Chapter Eight  
How the West Was Lost  
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In a remarkably brief period—the thirty-eight years from 1848 to 1886—the Indians of the western half of what is today the United States lost their fight against the white invaders and had most of their land taken from them. Some groups of western Native Americans already had a history of contact with white men that went back several generations. Indians of the Southwest and California had been trying to cope with the Spanish, the Mexicans, and the Americans recently settled in Texas. Other tribes had dealt with English, Russian, and American explorers, trappers, and traders. As a result, since their first contact with whites, most of the tribes of the West had, by the mid-nineteenth century, had a great deal of time to make some adjustments and to acquire new tools, weapons, and even—particularly in the case of the Pueblo groups—new crops and livestock. Therefore, while some Indians already had suffered badly at the hands of the white invaders, many others had seen an improvement in their standard of living since first meeting the newcomers.

In 1848 the West was populated by hundreds of flourishing, autonomous Native American societies enjoying cultures that had evolved over many centuries. In hardly more than a generation, however, these same societies would have most of their territory wrested from them, and their religious, social, and political practices subjected to attack. There must be few instances in history when people of a comparably sized region suffered such violent dislocation, physical and cultural, in such a brief period of time.

The major difficulty in presenting the story of “How the West Was Lost” is that it was not a single story, but rather literally hundreds of stories, as many as there were groups of Indians in the region in the 1840s. The individual unit could have been as small as a few hundred people or as large as several thousand. Nor did the many different groups suffer equally. The Pueblos suffered relatively less, as they were farmers and had managed to retain much of their land. The Plains Indians suffered most because continuation of their life as nomadic buffalo hunters became impossible. But each Pueblo’s experience differed somewhat from that of their neighbors, and the Plains bands, which were the focus of the loyalties of their members, each had its own story. As a result of this political fragmentation, the narrator of “How the West Was Lost” is compelled to approach the subject by regions, in the process lumping together many disparate Indian experiences.

It is logical to begin, both geographically and chronologically, with the Plains Indians. In the early 1840s these Indians were living testimony to how Native Americans had been altered by contact with Europeans. The acquisition of horses had given them the mobility that by the mid-nineteenth century was the principal characteristic of their lifestyle. Ownership of horses had been sufficiently diffused so that the nomadic life of the Plains people had evolved to its highest state and provided a challenging and deeply satisfying life for thousands.

But already these people were being forced to cope with intruders. In the late 1820s, it was the fur trappers ascending the Missouri River with whom the warriors occasionally clashed. By the 1830s, wagon trains were appearing on the Santa Fe Trail and the southern Plains tribes were reacting angrily. In the next decade, thousands of whites crossed the Plains en route to Oregon and California, killing game and destroying scarce timber resources as they went. The Plains tribes had staked out and maintained their hunting grounds against other Indians by force of arms, resulting in what were by the 1840s traditional enmities among tribes. Long accustomed to defending their territory, Plains warriors were not prepared to stand meekly aside for the white invaders. Moreover, Plains societies honored the man who demonstrated his courage in combat and friends and relatives were expected to seek revenge for band members lost in battle.

Closely following the settlement of the Oregon question in 1846 and the Mexican cession to the United States two years later was the discovery of gold in California. All had momentous consequences for the Plains tribes, which had to try to cope with a rapidly escalating scale of invasion. Now white men seeking precious metals were ignoring Indian territorial claims to search every nook and cranny of the West. Tribepeople also had to contend with the intrusions of stagecoach operators and of railroad and telegraph-line construction crews. Warriors struck back at the encroachers, but in an unsystematic and relatively ineffective fashion.

The nature of Plains Indian society, with its emphasis on the rights of the individual and its absence of political centralization, made effective resist-
tance difficult if not impossible. Moreover, tribes that were traditional enemies did not close ranks in the face of the greater threat. The absence of fixed tribal authority meant that even the several bands of a particular tribe would have difficulty uniting for a campaign against a common foe. Those qualities that made Indian society so attractive to the individualist diminished its capacity for organized resistance.

Beginning in the 1850s, the Plains Indians were introduced to the complexities of treaty negotiation with the United States. In 1851 the northern tribes, and in 1853 the southern tribes, participated in councils that resulted in pieces of paper which, according to the white man, roughly delineated the boundaries of the principal tribes and secured permission for Americans to maintain military posts on Indian land and to traverse it on specified trails. But in these and subsequent negotiations there was no guarantee of participation by all the bands concerned, nor any real machinery by which a handful of chiefs and headmen could bargain away the property of all members of a tribe. For the average Indian, the negotiations were significant only to the extent that he or she shared in the distribution of gifts that were held out to attract a certain tribe to the council site. The resulting treaties also usually provided for annual distributions of goods, and the government-issued annuities that would become such bones of contention. These, nevertheless, usually did not amount to more than the equivalent of a few dollars worth of shoddy merchandise per individual.

As the frustration of the Indians mounted, they sometimes vented it by attacking outlying ranches, wagon trains, and stagecoaches. The Americans responded by establishing more military posts in the area, which in turn attracted more settlers, further alarming the Indians and driving them to additional efforts to protect their land. By the 1860s, the fighting had intensified to the point that the white man often said wars were occurring. For the Indians, it was simply more of the same. Raiding parties, usually as few as thirty or forty warriors, would ride from their camps seeking revenge for casualties suffered in an earlier raid, or simply the opportunity to count the coup that gave a man status or to increase his pony herd at the expense of some rancher or army post. Prisoners might also be taken who could then be held for ransom. If successful, the raid would probably lead to troops trying to run down the perpetrators, and another cycle of violence would be underway.

The Indians seldom had much trouble eluding the army detachments pursuing them. Entire camps, including women, children, and the elderly, proved elusive targets in terrain where an unobserved approach by an army column was extremely difficult. If the troops pressed too closely, the Indians would disperse, forcing the officer in command to either give up the pursuit or persist against a steadily diminishing target.

While the Plains warriors held their own in the initial skirmishing, a new series of treaties with the United States in 1867 and 1868 provided the framework for their ultimate undoing. These treaties, negotiated at councils to which the Indians were attracted, as usual, by the promise of food and presents, contained terms of far-reaching significance. By treaties such as that negotiated on Medicine Lodge Creek in 1867 with the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches, many tribes were committed to selling to the United States most of their land and settling on reservations. On these they were then supposed to begin farming and to send their children to school. And there even was provision in the treaties for the ultimate division of the reservations into family-sized farms, with the implication that the Indians would over a thirty-year period abandon their communal lifestyle and fully adopt the white man's customs.

It is highly unlikely that the average Indian appreciated that such treaties committed him to changing an entire way of life. Indeed, it is unlikely that even the chiefs and headmen whose marks appeared on the treaties completely comprehended their terms. Nevertheless, the Indians soon would discover that the Americans considered the treaties to be their authority to force them onto reservations and to keep them there.

During the decade after the negotiation of the 1867–68 treaties, the Plains were in turmoil. In the face of U.S. demands that they give up their freedom, and seduced by the promise of further rations, which became more and more appealing as the buffalo herds melted away under the relentless
killing by the white hide hunters, bands began to trickle into the agencies. But others clung desperately to the old life. Every summer those who held out would be joined by reservation Indians who had tired of the scanty rations provided and resented the constant pressure to substitute the white man's way of life for their own familiar and cherished customs. The whites' insistence that they begin farming was particularly objectionable to men who regarded such activity as, at best, fit only for those tribes not capable of nomadic plains life and, at worst, a gashing of the earth's surface that bordered on sacrilege.

But each year it became more difficult to live the old life. The buffalo herds were rapidly disappearing, and army patrols were more numerous. The soldiers seldom were able to overtake the more mobile Indians, but they could harass the warriors and their families and keep them moving. It reached the point that all tribesmen off a reservation might be considered hostile and subject to attack without warning. Camp equipment and tipis abandoned by fleeing Indians were destroyed at a time when it was becoming much harder to get new buffalo hides to make tipi covers. Nor could a warrior hope to quickly replace the pony herd seized by U.S. troops. These animals, which

*On the Canadian.* Drawing by Cheyenne artist Bear's Heart depicts white hunters and settlers disrupting life in Indian Territory in the 1870s. Courtesy, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

had made the Plains life possible, were either shot—and herds of as many as a thousand animals were so disposed of—or given as rewards to other Indians serving the army as scouts. Not only were traditional enemies happy to play the role of scout, but even members of bands that had settled on the reservation were persuaded to trail other members of their own tribe who were trying to preserve their free way of life.

By the late 1870s, the Plains Indians were worn down. In a decade of fighting they had, however, scored some successes. The Sioux and Cheyennes, following such able leaders as Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and Two Moon, had forced the abandonment of the Bozeman Trail forts in 1868. In 1876 they first drove the army soldiers from the field at the Battle of the Rosebud and then killed over half of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment on the Little Big Horn. In hundreds of skirmishes, the warriors demonstrated their ability to inflict losses disproportionate to their own and to outmaneuver the more heavily armed enemy.

By the decade's close, however, the Plains Indians' capacity to resist steadily declined. They faced a growing enemy strength while their eroded. As mentioned, a lack of racial, even tribal, solidarity meant that at no time was all Indian manpower arrayed against the white invaders. Indeed, at any given time the enemy columns were most likely being guided by other Indians, and not necessarily from tribes hostile to those being pursued by the troops. Crazy Horse of the Oglala Sioux, Horseback of the Comanches, and Grey Bear of the southern Cheyennes were typical of Plains chiefs whose final surrender was hastened by the aid provided the troops by their fellow tribesmen. Finally, the slaughter of the buffalo by the hide hunters in the 1870s struck at the mainstay of the Plains Indians' existence: without the buffalo the Plains Indians' cherished lifestyle was impossible.

The experience of other western tribes that attempted to defend their homelands was depressingly similar. In 1846 the Navajos suddenly found themselves being told by American officers that they were now under the jurisdiction of the United States and should give up immediately their long-standing custom of raiding Pueblo and Mexican villages. At the time the Navajos lacked any semblance of a tribal government, and their less than ten thousand people lived in many small communities, seldom larger than two hundred people. The Navajos subsisted by farming and grazing sheep and horses on the open range—and by raiding. The last was an important part of their economy and provided them with additional sheep and horses, as well as captives who might be sold, ransomed, or assimilated.

The Navajos had difficulty comprehending American proscriptions against raiding. The Indians had been at war with the Mexicans for generations, and the Americans had been so recently. That the Americans wished peace with the Mexicans seemed little reason for the Navajos to give up a long and profitable practice.
Nevertheless, a few Navajos were found to affix their X's to the white man's treaties calling for a cessation of raids against Pueblos and Mexicans. Most Navajos were not even aware of the existence of the treaties, and few of those who were felt themselves bound by them. The raiding continued under leaders like Manuelito, only now the Navajos had to avoid patrols and punitive expeditions operating from new American posts established deep in Navajo territory. On their rounds, the American soldiers frequently were guided by Utes, Pueblos, and even Navajos.

As the fighting accelerated, Navajo losses rose. In 1860 an attack on the principal U.S. post in Navajo country by an unusually large force of one thousand warriors was unsuccessful. Navajos also were losing people to other Indian raiders, with hundreds of Navajos ending up as slaves in Mexican and Pueblo settlements. Then, in 1863 and 1864, the Navajos had to contend with soldiers who penetrated to the heart of Navajo country, invading Canyon de Chelly where they destroyed the cornfields and peach trees upon which the families depended. Intimidated by this show of strength, thousands of Navajos gave up further resistance and submitted to a 300-mile trek east, the notorious Long Walk, to confinement on a reservation on the Pecos River. For three years they suffered under military rule, and more than two thousand died from a smallpox epidemic. Meanwhile, some managed to elude their guards and make it back to Navajo country. They were joined in 1868 by survivors of the Pecos River ordeal, after the Navajos had pledged to live on a reservation and abandon their raiding.

The Navajo resistance had not been as protracted as that of the Plains warriors. As more or less stationary farmers and herdsmen, the Navajos had been more vulnerable to attacks by the U.S. Army than were the buffalo hunters. And like the plainspeople, the Navajos suffered from a lack of tribal cohesion, and their long-standing hostilities with neighbors ensured that the American soldiers had no difficulty recruiting Mexican and Indian guides into their ranks.

Other tribes in the Southwest had their homelands invaded by the whites in the 1840s and 1850s; some resisted only briefly, although others defied the Americans into the 1880s. The Apaches provide examples of both extremes; Jicarilla resistance ended in the 1850s, while some western Apaches were still fighting as late as the 1880s. In general, the Apaches persisted longer in their struggle to maintain their independence than did the Navajos for several reasons. For one thing, the Apaches had never developed the Navajo's dependence on agriculture and stock raising that, while raising the Navajo standard of living, tied them to one place and made them more vulnerable to hostile armies. For another, Apacheria, the Apache homeland, comprised terrain even more rugged than that of Navajo country, which discouraged its attack. Moreover, Apacheria's proximity to Mexico offered the Apaches further opportunities for refuge if hotly pursued by U.S. troops.

The Apaches had not been as disturbed by the long Spanish presence in the Southwest as they would be by the relatively recent American presence. No permanent Spanish settlements had been established in Apache country, and the number of Spaniards in the Southwest was nothing compared with the relative flood of Americans in the 1850s and 1860s.

The initial contacts of the Apaches with the Americans resembled those of the Navajos. The Apaches likewise considered themselves at war with the Mexicans and were evaluating the Americans as potential allies. By 1850 the usual treaties had been drawn up and the Apaches began to learn that the United States not only would not join them against the Mexicans but expected them to give up the raiding that was a part of Apache lifestyle. The Apaches were willing to recognize that the Americans had defeated the Mexicans and therefore had the right to dictate to Mexicans. They could not comprehend, however, how that gave the United States the right to dictate to Apaches.

Then the Apaches became acquainted with that most persistent of intruders, the white prospector. Reports of gold in Apache country attracted those men who knew no boundaries and respected no rights. When Mangas Coloradas of the Mimbreno Apaches protested their incursions, he was badly beaten.
The prospectors, however, were only the beginning. The Apaches also had to contend with ranchers who began to operate on Indian land without so much as a by-your-leave. And government agents displayed the usual facility for obtaining pieces of paper complete with the marks of Indian leaders that purported to give the Americans the right to develop lines of communication through Apache territory.

It was the beginning of more than thirty years of Apache efforts to protect their homelands from white trespassers. As always, the level of violence ebbed and flowed, and at no time were the many bands of the several western Apache tribes able to combine against the common enemy. Apache heroes of that long war included Mangas Coloradas, Cochise, Victorio, and Geronimo. Mangas Coloradas was a big, powerful man whose intelligence was as impressive as his physical attributes. He had convinced Mexican authorities of his military skills long before the Americans asserted their claims to the Southwest. When American miners stormed through the country of the Mimbres in the early 1860s, Mangas allied his fellow tribesmen and drove most of the prospectors out. Subsequently, however, he failed in an effort to ambush a U.S. Army column in the fabled Apache Pass, near the boundary of southern Arizona and New Mexico, and within six months Mangas would be dead. According to an eyewitness, a white man, Mangas had been captured by soldiers violating a flag of truce and then tortured into sufficient resistance for the soldiers to rationalize shooting him.

Apache Pass was in the territory of the Chiricahua Apaches, whose chief included Cochise, an ally on occasion of Mangas. Cochise was driven to hostilities against the Americans by a matter of mistaken identity. Americans blamed his band for an attack actually made by other Apaches; when U.S. troops seized some of Cochise’s people as hostages, he retaliated. Another cycle of violence was underway, one that would pit the Chiricahua against the white intruders for the next twenty-five years. In 1872 Cochise was able to negotiate a truce in this bloody business when he agreed to locate his people on a reservation that was, at least, a part of the much vaster region they always had called home. Two years later Cochise died, and leadership of the Chiricahuas passed first to Victorio and then to Geronimo.

Throughout the 1870s, the western Apaches were under pressure to remain on reservations and undergo the American version of a civilization program. Some Chiricahuas resisted this fate more vigorously than others, and the strong willed and independent looked to Victorio for leadership. For three years he led a band, fluctuating in size but seldom exceeding 250 people, back and forth across western Texas, New Mexico, and eastern Arizona. The Apaches consistently outwitted, or simply outmarched, the troops pursuing them. If the Americans came too close, Victorio would head for the mountains south of the border. This ultimately proved his undoing when in 1889 a Mexican force trapped his band in a canyon and almost all the Apaches were killed or captured. Victorio himself died, presumably the victim of one of the Indian auxiliaries of the Mexicans.

In the early 1880s, Geronimo emerged as the most able of the Apache freedom fighters. Like many other Apaches, he had found the reservation regimen intolerable and fled to the mountains. But the odds against the Indians were mounting. The white population of Arizona doubled in the early 1880s, and the troops were not only more numerous but toughened and experienced by the constant campaigning. Moreover, Apaches off the reservation now knew that their pursuers probably would be guided by fellow tribesmen who had taken service with the United States.

During the last four years of Apache resistance, a bewildering succession of events occurred as parties of Indians were driven to the reservations, only to have some of them slip away again. Nor was Mexico the refuge it once had been. In 1886, Geronimo’s band was held in the Sierra Madre in Chihuahua. Nevertheless, even a small Indian force could do damage, as a party of about a dozen warriors led by Geronimo’s brother Josanie demonstrated. In a month the Apaches traveled an estimated 1,200 miles, killed 38 people, seized 250 horses, and totally baffled hundreds of pursuers before retreating south of the border.

But with each campaign, those Apaches prepared to risk everything to maintain their freedom were fewer in number. Many of the bravest died in battle; others were finally forced to accept the futility of further resistance. Geronimo was in the latter category, finally surrendering in 1886. His last campaign indicated the impracticality of further resistance. Geronimo’s band, including women and children, numbered only thirty some people, while pursuing them were upwards of five thousand troops with orders to kill or capture them.

The Apache wars were even more violent than most such hostilities. Fighting for their very existence, the Indians had to be implacable. Nevertheless, it was the whites, both soldiers and civilians, who were guilty of the most flagrant acts of treachery, and examples abound. The 1871 Camp Grant Massacre, in which nearly a hundred Apaches were killed and many Indian children seized to be sold into slavery, was perpetrated by a mob of Tucson settlers supported by the Tohono O’odham. The victims had been attracted to Camp Grant by the promise of rations and protection by troops. Cochise’s inveterate hostility stemmed partly from the murder of Apaches who had been persuaded to appear for a peace conference. On another occasion, white settlers had invited Indians to talk peace and then killed their guests by serving them poisoned food.

The experience of tribes more sedentary than the Apaches varied. To the east, the Pueblos of the Rio Grande Valley fared better than did most Indians in the Southwest, although they too lost land. Generally speaking, the Americans agreed to recognize the village boundaries that had existed under
Aboriginal Territories and Modern Indian Reservations. Shaded areas indicate land areas recognized by the Indian Claims Commission (an independent tribunal established by Congress in 1946) as the "aboriginal territories" of several western tribes. Black areas represent the external boundaries of reservations where members of those tribes currently reside. The aboriginal territories (and modern reservations) are as follows: California (Hoopa Valley, Round Valley, Tule River, and the Southern California Rancherias), Yakima (Tatitlek), Nez Percé (Nez Percé), Blackfeet and Gros Ventre (Blackfeet and Ft. Belknap), Crow (Crow), Sioux (Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Tankton, Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock, and Sisseton), Shoshone and Western Shoshone (Fort Hall, Wind River, Pyramid Lake, Walker Lake, and Duck Valley), Cheyenne and Arapaho (Northern Cheyenne, Cheyenne and Arapaho, Wind River), Pawnee (Pawnee), Kiowa Comanche and Apache (Kiowa, Jicarilla, Mescalero, Chiricahua and Western Apache, Jicarilla, Mescalero, San Carlos, and Fort Apache), and Navajo (Navajo). Note: Aboriginal areas were determined by the Indian Claims Commission on narrow legal grounds. In general, they represent boundaries of tribal habitation at the time treaties were negotiated with the United States; they do not reflect the precontact locations of tribes or account for seasonal migrations. In short, they are suggestive rather than definitive.
Spanish and Mexican rule. The Indians, however, had traditionally grazed their livestock on large areas adjoining their cultivated fields. With the influx of Americans into the region after the Mexican War, the use of much of that land would now be denied the Pueblos. Moreover, white lumbermen's overcutting of timber in the Rio Grande watershed contributed to floods that destroyed fields that had been farmed by the Indians from the days before the Spanish entered the valley.

The legislature of New Mexico Territory had recognized Pueblo village existence, but in California the rights of the Indians were dismissed cavalierly by the new state government. In 1850 there were approximately one hundred thousand Indians in the new state of California. About sixty tribes were represented, and their cultures varied greatly, ranging from the Indians of northern California whose lifestyles closely resembled those of the Coastal tribes of the Pacific Northwest to the southern tribes with obvious links to the Pueblo cultures of the Southwest.

Several things combined to render ineffective Indian resistance to the American occupation of California. The great cultural differences among the tribes and the absence of any real tribal governments meant that Indians choosing to resist seldom were able to mobilize more than a few freedom fighters. In addition, the Indians had been demoralized by developments during the period of Mexican control of California. In the mid-1830s the secularization of the missions had cast adrift fifteen thousand proselytized Indians, and in the interior the tribes were being pressed by Mexican settlers interested in expanding their ranchos or capturing additions to their work force. Meanwhile, diseases introduced into the region by whites were taking a heavy toll on the native population—five times the number killed by the Mexicans, according to one estimate.

Thus an already tragically weakened Native American population was faced with an even greater threat after the Americans acquired California. In 1848 the non-Indian population of California had been less than ten thousand; by 1850 it exceeded one hundred thousand, and settlers and miners were penetrating every area of the new state.

The unique California experience of bypassing the territorial stage of government only complicated matters for the Indians there. Territorial governments were directed by officials in Washington who typically took more seriously their obligation to protect the rights of the Indian population than did state officers. The white Californians, however, almost immediately obtained statehood, and they felt little compunction to observe federal Indian policy. One early state law provided that Indians could be indentured to white employers for extended periods of time. The result was at best peonage, and for those Indian women and children who were kidnapped and sold to white settlers, little better than slavery.

Indian resistance to this and other white abuses was sporadic. They would burn a barn here, steal cattle there, and occasionally kill a settler or a miner.

These acts of defiance would be met by punitive expeditions that would exact revenge out of all proportion to the alleged crime. Frequently these operations were conducted not by disciplined forces of the U.S. Army but by militia units or local posses whose members had the typical citizen's contempt for Indians and a complete disregard for their rights.

Those Indians who were willing to locate on the few reservations hastily established in California did not find there the peace and security they had been promised. Settlers, with the connivance of reservation employees, were constantly encroaching on the land set aside for the Indians. Rations and supplies designated for the reservation inhabitants were diverted to other channels by corrupt agents. Meanwhile, disease was taking a terrible toll on the remaining Indian population.

Under multiple blows, the fabric of Indian political and social life gave way. A half-century of American control saw the California Indian population steadily decline until it was less than one-fifth of what it had been in 1848.

“Genocide” is a term of awful significance, but one which has application to the story of California's Native Americans.

North of California, the Indian populations initially welcomed the white traders because the newcomers brought with them tools and other goods that improved Indian living standards. By 1800, the tribes had developed regular commercial relations with the “Boston men,” as they referred to the Yankee traders, and with their rivals, the “King George men.” Within two decades the interior tribes also had been brought into contact with traders and trappers, and their societies began to show some of the same improvement in standards of living as had that of the Plains tribes after their acquisition of horses and firearms.

The Chinooks discovered the dangers of the new relationships. For many years they had flourished as middlemen between American and British traders and tribes more remote from the coast. But around 1830 the Chinooks fell prey to one of the diseases imported by the whites and were virtually exterminated as a tribe.

The situation changed abruptly for the worse for all the tribes of the Northwest in the 1840s. First Americans began to occupy the Willamette Valley and move north towards Puget Sound. Then the Indians had to contend with the whites lured to the region by reports of gold.

The first tribes to be attacked were those in southern Oregon, after they were mistakenly blamed for depredations committed by people to the south of them. In 1855 Indians from the Rogue River area resisted briefly and then were required to accept a treaty locating several of the tribes on a single reservation. As some of these tribes were traditional rivals, few people actually took up residence on the reservation.

Indians who found themselves within the newly established Washington Territory had problems of their own. They quickly became acquainted with the peremptory demands of a territorial governor that they sign treaties, sur-
render most of their land, and gather on designated reservations. These reservations were usually located east of what had been the tribal homelands and comprised land less well watered and timbered and not as plentifully supplied with game and fish. Moreover, the tribes again were expected to share a few reservations, regardless of longstanding intertribal rivalries. At the treaty councils, the Indians seldom spoke with one voice. Among the Nez Percés, for example, most tribesmen strongly opposed assignment to a reservation, and Old Joseph and Looking Glass were among the resistors’ most effective spokesmen. Other Nez Percés, however, accepted the leadership of Lawyer, who was convinced that resistance was not a viable option. As usual, the whites finally obtained treaties that purported to show that the tribes had ceded large areas of land and had agreed to move to reservations.

Pressure on the Indians to move coincided in 1855 with new gold strikes in the Northwest. More whites began to invade the area, and some Indians were driven to resist. Native peoples from the Rogue River area fought until overwhelmed, whereupon the survivors were forced onto a reservation. Concurrently, the Yamahas and their allies put up a real battle to hold their homelands, although the steadily mounting white power in the region soon proved too much for them. Pressed by the brutal local militia, which was backed by U.S. Army regulars armed with rifled guns that outranged the muskets and bows and arrows of the tribesmen, the Indian resistance faded. In the process, the tribes lost some of their best leaders, among them Owhi, chief of the Kutsbas, and his son, Quelchan.

Owli was a chief whose prestige extended beyond his own tribe, and his determination not to give in to the whites helped mobilize other Upper Salishan tribes in the struggle to maintain their independence. When further resistance proved futile, Owli turned himself in only to be told that his own safety depended upon his persuading Quelchan to surrender. After Owli accomplished this, the army officer to whom Quelchan submitted had him hanged. The betrayed and distraught father was then killed while attempting to escape.

With the exception of the Modocs and the Nez Percés, the tribes of the Northwest ended their resistance with the campaigns of the 1850s. In 1854, intolerable conditions on a reservation that the Modocs were forced to share with larger and unfriendly tribes led some of them to slip away under the leadership of Keintpoos, better known among the whites as Captain Jack. Keintpoos led his people back to their ancestral homeland, and the fugitives took shelter in a ten-square-mile area covered by lava deposits. The very rough terrain abounded in caves and ready-made trenches, making it ideal for defense. With only about sixty warriors, Keintpoos kept at bay for seven months an army that at its peak numbered nearly a thousand men. At one point hostilities gave way to negotiations, only to have the Indians kill two of the white delegates. But the whites took a terrible vengeance. When the Modocs were finally forced to surrender, four of them, including Keintpoos, were found guilty by a military tribunal and hanged. Then the heads of the four men were severed and sent to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D.C. The surviving Modocs were exiled to Oklahoma, where the descendants of some of them live today.

The Nez Percés, who in 1877 fought one of the last Indian wars for independence, were members of several bands of that tribe that had for years refused to move to a reservation in Idaho. Under mounting pressure from the United States, they had at last reluctantly agreed to leave the land they loved. En route to the reservation, however, young men broke from the main body and killed three settlers who had committed crimes against Indians. Other warriors, assuming that the whites, as usual, would react on the premise of collective guilt, vented their spleen by additional attacks. Troops were sent against the main Nez Percé encampment, but the Indians drove them off. Undecided what to do next, the tribesmen heard conflicting counsel from their chiefs.

Looking Glass, a veteran of many expeditions to the buffalo country east of the Rockies, urged the Nez Percés to head in that direction with the object of seeking refuge among the Crows or retreating north to Canada as Sitting Bull had done the previous year.

With severe punishment and banishment to a reservation as the alternative, the eight hundred Indians began a 1,500-mile retreat that took them over some of the most rugged trails in the Northwest. Pursued by four detachments of U.S. troops, the Nez Percés, under the leadership of chiefs like White Bird, Young Joseph, and Looking Glass, managed to beat off their attackers in several early engagements. The discovery that Crow scouts were serving with one of the army columns ruled out refuge with that tribe as a Nez Percé option. That left retreat into Canada. The Indians were about thirty miles from that sanctuary when they were surrounded by troops led by Cheyenne scouts. During intermittent fighting over a period of a week, Looking Glass and many other Indians were killed. About three hundred Nez Percé, including White Bird, managed to slip through enemy lines and escape into Canada. The remainder of the Indians who had survived the long retreat were surrendered by Joseph, who concluded the negotiations with his poignant, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

There remained only one major effort by Indians to resist by armed force the domination of the United States—the 1879 struggle of the White River Utes. In 1868, Utes had been subjected to one of the treaty proceedings with which the Plains tribes were becoming so familiar. Seven bands gave up all their land claims and received title to a reservation that covered the westernmost third of Colorado Territory. There were the usual provisions for the Indians to begin farming, to send their children to school, and otherwise to transform completely their mode of living.

For a few years the Utes continued to hunt and roam over the area much as their ancestors had done. Then prospectors infiltrated the reservation and found silver in the San Juan Mountains. Other white men poured in
A group of Ute chiefs photographed soon after the 1879 White River conflict. The group consists of Ouray (front, center), who negotiated an end to the fighting, and four others: Guero (front, right), Shavanu (rear, right), Wazencu (rear, left), and Ankatosh (front, left). Courtesy, The Newberry Library.

and, unable to keep its own citizens off Indian land, the United States extorted another land cession from the Utes. By 1878, the Utes at the White River agency had settled onto a smaller reservation. During that year, this northernmost of the two Ute agencies had to contend with a new agent, Nathan Meeker, who proposed an immediate transformation of the Utes from hunters to farmers. In the space of a year, Meeker had driven the White River Utes to the brink of armed rebellion. When Chief Canvish protested the agent’s having ordered a plot of grazing land prepared for plowing, a pushing-match ensued and Meeker reported he had been “assaulted.” He called for troops to be sent to the agency. The warriors, understandably frightened at the prospect of what the troops might do, fought them to a standstill when they approached the agency. Meanwhile, other Utes vented their fury on Meeker, his family, and other agency employees. The white men were killed, the women and children taken captive.

Within a few weeks the army had mobilized almost four thousand troops, some arriving from distant posts by railroad, to contend with the less than one thousand Ute men, women, and children enrolled at White River. Utes from other hands, including the celebrated Ouray who had represented the tribe in earlier negotiations with the white men, intoned and helped arrange a surrender, thus avoiding even more bloodshed. The ending was as familiar as the events that had led to it: the Utes were forced to cede almost all of the reservation in Colorado and retire westward to a less desirable tract in Utah Territory.

The Ute War of 1879 was the last major reenactment of a tragic scenario played out many times in the period from 1848 to 1886. First the Indians of a region would be subjected to invasion of their territory by small parties of whites who killed the game upon which the Indians depended, or drove the tribesmen from the best fishing sites. Other whites would appear to seize land for farming settlements. When faced with Indian resistance—threatened or actual—the United States would arrange treaty negotiations. What almost always resulted was a document that few Indians involved could understand, but which nevertheless committed them to surrender most of their ancestral homeland and relocate on a reservation where they could count on being badgered to give up cherished ways.

Such treaties were powerful weapons in the hands of whites who used them to give an aura of legality to the dispossession of the tribes. Time and time again these scraps of paper were invoked to justify policies abhorrent to the Indians. If the Indians then resisted, they were portrayed as violating agreements freely agreed upon.

Indian resistance, when it did occur, was usually doomed to defeat for the variety of reasons previously mentioned. Indian societies produced an abundance of individual heroes prepared to die in defense of their homes and families, and many tribal cultures assigned the highest status to the warrior. Nevertheless, the tribes lacked effective political unity, and their members were unwilling to submit to the discipline that would enable them to carry on protracted campaigns. Indians paid more than lip service to individual freedom; the latitude given tribal members, however, meant that rarely would all those capable of fighting be willing to do so at any given time. There was no machinery by which a majority could commit all to a course of action. Chiefs could only lead by example; they did not have real authority over members of their bands. They held their positions of honor or the sufferance of their
fellow and had little power to discipline. A common response of chiefs to
complaints of whites about the conduct of their warriors was the plaintive,
"We cannot control our young men."

If individual tribes had difficulty mobilizing all their bands on a particu-
lar course of action—and band chiefs rarely could produce all their war-
to meet a threat—it is not surprising that all tribes of a region would be in-
capable of closing ranks against the white invader. In such a situation,
traditional rivalries with neighboring tribes took precedence over what was
the much greater threat of the white man. As mentioned, U.S. Army troop
columns commonly went into battle led by scouts from rivals of the tribe the
troops were fighting. Nor was it rare for members of one band of a tribe to
take service against other bands of the same tribe. This phenomenon of In-
dians supporting U.S. soldiers against other Indians was as old as the first wars
of the seventeenth century.

Other factors also contributed to the losing of the West. The Indians' ca-
cacity to resist was eroded, as the example of the Plains Indians dramatically
illustrated. The whole nomadic way of life of those Indians, which made them
such elusive targets for the troops, became impossible with the mass slaughter
of the buffalo. Life could be just as desperate for Indians driven from tradi-
tional fishing or gathering sites, thereby drastically diminishing their capacity
to resist.

Wars are determined by more than weaknesses, however. The ultimate
victor brings strengths to the contest that cannot be matched. Population was
a major factor, and the disparity between the numbers of whites and Indians
steadily widened with the passing years. To impress chiefs and headmen with
the futility of opposing the millions of whites, with their more advanced tech-
nologies, the United States pursued a policy of taking Indian leaders on junc-
tures to major cities in the East, particularly to Washington. Spotted Tail of the
Brule Sioux and Ouray of the Utes were only two of many chiefs who re-
turned to their tribes convinced that successful resistance was impossible.

The enemy also strove to deny the Indians the means to continue to fight.
Disarming and dismantling the hostiles was standard policy for the
army in this period. The thousand ponies killed by troops in 1875 helped end
one Comanche resistance. Requiring the surrender of ponies and weapons by
Crazy Horse's people when they came into the reservation in 1877 severely
restricted their chances of fleeing again to the plains.

Finally, the rapid expansion of the railroad network multiplied the effec-
tiveness of the available U.S. troops. The speed with which forces were mobi-
lized against the White River Utes in 1879 demonstrated that.

Again, what is remarkable is how quickly the West was lost, given the
individual abilities of the warriors and the willingness of so many to give their
all for freedom. Few people have had a better cause for which to fight than
did the inhabitants of the West from 1848 to 1886, but the odds against them
were too great.

For Further Reading

The best general history of the wars in the West is to be found in two vol-
umes by Robert Utley. They are Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army
and the American Indian, 1848–1865 (New York, 1967) and Frontier Reg-

Dee Brown, Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American
West (New York, 1970) was a pioneering effort at integrating Indian perspec-
tives about the wars. For the role of those Indians who acted as scouts and
auxiliaries for the U.S. troops, see Thomas W. Dunley, Wolves for the Blue
Soldier (Lincoln, 1982). The influence of the military on Indian policy is
explored by Robert Wooster, The Military and United States Indian Policy,
1865–1903 (New Haven, 1988) and Jeffrey Ostler, "Conquest and the State:
Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the

Sherry L. Smith, The View From Officers' Row: Army Perceptions of Western
Indians (Tucson, 1990) provides a useful overview.

The Plains wars were not the most protracted, but they have been the
most widely covered. There are a number of valuable studies of particular
Indians or particular tribes. Father Peter John Powell's People of the Sacred
Mountain: A History of the Northern Cheyenne Chiefs and Warrior Societies,
1830–1879 (San Francisco, 1981) is a Cheyenne view of their past. A Chey-
enne perspective on the battle of the Little Big Horn may be found in John

Mari Sandoz, Crazy Horse (Lincoln, 1961) is a successful effort to recreate
the life and times of that great Oglala Sioux chief. His rival for primacy among the western Sioux is the subject of a new biography by Robert Larson, Red Cloud (Norman, 1997). For the Indian role in the southern Plains, a good starting point is Donald J. Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes (Norman, 1963).


Chapter Nine

The Curious Story of Reformers and American Indians

Frederick E. Hoxie

At ten o’clock on the morning of September 28, 1887, Albert K. Smiley stood in the parlor of the Lake Mohonk Mountain House and called an unusual meeting to order. Smiley, the Quaker proprietor of this fashionable Catskill resort, faced a group of men and women who had come to New York from as far away as South Dakota to discuss the future of the American Indians. Among the assembled were Massachusetts’ Senator Henry L. Dawes, recently reelected to a third term in Washington; Lyman Abbott, editor of the influential Christian Union; the presidents of Vassar and Swarthmore colleges; editorial writers from the Hartford Courant, the Springfield Union, and Boston Journal; the Reverend F. F. Ellinwood of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions; the superintendent of public instruction for the state of New York; and Harvard Law School professor, James Bradley Thayer. From their opening prayer to the closing hymn, sung together two days later, Smiley and his guests talked about people who were not there and wrestled with a “problem” that had no direct impact on any of them.

One can hardly imagine a less likely spot for a discussion of Indian affairs than the sitting room of the Mohonk lodge. Perched on a peak overlooking the Hudson Valley, built for weekend tourists from New York City, and proud of its fine cuisine and rustic luxury, Mohonk represented everything American Indians lacked in late-nineteenth-century America: wealth, security, and supreme confidence in the future. On the other hand, the resort’s distance from the daily reality of Indian existence symbolized the revolutionary changes these reformers had in mind for their Native “friends.” The men and women who gathered at Mohonk wanted to destroy traditional Indian life by dissolving all

Above: Detail from photo. See page 194–195.