

“Wars of the Peace Policy, 1869-1886” (2002)¹

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The Peace Policy aimed at placing all Indians on reservations, where they could be kept away from the settlements and travel routes and where ultimately they could be civilized. The Indians often had other ideas—if not at first, then after they had sampled the reality of life on the reservation. Virtually every major war during the two decades after Appomattox was fought to force Indians onto newly created reservations or to make them go back to reservations from which they had fled. From such a perspective, it is not surprising that warfare characterized the Peace Policy.

As the years passed, moreover, the Peace Policy ceased to command the wide support it had at first. The army, in particular, grew more openly critical. Except for an occasional Lieutenant [Charles] Drew or Colonel [Benjamin] Grierson [known for their humane approaches to Indians], officers scoffed at the notion of conquest by kindness, and they had little use for the idealistic yet often corrupt people and purposes of the Indian Bureau. As General Sheridan remarked simplistically in 1869, “If a white man commits murder or robs, we hang him or send him to the penitentiary; if an Indian does the same, we have been in the habit of giving him more blankets.” And as Lieutenant Schyler observed at the Camp Verde [Arizona] Reservation, the Indians “can be governed for the present only with a hand of iron, which is a manner of governing totally unknown to the agents of the Indian Bureau, most of whom are afraid of the Indians and are willing to do anything to conciliate them.” Western sentiment, always militant, encouraged the army in its view of the Peace Policy. “Let sniveling Quakers give place to bluff soldiers,” ran a typical editorial comment.

Who is friendly and who is not? Military officers not unreasonably asked the civilian authorities. Those on the reservation were friendly and the exclusive responsibility of the Indian Bureau, came the answer; those off the reservation were hostile and the responsibility of the army. Superficially, it seemed a logical solution to a chronic dilemma. It drew a line that no one, including the Indians, could mistake. But as the record of the Fort Sill [Oklahoma] “city of refuge” demonstrated, a reservation could harbor a great many Indians of unfriendly disposition. Unfortunately, except for the rare Satanta [a Kiowa leader] who bragged of his exploits, their individual identities remained unknown or unprovable. Aggravating the army’s frustration, garrisons on or near reservations had to watch helplessly while civilian corruption and mismanagement—or so it seemed to them—prodded Indians toward an armed hostility that would have to be suppressed at the risk of army lives. As General Sherman complained to a congressional committee in 1874: “The Indian Bureau keeps feeding and clothing the Indians, till they get fat and saucy, and then we are only notified that the Indians are troublesome, and are going to war, after it is too late to provide a remedy.”

Except by government decree, moreover, Indians off the reservation were not necessarily belligerent. They might be out hunting, or headed for a visit with friends in another tribe, or simply wandering about seeing the country. Even a whole band off the reservation did not automatically mean hostility. Indeed, few such could be clearly

¹ Robert Utley, “Wars of the Peace Policy,” in Sterling Evans, ed., *American Indians in American History, 1870-2001*, (Westport, CT: Praeger), 17-31.

labeled friendly or hostile; ambiguity more accurately described their temper. Was Black Kettle's village on the Washita [River, in southern Colorado] friendly or hostile? No chief and no band more diligently pursued peace. Yet it was the trail of a party of Black Kettle's young men, their hands stained with the blood of Kansas settlers, that led Custer's cavalry to the luckless chief's winter lodges. The army never learned to discriminate between the guilty and the innocent, simply because a group of Indians was rarely unmistakably one or the other.

The army did not pursue its Indian-fighting mission very creatively. Occasionally a General Crook recognized his foes as superb guerrilla fighters who called for techniques quite different than had Robert E. Lee's gray legions. Crook fought Indians like Indians and usually, in fact, with Indians. But the army as an institution never evolved a doctrine of Indian warfare, never taught its aspiring officers at West Point the difference between conventional and unconventional war, and never issued official guidance for troops in the field.

Lacking a formal doctrine of unconventional war, the army waged conventional war. Heavy columns of infantry and cavalry, locked to slow-moving supply trains, crawled about the vast western distances in search of Indians, who could scatter and vanish almost instantly. The conventional tactics of the Scott, Casey, and Upton manuals sometimes worked—by routing an adversary that had foolishly decided to stand and fight on the white soldiers' terms, by smashing a village whose inhabitants had grown careless, or by wearing down a quarry through persistent campaigning that made surrender preferable to constant fatigue and insecurity. But most such offensives merely broke down the grain-fed cavalry horses and ended with the troops devoting as much effort to keeping themselves supplied as to chasing Indians.

But when they worked, these offensives worked with a vengeance. They were a forerunner of "total war" against entire populations, as pioneered by Sherman and Sheridan against the Confederacy. Under the guidance and inspiration of these two leaders—the one now general in chief of the army, the other heading the strategic Division of the Missouri, embracing all the Great Plains—the army set forth to find the enemy in their winter camps, to kill or drive them from their lodges, to destroy their ponies, food, and shelter, and to hound them mercilessly across a frigid landscape until they gave up. If women and children got hurt or killed, it was lamentable but justified because it resolved the issue quickly and decisively, and thus more humanely. Although prosecuted along conventional lines and often an exercise in logistical futility, this approach yielded an occasional victory, such as the Washita, that saved it from serious challenge.

No better than the army did the Indians adapt to new conditions. The westward surge of the white people after the Civil War confronted Indians with a crisis of apocalyptic implications, yet they met it, like the army, in the same old ways. Despite the common danger, tribal particularism and intertribal animosities remained as strong as ever. Sometimes tribes came together in alliance against an especially visible threat from the whites, but rarely did such an alliance hang together for very long. Even unity within a tribe proved elusive. Factions differed on how to deal with the white encroachment; some resisted, some accommodated, and some wavered and even oscillated between the two extremes. The highly individual character of tribal society inhibited the rise of leaders who could bring together diverse opinions, and, to make matters worse, the

proliferation of “government chiefs” demoralized the traditional political organization. As one astute observer remarked, army officers, Indian superintendents and commissioners, and even agents had created so many chiefs that “Indian chiefs, like brevets in the army, are become so common they are not properly respected.”

Nor did fighting methods change. Indian culture still developed a superb fighting man. Warriors still practiced guerrilla tactics masterfully and made uncanny use of terrain, vegetation, and other natural conditions, all to the anguish of their military antagonists. But Indian culture also continued to emphasize the individual and withhold from any man the power of command, except through personal influence. Thus team discipline tended to collapse when opportunities for personal distinction or differing opinions on strategy or tactics arose. Man for man, the warrior far surpassed his blue-clad adversary in virtually every test of military proficiency, but unit for unit—however great the numbers—the Indians could not come close to matching the discipline and organization of the army. When Indians made the mistake of standing and fighting on the army’s terms, they usually lost.

In the end, however, the relative fighting qualities of the opponents made little difference. Despite all the wars of the Peace Policy, the Indians did not succumb to military conquest. The army contributed to the final collapse, of course, with “war houses” scattered all through the Indian Country and with campaigns that hastened an outcome ordained by more significant forces. More than the army, railroads, settlements, and all the numbers, technology, and other trappings of an aggressive and highly organized society brought defeat to the Indians. Every white advance came at the expense of resources, especially wild game, essential to the Indian way of life. As the open land and its natural bounty shrank, the reservation offered the only alternative to extinction. For the Indians, General Sherman’s jest held deadly portent: “I think it would be wise,” he said of the Sioux insistence on hunting on the Republican River, “to invite all the sportsmen of England and America there this fall for a Grand Buffalo hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all.”

Yet the Indians’ armed resistance to the westward movement, and the army’s armed response, form dramatic and significant chapters in the history of both peoples and of the frontiers across which they faced each other. In the Trans-Mississippi West, the final and most intense phase coincided with the final phase of the westward migration and settlement of the whites and was a direct consequence of the Peace Policy’s imperative to confine all Indians to reservations.

Kintpuash had tried the reservation and did not like it. An able, ambitious young man, he and other Modoc leaders had signed a treaty in 1864 ceding their homeland among the lake-dotted, lava-scored plateaus of southern Oregon and northern California and had agreed to live on a reservation with Klamaths and Snakes. Homesick, bullied by the more numerous Klamaths, some sixty to seventy families followed Kintpuash back to their old homes on Lost River, just south of the Oregon-California boundary. As more and more whites took up homesteads on the ceded lands, tensions rose. Officials of the Indian Bureau pressed Kintpuash—with other whites, they knew him as Captain Jack—to go back to the reservation. Persuasion failing, they asked the army to use force. That move provoked the Modoc War of 1872-73.

At dawn on November 29, 1872, cavalry attacked the village of Kintpuash. After an exchange of fire, the Indians fled, later crossing Tule Lake in boats. Another party of

Modocs, under a leader the whites called Hooker Jim, rode around the east side of the lake, killing settlers along the way. On the lake's southern shore they united in a wild expanse of black lava that nature had piled into a gigantic fortress. They knew its every fissure, cavern, and passageway. Patches of grass subsisted their cattle. Sagebrush and greasewood yielded fuel. Water came from Tule Lake. As the big army that quickly assembled discovered, it could not be penetrated by assault, reduced by artillery bombardment, or taken by siege. It swiftly drew national attention as "Captain Jack's Stronghold."

Kintpuash conducted the defense with great skill. For four months, with only about sixty fighting men, he held off an army whose numbers ultimately approached a thousand. Again the government decided to try diplomacy. A peace commission arrived and erected a lone tent on the plain outside the lava beds. Negotiations commenced. So did Kintpuash's troubles. Factionalism accomplished what an army could not. Hooker Jim and others challenged Kintpuash's course and taunted him for refusing to kill the peace commissioners in a bold stroke aimed at winning a reservation on Lost River. Ridiculed and humiliated, he finally agreed. On Good Friday, April 11, 1873, the Modoc leaders suddenly interrupted the peace talks, drew hidden weapons, and fell on the white negotiators. One escaped, but three were left on the ground shot, stabbed, and stripped. (Miraculously, one later recovered.)

The deed sealed the fate of the Modocs, for the head of the commission was none other than the commander of the military department, Edward R. S. Canby, who thus gained dubious distinction as the only regular army general slain by Indians in the entire history of the Indian Wars. (Others called general, such as Custer, held the rank by brevet or volunteer, not regular, commissions.) Foolishly, the Modocs had called down upon themselves the wrath of an outraged nation. The army responded with more troops and better leadership at the same time that quarrels among the Modoc leadership intensified. Finally the Indians scattered from the lava beds and were run down, group by small group, by pursuing columns of soldiers. On June 1st a detachment found Kintpuash and his family hiding in a cave. His "legs had given out," he explained.

Against people who had treacherously murdered a popular war hero, the precepts of the Peace Policy could not be expected to govern. Kintpuash and three others involved in Canby's death died on the gallows; their heads were cut off and shipped to the Army Medical Museum in Washington. A furious General Sherman demanded that Kintpuash's followers, who had compiled such an extraordinary record of skill and courage in holding the lava beds, be scattered among other tribes, "so that the name of Modoc should cease." In October 1873, 155 in number, they were resettled fifteen hundred miles to the east, in Indian Territory. The name did not cease, but their demand to live in their homeland ceased to be heard.

The Modoc War—more accurately, the slaying of General Canby—badly crippled the Peace Policy. Newspapers everywhere saw it as dramatic evidence that Indians could not be trusted or reasoned with. Whether favoring extermination or civilization, editors judged Canby's death a grievous blow to the Peace Policy. As always, however, events on the Great Plains more profoundly influenced public opinion and shaped policy than those elsewhere in the West. Throughout the 1870s, warfare with the Plains Indians rose to a thunderous finale on the Little Bighorn in 1876 that was almost universally regarded as marking the demise of the Peace Policy. Like the Modoc War, the Plains wars centered

chiefly on the issue of whether or not tribes were to live on reservations as demanded by the Peace Policy.

On the southern Plains, the big nomadic tribes had agreed to reservations in the Medicine Lodge treaties. They actually lived there—Kiwias and Comanches at Fort Sill, Cheyennes and Arapahos at Darlington—because General Sheridan’s winter operations of 1868-69, especially Custer’s persistent and wide-ranging marches, had made fugitive life tiring and insecure. But reservation life proved confining. Clothing and ration issues were scant, of poor quality, and badly selected for Indian wants, and the encroachments of white cattlemen, whiskey peddlers, horse thieves, and other opportunists were unnerving, if not demoralizing. Particularly ominous to Indians, white hunters slaughtered the buffalo for their hides alone, leaving carcasses by the hundreds of thousands to rot on the prairies. Kiowias and Comanches regularly raided in Texas and Mexico, as they always had, while Cheyennes and Arapahos raided less often in Kansas. Discontent and mutual aggression finally boiled over in the Red River War of 1874-75.

For a time, while Satanta and Big Tree languished in the Texas penitentiary and the government held 124 women and children seized in an attack on a fugitive Comanche village, reservation-based raiders had restrained themselves. But the release of these captives, in exchange for promises of good behavior, had removed the restraint. The spring and summer of 1874 found Indians raiding in Texas and Kansas with new ferocity. In particular, Comanches and Cheyennes attacked a camp of white hide-hunters at Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle, where Kit Carson had fought the Kiowias in 1864, and Kiowias under Lone Wolf ambushed a detachment of Texas Rangers near the site of the Salt Creek Massacre of 1871. These aggressions provoked the government to lift the ban against military operations on Indian reservations. Suddenly army officers at the Fort Sill and Darlington agencies were compiling lists of “friendly” Indians. Everyone else, sure to be classed as “hostiles,” headed west, beyond the reservation boundaries. Some eighteen hundred Cheyennes, two thousand Comanches, and one thousand Kiowias moved in large encampments among the breaks surrounding the headwaters of the Washita River and the various forks of the Red, in the Texas Panhandle—hence the designation “Red River War.”

Suddenly this country, hitherto so remote and secure, swarmed with soldiers. From north, east, south, and west, five columns converged. One routed the Indians at the base of the caprock near the mouth of Palo Duro Canyon. Another fell on a Comanche village nestled deep in the canyon itself. August sun parched the land and dried the water holes. September brought days of rain, bank-full streams, prairies of mud, and an ordeal the Indians remembered as “the wrinkled-hand chase.” Winter loosed blizzards and numbing cold. Through it all, the soldiers kept after the Indians. There were few clashes and little bloodshed, but gradually the exhaustion of the chase, the discomforts of weather and hunger, and, above all, the constant gnawing fear of soldiers storming into their camps at dawn wore them down. As early as October, some had tired and drifted back to the reservation. By the spring of 1875, all had returned.

At the agencies the Indians discovered white officials behaving with a sternness uncharacteristic of the Peace Policy. Throughout the winter, as parties straggled in from the West, army officers confined leaders who were somewhat capriciously judged guilty of particular “crimes” or simply of functioning as “ringleaders.” Satanta found no disposition toward leniency; back he went to the Texas penitentiary, where three years

later, in despair, he threw himself from an upper window to his death. As spring came to Fort Sill, soldiers herded seventy-four Indians, shackled and chained, aboard eight wagons. Among them were such noted chiefs as Gray Bear, Minimic, and Medicine Water of the Cheyennes; Lone Wolf, Woman's Heart, and White Horse of the Kiowas; and Black Horse of the Comanches. With women wailing their grief, the caravan moved out and headed for the railroad. After days of travel the Indians, so recently at large on the Staked Plains, found themselves enclosed by the thick walls and bastions of an ancient Spanish fortress on the Florida coast.

The army had gained a clear victory, not only over the Indians but over the more extreme proponents of the Peace Policy. From his Chicago headquarters General Sheridan had directed the strategy of convergence. Generals John Pope and Christopher C. Augur had overseen its execution. At least two field officers, Colonels Nelson A. Miles and Ranald S. Mackenzie, had won great distinction in carrying it out. Both had gained battlefield victories, Miles in the caprock fight, and Mackenzie in the celebrated charge into Palo Duro Canyon. But in the end it was not combat success but convergence, unremittingly prosecuted, that had won the war. Confinement of the "ringleaders" far from their homes and families helped ensure that another war would not occur. Never again did Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, or Arapahos revolt against their reservation overlords. Never again did Texas and Kansas settlers suffer aggression from these tribes. Nor did Generals Sherman and Sheridan forget the lessons of the Red River War as they turned their attention to the northern Plains.

Here, Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Northern Arapaho had yet to be finally brought within the reservation system. Oglalas and Brules drew rations at the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies in northwestern Nebraska, where these two chiefs maneuvered tortuously between the opposing forces of white officialdom and their own people. Other Sioux formed tenuous connections with agencies along the Missouri River, the eastern border of the Great Sioux Reservation-Hunkpapas and Blackfeet at Grand River, Miniconjous and Sans Arc at Cheyenne River, and still others at Crow Creek and Lower Brule. Cheyennes and Arapahos mingled with Sioux at Red Cloud. In all, these agencies counted perhaps twenty-five thousand adherents.

But the strength of the adherence wavered with the seasons and the competing influence of rival chiefs, for off to the west roamed a hard core of kinsmen who had no intention of abandoning the free life of the chase for the dubious attractions of the reservation. They looked for leadership to a chief of surpassing influence. Of compelling countenance and commanding demeanor, quick of thought and emphatic of judgment, Sitting Bull held power not only as war and political chief but also as religious functionary. "He had a big brain and a good one," recalled an old warrior, "a strong heart and a generous one." At the agency Indians he hurled a taunt: "You are fools to make yourselves slaves to a piece of fat bacon, some hard-tack, and a little sugar and coffee." And in fact, many did not. Nothing prevented them from sampling the old hunting life in the summer and the hardtack and coffee in winter. Back and forth they shuttled between the agencies and the camps of Sitting Bull and other "nontreaty" chiefs.

These "northern Indians" stirred up constant trouble. While on the reservation, they kept the agencies in turmoil, for they were ungovernable, a danger to white officials, and a bad influence on the agency Indians. While off the reservation, they did not always keep to the unceded hunting grounds guaranteed by the Treaty of 1868, but sometimes

raided along the Platte and among the Montana settlements at the head of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

That the whites called them hostiles and accused them of breaking the treaty while also enjoying its bounty did not bother these hunting bands. They could point to some treaty violations by the other side as well. For one thing, in 1873 surveyors laid out a route for the Northern Pacific Railroad along the northern margins of the unceded territory. For another, and most infuriating, in 1874 “Long Hair” Custer led his soldiers into the Black Hills, part of the Great Sioux Reservation itself, and there found gold. Miners swarmed into the Indian country, and the government, making only a token effort to keep them out, hesitatingly broached the subject of buying the part of the reservation that contained the Black Hills. Then, later in 1875, runners arrived in the winter camps of the hunting bands with a stern message from the Great Father: Come to the agencies at once or be considered hostiles against whom the army would make war.

They ignored the summons, and as spring turned to summer in 1876 they discovered blue columns converging on their hunting grounds. In March, one attacked an Oglala camp on Powder River but bungled the follow-up and retreated under assaults of bitter cold and deep snow. As the snow melted, the fugitive camps swelled. Worsening conditions at the agencies, the Black Hills issue, and the attempt to take away the freedom to roam the unceded territory set off an unusually large spring migration of agency Indians to the camps of the hunting bands. June found them coming together in a village that steadily expanded as it moved slowly westward across the streams flowing northward into the Yellowstone. These Indians were not looking for a fight, but, as never before, they were proud, confident, and at the height of their power. Chiefs of ability fortified the leadership of Sitting Bull—Black Moon, Gall, Hump, Lame Deer, Dirty Moccasins, Lame White Man, and the incomparable Crazy Horse. Since his triumph as head of the party that decoyed Captain Fetterman out of Fort Phil Kearny ten years earlier, Crazy Horse had emerged as a splendid war leader and uncompromising foe of reservations.

By mid-June the Indians camped on a creek that ran into a river they knew as the Greasy Grass. Earlier, on the Rosebud, they had staged their annual Sun Dance. Sitting Bull had experienced a vision, in which he saw many dead soldiers “falling right into our camp.” The people had thrilled to the image and the promise. Now scouts brought word of soldiers marching down the Rosebud. Crazy Horse led a large force to do battle. For six hours they fought, and after the Indians called off the fight the soldiers retreated.

But this was not the triumph foretold by Sitting Bull. Soldiers had not fallen into their camp. Down to the Greasy Grass the village moved, and here the largest number yet of agency Indians joined the alliance. Six separate tribal circles—Hunkpapa, Oglala, Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Blackfoot, Northern Cheyenne—extended for three miles along the banks of the Greasy Grass. The village probably counted twelve hundred lodges and mustered almost two thousand fighting men.

True to Sitting Bull’s prophecy, many soldiers were in fact about to fall into this village. As in the Red River War, General Sheridan had plotted a strategy of convergence. Advancing from the south, General Crook had struck the camp on Powder River on March 17 but had been driven back at the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17. Meantime, General Alfred H. Terry approached from the east, and Colonel John Gibbon from the west. They joined on the Yellowstone at the mouth of the Rosebud. From here

Terry launched a striking force of some six hundred cavalry, under the same Long Hair Custer who had invaded the Black Hills two years earlier. Custer followed the Indian trail up the Rosebud, across the Wolf Mountains, and down to the Greasy Grass, which his map labeled the Little Bighorn. The village there, because of the recent arrivals of agency Indians, contained about three times as many warriors as he had expected. On the scorching Sunday of June 25, 1876, his soldiers fell into it.

George Armstrong Custer presided over one of the most complete disasters in American military annals. A century later it still commanded public fascination and fueled heated controversy. More immediately, the Sioux and Cheyennes discovered what the Modocs had so painfully learned; the slaying of a big white chief could spell the doom of a people. Custer's Last Stand shocked and outraged Americans, shook the Peace Policy to the verge of collapse, brought a flood of soldiers to the Indian Country, and afforded rationalization for forcing the agency chiefs, hitherto held back by the militant opposition of the northern Indians, to sell the Black Hills. An "agreement"—it resembled a treaty in all but name—legitimized the sale. For the Sioux and Cheyennes, final defeat lurked unseen in their soaring victory amid the brown hills overlooking the Greasy Grass.

Once again, winter combined with soldiers who could brave its blasts destroyed Indian resistance. Until the first snows the Sioux and Cheyennes, now fragmented in bands, easily eluded the big armies that ponderously gave chase. But winter, as usual, made them vulnerable. In the frigid, misty dawn of November 25, 1876, eleven hundred cavalymen under Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie burst into the Cheyenne village of Dull Knife and Little Wolf in a canyon of the Bighorn Mountains. Forty Cheyennes died, and the rest watched helplessly from the bluffs as the soldiers burned their tipis, clothing, and winter food supply. That night the temperature plunged to thirty below zero. Eleven babies froze to death at their mothers' breasts.

The suffering Cheyennes took refuge with Crazy Horse, but the soldiers tracked down these people too. In January 1877, on Tongue River, Sioux and Cheyenne warriors clashed with "walk-a-heap" bluecoats in a fight that petered out in a blinding blizzard. These soldiers had built a rude fort at the mouth of the Tongue, and they kept to the field all winter. Tired and discouraged, the Indians opened talks with the soldier chief at this fort. He wore a huge overcoat, and they called him "Bear's Coat." He was the same Colonel Nelson A. Miles who had so resolutely pursued the southern Plains tribes in the Red River War.

Bear's Coat's combination of fight and talk, together with peace feelers put out from Red Cloud Agency through the agency chiefs, gradually strengthened the peace elements in the hostile camps. Spring saw the surrender of almost all the fugitives. On May 6, 1877, Crazy Horse led his Oglalas into the Red Cloud Agency and threw his weapons on the ground in token of surrender. Four months later, amid circumstances that are still confusing, he died in a guardhouse scuffle, stabbed by either a soldier's bayonet or another Indian's knife. "It is good," said a fellow chief sadly, "he has looked for death and it has come."

The previous October, in a tense meeting between the lines, Sitting Bull told Bear's Coat that the Great Spirit had made him an Indian, and not an agency Indian. Rather than go to the reservation, he had led his people northward to the land of the "Great Mother." He got along well with her redcoats [Royal Canadian Mounted Police], but he and his people could not find enough food. Bear's Coat watched the boundary line

like a hawk and prevented them from riding into Montana to hunt buffalo. Year after year, as they grew hungrier and hungrier, families and groups slipped away to surrender and go to the reservation. At last, in July 1881, Sitting Bull and about fifty families presented themselves at Fort Buford, Montana, the last vestige of the mighty alliance that had overwhelmed Long Hair Custer five years earlier. Sitting Bull handed his rifle to his eight-year-old son and told him to give it to the soldier chief. "I wish it to be remembered," he said, "that I was the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle, and this day have given it to you."

By 1881, when the surrender of Sitting Bull marked the close of the Plains wars, all tribes of the American West save one had been compelled by military force to go to, or return to, their reservations. Of them all, only the Apaches had not yet been made to face the truth that the reservation represented their only possible destiny. At one place or another in the Southwest, Apache warfare had been virtually continuous since Spanish colonial times. In the early 1870s General Crook had seemed to be on the verge of ending it permanently. His masterful Tonto Basin campaign of 1872-73 had brought about the collapse of the most troublesome Apache groups and their confinement on the reservations set up earlier by Vincent Colyer and General Howard. But Crook went north in 1875, to do less than brilliantly against the Sioux, and the iron military regime relaxed. At the same time the Indian Bureau decided to do away with the multiplicity of small reservations and to concentrate all Apaches west of the Rio Grande on a single reservation. A hot, barren, malarial flat along Arizona's Gila River, San Carlos was a terrible place to live. The final phases of Indian warfare in the United States grew out of the refusal of two powerful Apache leaders and their followers to settle permanently on the San Carlos Reservation.

These leaders were Victorio and Geronimo. Victorio, of the Mimbres, had learned his skills from the great Mangas Coloradas, whom he equaled in courage, stamina, cunning, and leadership. He wanted peace with the whites, and for a time, with Loco, he had pursued it. But soon he saw that few whites were as trustworthy as the good Lieutenant Drew, and the command to settle at San Carlos banished all such notions. Geronimo, of the Chiricahuas, emerged as a leader shortly after the death of Cochise in 1874. Short, thick, scowling, and ill-tempered, he exhibited few appealing traits, even to his own people. But of all Apache leaders, his cousin later remembered, "Geronimo seemed to be the most intelligent and resourceful as well as the most vigorous and farsighted. In times of danger he was a man to be relied upon." No less than Victorio did Geronimo find the order to move to San Carlos in 1876 offensive.

For two years, 1877-79, Victorio tried to find a solution to the dilemma that the government's concentration program had thrust upon him. He even attempted to live at San Carlos. "That horrible summer!" recalled one of his followers. "There was nothing but cactus, rattlesnakes, heat, rocks, and insects. No game; no edible plants. Many, many of our people died of starvation." Victorio also tried to live on his old reservation at Ojo Caliente, but the government had decided to close that place down. He tried to settle with the Mescaleros on the Fort Stanton Reservation, east of the Rio Grande, but that did not work. In fact, nothing worked, and on September 4, 1879, he and sixty warriors attacked a contingent of black cavalymen near Ojo Caliente in the opening clash of the Victorio War.

In Texas, New Mexico, and Chihuahua, Victorio exacted a terrible price for the government's attempt to put him at San Carlos. With fresh numbers from the Mescalero Reservation, he counted between 125 and 150 warriors. Here and there they darted with lightning speed, cutting down isolated shepherders and waylaying hapless travelers. Time and again they eluded the soldiers, both American and Mexican, who combed the mountains and deserts in an exhausting and mostly vain effort to destroy the marauders. In July 1880, in the hot, barren wastes of western Texas, Victorio found himself, for a change, thwarted by hard-riding units of black troopers who expertly kept him from the few waterholes and ultimately forced him into Mexico. Hungry, destitute, and low on ammunition, the raiders began to tire. Eastward they drifted, into the parched deserts of Chihuahua, seemingly without plan or purpose. By October 1880 they camped amid three low peaks rising from the vast desert plain—Tres Castillos, the Mexicans called them.

At dawn on October 15 the Apaches awoke to the crash of gunfire and the shouts of Mexican soldiers and Tarahumara Indian allies. Their horse herd lost, the Indians scrambled up the boulder-strewn slope of one of the hills, and there they fought back. All day and into the night the two sides exchanged fire. In the dark the Indians tried to slip away, but failed. Singing the death chant, they turned to throwing up rock fortifications for a fight to the last. At daybreak they watched as the Mexicans began filtering upward among the boulders. The struggle was desperate and bloody and, in its final stages, hand-to-hand. When the smoke and dust cleared, seventy-eight Apaches lay dead among the rocks and another sixty-eight were herded together as captives. Among the dead was Victorio.

At the time of Victorio's death, Geronimo was living, none too contentedly, at San Carlos. Besides its repugnant natural conditions, the reservation festered with intrigue, intertribal rivalries, incompetent and corrupt agents, and conflict between civil and military officials. White settlers pressed in on the reservation boundaries. Almost any spark could touch off an explosion. It came in August 1881. A medicine man had been preaching a new religion that whites regarded as incendiary. In an attempt to arrest him, the army got into a fight with his followers, shot and killed the prophet, and had to quell a mutiny among the Apache scouts. Frightened by the resulting military activity, Geronimo and other leaders, with seventy-four people, broke out and headed for Mexico.

An especially daring raid in the following spring drew attention to the deteriorating state of affairs in Arizona. Geronimo and others swooped down on San Carlos, killed the police chief, and forced old Loco and several hundred people to return to Mexico with them. That event prodded the government to decisive action. Early in September 1882 a familiar figure reappeared in Arizona—the “Gray Fox,” General Crook. At once he clamped military rule on San Carlos. To keep the peace here and later to go after the “renegades” in Mexico, he recruited five companies of Apache scouts—“the wildest I could get”—and placed them under his brightest, most energetic young officers. Skilled packers organized efficient and sturdy mule trains. No cumbersome wagons would limit mobility.

The Sierra Madre of Mexico had always afforded Apaches an impregnable fortress. Its steep ridges, piled one on another toward towering peaks and perpetually shadowing plunging gorges and canyons walled in vertical rock, sheltered and protected these Indians and provided secure bases for raiding in all directions, on both sides of the international border. One Chiricahua group, the Nednhis, had made this wilderness their

home for generations. Their chief, Juh, surpassed all others in power. Geronimo, Nachez (son of Cochise), Chata, Chihuahua, Loco, Bonito, battle-scarred old Nana (who had ridden with Victorio but had escaped Tres Castillos), and others deferred to Juh. But one day Juh fell from a cliffside trail to his death, and increasingly the captains of the Apaches in the Sierra Madre looked to Geronimo for guidance. From their mountain lairs they continued to raid. In a foray of special ferocity, in March 1883 Chato and twenty-five warriors slashed across Arizona and New Mexico, and then faded back into Mexico. In response, Crook marched.

A surprise attack by Apache scouts on Chato's camp high in the Sierra Madre gave notice to all the fugitives that their fortress had been breached. Where Mexican troops had never ventured, Americans had penetrated, and at the head of other Apaches. It came as enough of a shock that one by one the band leaders drifted in to talk with the Gray Fox. Geronimo, who had been raiding in Chihuahua, came last. Squatting around smoky campfires, the Indians listened to the harsh words of this general who so uncharacteristically wore a canvas suit and rode a mule. Surrender, he told them in a threat that he and all his listeners knew he could not carry out, or he would kill them all. At night, in long arguments among themselves, the chiefs debated what to do. Crook's success in reaching them in previously inaccessible refuges, combined with his ability to enlist their own people against them, tipped the balance. "We give ourselves up," Geronimo at last announced, "do with us as you please."

The surrender turned out to be only temporary. Back at San Carlos, tensions began building almost at once. A people accustomed to freedom found military rule irksome; the men especially bridled at the ban on beating their wives and on brewing the volatile intoxicant *tiswin*. In May 1885 off they went again, some 134 people, including Geronimo, Nachez, Chihuahua, and Nana. Once again they hid themselves deep in the Sierra Madre. Once again they discovered white officers leading their own people against them. And once again they quickly tired of keeping always on the run, always apprehensive of a sudden surprise attack. They sent word to the officer in charge of one of the scout units, Captain Emmet Crawford, that they wanted to talk. But before a meeting could be arranged, Mexican militia attacked the scouts, and the captain fell with a bullet in his brain. Later Geronimo and others met with Crawford's lieutenant, Marion P Maus, and told him they wanted to talk with General Crook.

The meeting took place at Canyon de los Embudos, twelve miles south of the border, on March 25, 1886. Seated on the sides of a pleasantly shaded ravine, the general and the Apaches parleyed. As he had done two years earlier, Crook spoke sternly. Now the terms were harsher. The men with families must go to a place of confinement in the East for two years, and only then could they return to San Carlos. Otherwise, Crook vowed, "I'll keep after you and kill the last one, if it takes fifty years." After two days of argument among themselves, the Apache chiefs accepted Crook's terms. While the general hastened north to telegraph the good news to his superiors, the Indians moved slowly toward the border. Along the way they found a whiskey peddler. In the midst of a drinking bout Geronimo and Nachez had second thoughts. With twenty men and thirteen women, they stampeded back to the Sierra Madre.

This development profoundly discouraged General Crook. Worse, it brought him into conflict with General Sheridan, who had succeeded Sherman as head of the army. Sheridan had never trusted the Apache scouts, and he thought Crook should use regulars

instead. Now he issued orders that not only implicitly criticized Crook's methods but required him to break his word to the Indians who had not fled with Geronimo and Nachez. Rather than carry out such orders, Crook asked to be relieved. Sheridan lost no time in dispatching a replacement, Nelson A. Miles, now a brigadier general. It was a hard blow to the Gray Fox, for he and Miles had long been bitter rivals, personally as well as professionally. Bear's Coat welcomed the chance to succeed where Crook had failed.

Astutely, Miles made a great show of employing regular soldiers against the Apaches, but in the end he quietly adopted Crook's methods. Apache scouts combed the Sierra Madre, keeping the quarry on the run. As a special peace emissary, Miles sent Lieutenant Charles B. Gatewood, whom the Indians knew as a friend, to see if he could find and persuade them to give up. Ironically, Gatewood was a Crook protégé.

As in the past, the little band of fugitives soon tired of running. On August 24, 1886, they admitted Gatewood and two Indian companions to their camp. At considerable peril to his life, Gatewood stated the new terms: The Apaches must go to Florida and wait for the President to decide their ultimate fate. Geronimo said he and Nachez would give up, but only if they could return to San Carlos. Then Gatewood played his high card. At San Carlos Geronimo would find none of his kinsmen, only rival tribes. All the Chiricahuas, even those who had loyally served Crook as scouts, had been herded aboard railway cars and deported to Florida. Stunned, the Indians debated for a long time, but at last they told Gatewood that they would give up to General Miles personally. In Skeleton Canyon, just north of the border, Geronimo faced Miles and handed over his rifle.

A trainload of Apaches rattling across the Arizona desert toward far-off Florida signaled the end of armed resistance to the reservation system. Every important Indian war since 1870 had been essentially a war not of concentration but of rebellion—of Indians rebelling against reservations they had already accepted in theory if not in fact. Geronimo and his tiny band of followers were the last holdouts, and they only because the wilds of Mexico offered them a haven denied to most other tribes. Thus the wars of the peace policy, and indeed the Indian wars of the United States, came to a close in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, on September 4, 1886.