellent survey of this phenomenon.

33. Jan Pettit, *Utes: The Mountain People* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1990), 5.

34. Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and David McComb, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1982), 26.

35. John H. Nankivell, "Fort Garland, Colorado," *The Colorado Magazine* 16 (January 1939):13.

36. P. David Smith, *Ouray: Chief of the Utes* (Salt Lake City: Wayfinder Press, 1986), 12–13. Although Ouray was an articulate spokesman for his tribe, these words are probably the work of an Eastern reporter. The quote captures Ouray's philosophy, but the language is too flowery to be directly attributed to Ouray. Ouray was a masterful politician and realized that the Indian had a large sympathetic audience in the East. During his three trips to Washington, D.C., he actively sought to bring the issues at hand into the public eye.

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38. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, 89–90, 162.

39. Anne M. Smith, *Ethnography of the Northern Utes* (Albuquerque: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1974), 237.

40. Charles S. Marsh, *People of the Shining Mountains* (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing, 1926), 68.

41. Virginia Irving Armstrong, ed., *I Have Spoken: American History Through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 96. See also Marshall Sprague, *Massacre: The Tragedy at White River* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), 94–95.

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3. Forbes Parkhill, "The Meeker Massacre," *A Colorado Reader* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing, 1962), 234.

4. Department of the Interior, Indian Bureau, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1878), 19.

5. U.S. Congress, House, The Committee on Indian Affairs, *Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak*, 102.

6. Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The Blakely Printing Company, 1890), 498. While this was written twenty-one years after the event, it is worth considering as a prevalent view among Colorado officials. At the time of the Meeker massacre, Hall was the adjutant general of Colorado.

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8. U.S. Congress, House, *Extinguishment of Indian Title*, 46th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 9, pt. 1, 21 April 1870, 615.

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11. Department of the Interior, Indian Bureau, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior* (1879), xxii–xxiii.

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13. Parkhill, "The Meeker Massacre," 239.

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15. Parkhill, "The Meeker Massacre," 235.

16. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 38.

17. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior* (1879), xxi–xxii.

18. Ibid., xxx.

19. Ibid.

20. War Department, General of the Army, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* (1880), 8.

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22. Ibid., 8–9.

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25. Ibid.

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28. U.S. Congress, House, The Committee on Indian Affairs, *Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak* (1880), 64.

29. Ibid., 65.

30. Ibid. The signal of "waving the hat" is contentious. The Utes later testified that Cherry's action was to signal his troops to begin firing, while Cherry insists that it was an attempt to arrange a parley with the Indians.

31. Thomas Fulton Dawson, *The Ute War: A History of the White River Massacre and the Privations and Hardships of the Captive White Women Among the Hostiles on Grand River* (Denver, CO: Tribune Publishing House, 1879), 23–24.

32. Ibid., 27–28.

33. George K. Lisk, "Letters to the Editor," *Winners of the West* 3 (February 1925): 2.

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37. "The Milk River Campaign," *Winners of the West* 2 (May 1933): 1.

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8. John H. Nankivell, *History of the Military Organizations of the State of Colorado: 1860–1935* (Denver, CO: W. H. Kistler Company, 1935), 61.9.

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15. War Department, "Report of General John Pope" (1880), 84.

16. Weeks, *Farewell, My Nation*, 218.

17. Pettit, *Utes: The Mountain People*, 124.

18. P. David Smith, *Ouray: Chief of the Utes*, 192.

19. The alternative means to combat the advantages of Indian mobility was the use of Indian scouts or auxiliaries. Records were used, with varying degrees of success, but this expedient was not largely accepted because it implied the Army proper was incapable of dealing with the problem.

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