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THE FRONTIER ARMY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BUFFALO: 1865-1883

DAVID D. SMITS

SCHOLARS OF WESTERN AMERICAN HISTORY have long recognized the post-Civil War frontier army's complicity in the near-extirpation of the buffalo. Historian Richard White represents the scholarly consensus in stating that "various military commanders encouraged the slaughter of bison" by white hide hunters in order to cut the heart from the Plains Indians' economy. Some scholars implicate the army's high command more directly in the annihilation. Retired Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, for instance, claimed that Generals William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan viewed the eradication of the buffalo as "the critical line of attack" in the struggle with the plains tribes. Paul Andrew Hutton, Sheridan's able biographer, maintains that the scrappy little Irishman did his utmost to further "his policy of exterminating the buffalo."¹

But if mainstream interpretations assign to the army, or at least to important commanders, a key (though imprecise) role in the great buffalo slaughter, a revisionist school tends to absolve the military from responsibility for the annihilation. Thus, the eminently fair-minded Robert M. Utley contends that although the army is "frequently" charged with pursuing an "official policy" of exterminating the buffalo, there "was never any such policy." Utley argues that it was unnecessary to encourage the buffalo hunters to carry on their profitable business, but he adds that "both civil and military officials concerned with the Indian problem applauded the slaughter, for they correctly perceived it a crucial factor that would force the Indian onto the reservation."²

Robert Wooster's insightful analysis of the War Department's strategic policy against Indians from 1865 to 1903 acknowledges that "Sheridan and Sherman recognized that eliminating the buffalo might be the best way to force Indians to change

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¹ Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, 1991), 219; S. L. A. Marshall, *Crimsoned Prairie: The Wars Between the United States and the Plains Indians During the Winning of the West* (New York, 1972), 83; Henry E. Davies, *Ten Days on the Plains* (1871; reprint, Dallas, 1985), 16.

² Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York, 1973), 412-13.



Buffalo hunting, Montana, 1882. Courtesy of the Haynes Foundation Collection, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.

their nomadic habits." Still, Wooster concludes that "the army, while anxious to strike against the Indians' ability to continue their resistance, did not make the virtual extermination of the American bison part of its official policy; in some cases, individual officers took it upon themselves to try and end the slaughter."³

The purpose of this essay is to assemble the evidence that establishes a direct connection between the army and the destruction of the buffalo. A scrutiny of official military reports, personal letters, the reminiscences of retired army officers and ex-buffalo hunters, the observations of Indian Bureau personnel and Indians themselves, along with other eye-witness accounts reveals that traditional interpretations have inadequately defined (and revisionists have underestimated) the army's involvement in the destruction of the bison.

General Sherman, more than any other officer, was responsible for devising a strategy to conquer the Plains Indians. Remembered most for his Civil War "march through Georgia," Sherman was a battle-seasoned veteran who in 1866 assumed command of the Division of the Missouri, which encompassed the vast wind-blown blanket of grass known as the Great Plains, home to those Indians whose life revolved around the buffalo. In 1869, Sherman succeeded Grant as commanding general, a position that he held until his retirement in 1883. The Civil War had taught Sherman that the enemy's power to resist depended not only upon its military strength, but also upon the will of its people. He had learned that to shatter the enemy's will to resist, it was necessary to destroy his ability to supply his armies. The man who desolated much of the South did so with the conviction that his Army of the Tennessee "must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war"; Sherman relied on the same strategy to subdue the Plains Indians.⁴

The Civil War had also taught Sherman that railroads were immensely important for moving troops, munitions, and supplies. Applying that lesson, he became convinced that the railroads traversing the plains would seal the fate of the aboriginal inhabitants. To clear the central plains for the Union Pacific and the Kansas Pacific, Sherman proposed to annihilate the buffalo in the region. On 10 May 1868, Sherman wrote to his friend and comrade-in-arms, General Sheridan, "as long as Buffalo are up on the Republican the Indians will go there. I think it would be wise 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. Until the Buffalo and consequent[ly] Indians are out [from between] the Roads we will have collisions and trouble."⁵

Sherman's remarks were not made in jest; his proposal came very close to what the frontier army actually did under his leadership. Indeed, the army's high command

³ Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903* (New Haven, 1988), 171-72.

⁴ William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* (1875; reprint, New York, 1892), 2:227.

⁵ Sherman to Sheridan, 10 May 1868, *The Papers of Philip H. Sheridan*, microfilm reel no. 17, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter *Sheridan Papers*).

routinely sponsored and outfitted civilian hunting expeditions onto the plains. Sheridan, as Hutton observes, "heartily approved of the activities of the buffalo hunters, feeling that they were doing the public a great service by depleting the Indians' shaggy commissary." Sherman and Sheridan regularly provided influential American citizens and foreigners with letters of introduction to western commanders. The letters enabled the influential "to obtain supplies, equipment, military escorts, knowledgeable scouts, and other types of assistance at frontier military posts."⁶

That accommodating policy allowed the army to advance its goal of exterminating the buffalo while gaining favor with the prominent and powerful. Such hunting parties normally slaughtered buffalo and other game with reckless abandon. William F. Cody recounted how the army assisted a party of prominent businessmen who visited Fort McPherson in 1871 as Sheridan's guests. Many officers accompanied the party, and two companies of the Fifth Cavalry provided an escort. Cody remarked that any guest "who wished could use army guns." In fact, the Springfield army rifle was initially the favorite weapon of the hide hunters. The party killed over six hundred buffalo on the hunt, keeping only the tongues and the choice cuts, but leaving the rest of the carcasses to rot on the plains.⁷

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, who, like so many frontier officers, was an avid hunter, took three English gentlemen on a twenty-day hunt in Kansas in the fall of 1872. In their excitement the Englishmen killed 127 buffalo, "more buffalo than would have supplied a brigade." The next year the same party killed a comparable number.⁸

The high command's most elaborate preparations for a buffalo hunt were those arranged in January 1872 for the Grand Duke Alexis, third son of the Czar of Russia. Sheridan and his military entourage joined Alexis and his attendants in Omaha. A military escort consisting of two companies of infantry, two of cavalry, and the Second Cavalry's regimental band, along with teamsters and cooks, completed the assemblage. All boarded a special train provided by the Union Pacific Railroad and headed for North Platte, Nebraska. In five days of exuberant hunting the party slaughtered hundreds of buffalo.⁹

Army commanders throughout buffalo country customarily treated distinguished travelers to hunts. Former Commissioner of Indian Affairs George W. Manypenny observed that "in the country surrounding military posts the pursuit of the buffalo and other game is an amusement that the officers engage in, and the visitors to the posts are generally entertained with a hunt." Post commanders often furnished their most

⁶ Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln, 1985), 245-46. Hutton, in his introduction to Davies (*Ten Days*, 16), is aware of Sheridan's efforts to destroy the buffalo herds, but he neither analyzes nor recounts them.

⁷ William F. Cody, "Famous Hunting Parties of the Plains," *Cosmopolitan* 17 (June 1894): 138-39.

⁸ Richard Irving Dodge, *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants* (New York, 1959), 132-33; George W. Manypenny, *Our Indian Wards* (1880; reprint, New York, 1972), 149.

⁹ Hutton, *Sheridan and His Army*, 213-14; Cody, "Famous Hunting Parties," 141.



Buffalo killed, Smoky Butte, Montana. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

accomplished soldier marksmen and riders as escorts for the visitors, thereby making the hunts all the more destructive.¹⁰

Military commanders who permitted their troops to kill buffalo did so with the knowledge that they were doing their part to resolve the so-called "Indian Problem." Lieutenant General John M. Schofield, commander of the Department of the Missouri in 1869-1870, exhibited this outlook. His headquarters at Fort Leavenworth afforded Schofield a propitious site from which to launch strikes against the Plains Indians and their buffalo. In retirement, Schofield wrote in his memoirs: "With my cavalry and carbined artillery encamped in front, I wanted no other occupation in life than to ward off the savage and kill off his food until there should no longer be an Indian frontier in our beautiful country."¹¹

¹⁰ J. Lee Humfreville, *Twenty Years Among Our Hostile Indians* (New York, 1899), 440; G. O. Shields, *Hunting in the Great West* (1883; 5th ed., New York, 1888), 133, 140-50; Colonel George A. Armes, *Ups and Downs of An Army Officer* (Washington, DC, 1900), 263-64; "The Yale College Expedition of 1870," *Harpers's New Monthly Magazine* 43 (October 1871): 671; Manypenny, *Our Indian Wars*, 148-49.

¹¹ Lieutenant-General John M. Schofield, *Forty-Six Years in the Army* (New York, 1897), 428.

Sherman himself publicly proposed the employment of the army to slaughter the buffalo in order to subdue the plains tribes. On 26 June 1869, the prestigious *Army Navy Journal* reported that "General Sherman remarked, in conversation the other day, that the quickest way to compel the Indians to settle down to civilized life was to send ten regiments of soldiers to the plains, with orders to shoot buffaloes until they became too scarce to support the redskins." Agreeing with Sherman, the *Journal's* commentator maintained that to campaign effectively against a wartime enemy it was ordinarily necessary to move on his armies, his works, his communications, or his supplies. But in a guerrilla war, such as that being fought against the plains tribes, the enemy had no home base, no line of operations or defense, no strategic points to defend and no important storage facilities for ammunition or provisions. A guerrilla foe could be defeated only "by making it impossible for him to exist in the country he operates in." The buffalo were to the Plains Indians what the Shenandoah Valley's grain was to the Confederate armies of "Stonewall" Jackson and Jubal Early. Phil Sheridan had finally gained control of the Shenandoah Valley, the *Journal* recalled, by laying "waste the grain fields—the supply of food and forage to the enemy—and it was like robbing the Indian of his buffalo." As long as the buffalo roamed in great herds the plains tribes would spurn the reservations. But the buffalo's disappearance would draw the tribes to the reservations for subsistence. Furthermore, the Indians' determination to protect the buffalo pastures of the plains compelled them to oppose the railroad. Hence, according to the *Journal*, "to campaign against the buffalo would be, if successful, not only to destroy the enemy's supplies, but to put the whole *casus belli* out of existence by annihilation."¹²

Sherman's proposal was a trial balloon. When it was not promptly shot down, he was encouraged to continue a policy that the army had actually already begun. Of course, in the post-Civil War era a parsimonious Congress and a war-weary public would not permit him to devote ten full regiments to the annihilation of buffalo. But the thin blue line that was America's western military force would slaughter buffalo wherever and whenever practicable.

The army killed under the pervasive assumption that "regardless of tribe, most Indians required a demonstration of power." Army officers hoped that America's Indians could be civilized and Christianized, but the military was thoroughly convinced that Indians respected martial power and that only punishment would persuade them to capitulate. Sheridan expressed this consensus viewpoint in an 1869 letter to the army's adjutant general. In Sheridan's words, "if he [the Plains Indian] does not now give up his cruel and destructive habits, I see no other way to save the lives and property of our people, than to punish him until peace becomes a desirable object."¹³

¹² *Army Navy Journal* 6 (26 June 1869): 705.

¹³ Sherry L. Smith, *The View From Officers' Row: Army Perceptions of Western Indians* (Tucson, 1990), 98; Sheridan to Edward D. Townsend, 1 November 1869, *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel no. 86.

But punishing the elusive plains tribes by defeating them in conventional battles was extraordinarily difficult. Infantrymen were virtually useless in pursuing hostile warriors so long as there was grass for their ponies. And as for the cavalry, Colonel Philippe Régis de Trobriand, French aristocrat and veteran commander of volunteer Union forces in the Civil War, summed it up accurately when he wrote: "In brief, the movement of Indian horsemen is lighter, swifter, and longer range than that of our cavalry, which means that they always get away from us."¹⁴

Frustrated bluecoats, unable to deliver a punishing blow to the so-called "Hostiles," unless they were immobilized in their winter camps, could, however, strike at a more accessible target, namely, the buffalo. That tactic also made curious sense, for in soldiers' minds the buffalo and the Plains Indian were virtually inseparable. When Captain Robert G. Carter of the Fourth Cavalry referred to the "nomadic red Indian and his migratory companion, the bison," he linked the two together in a manner typical of military men. Soldiers who associated the buffalo with the Indian so inseparably could even occasionally pretend that slaughtering buffalo was actually killing Indians. Thus, on the buffalo hunt staged for Russia's Grand Duke Alexis, Chalkey M. Beeson, a westerner hired as a guide, describes what happened when the animals were found: "Custer, who was in charge of the hunting party, stopped and said, 'Boys here's a chance for a great victory over that bunch of redskins the other side of the hill. Major B., you will take charge of the right flank, I will attend to the left. General Sheridan and the infantry will follow direct over the hill. Ready! Charge!'"¹⁵

Doubtless the commander who pretended that buffalo were "redskins" was a rarity, but the commander who used buffalo for shooting practice was not. Custer, General John Gibbon, Colonel Benjamin F. Grierson, and Colonel George A. Armes were among the officers who ordered their raw pony soldiers to chase running buffalo to teach these troopers how to shoot from horseback. Such hunts also broke the monotony of the daily routines of the campaign or post, provided good exercise for men and horses, and were, in the words of one lieutenant, "as good a system of scouting as could be devised for the vicinity of the camp." General Hugh Lenox Scott recalled that the army also encouraged officers to take hunting leaves, provided they would prepare maps of the terrain traversed.¹⁶

Commanders in the field and at military posts issued hunting passes freely to their seasoned troops so as to obtain fresh meat to supplement vapid army rations. Such buffalo hunting would have been far more justifiable had it not been so wasteful.

¹⁴ Lucile M. Kane, trans. and ed., *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Régis de Trobriand* (Lincoln, 1951), 64.

¹⁵ Captain R. G. Carter, *On the Border With Mackenzie; or, Winning West Texas from the Comanches* (Washington, DC, 1935), ix; Chalkey M. Beeson, "A Royal Buffalo Hunt," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society* 10 (1907-08): 577.

¹⁶ Neil Baird Thompson, *Crazy Horse Called Them Walk-A-Heaps: The Story of the Foot Soldier in the Prairie Indian Wars* (St. Cloud, MN, 1979), 121; Lieutenant James H. Bradley, *The March of the Montana Column: A Prelude to the Custer Disaster* (Norman, 1961), 120; Armes, *Ups and Downs*, 179; Hugh Lenox Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (New York, 1928), 124.

Customarily the successful hunters took only the tongues and humps from the slain animals, leaving the rest of the carcass to decompose where it had fallen. Soldiers killed huge numbers of buffalo in these hunts. Captain Albert Barnitz wrote to his wife that his column of the Seventh Cavalry, marching against hostile Cheyennes south of the Arkansas, had killed "not less than 75 buffaloes yesterday, and last evening there was a general feast on fat buffalo humps, tongues, and marrow bones!"¹⁷

Many Indians and whites considered buffalo tongues to be a great delicacy; western soldiers craved them. In 1870, General John Pope, new commander of the Department of the Missouri, wrote to his old West Point chum, Lieutenant Colonel Richard I. Dodge, in command at Fort Dodge, requesting twelve dozen buffalo tongues. Dodge quickly obliged by detailing a sergeant and a squad of marksmen to scour the Kansas plains for the shaggy beasts. In three days they returned with a wagon filled with more tongues than were ordered. To kill over 144 buffalo, animals that could weigh over 2000 pounds each, solely for their tongues, which weighed an average of two pounds apiece, was perfectly justifiable to those frontier soldiers who believed the herds were expendable.¹⁸

Custer himself was the Seventh Cavalry's most ardent and wasteful hunter. At the conclusion of his expedition to the Yellowstone in the summer of 1873, he wrote proudly to his wife "Libbie" to inform her of his prowess as a marksman. "I must not forget to tell you that during the expedition I killed with my rifle and brought into camp forty-one antelope, four buffalo, four elk, seven deer (four of them black-tails), two white wolves, and one red fox. Geese, ducks, prairie-chickens, and sage-hens without number completed my summer's record."¹⁹

Officers in the Seventh Cavalry and other regiments were also fond of holding contests to determine which individual or team could kill the most buffalo in a specified time or under prearranged conditions. Katherine Gibson, wife of Captain Francis M. Gibson of the Seventh, remembered a ten-day shooting contest in which several officers and "a squad of enlisted men" from Fort Totten, in Dakota Territory, participated. Seventh Cavalry officers arranged another competitive hunt in May 1867 near Fort Hays in which two teams, each composed of eight officers, competed. The rules agreed upon were that on different days each team would leave camp at sunrise and return at sunset with its haul of tongues, the proof of the number of buffalo downed. The winning team brought in twelve tongues; the losers, who had to dine the victors, collected eleven.²⁰ In that instance the participants' inexperience at buffalo hunting kept the kill quite low.

¹⁷ Robert M. Utley, ed., *Life in Custer's Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jenny Barnitz, 1867-1868* (New Haven, 1977), 190.

¹⁸ Richard Henry Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904* (New Haven, 1964), 63.

¹⁹ Elizabeth B. Custer, *Boots and Saddles; or, Life in Dakota With General Custer* (1885; reprint, Norman, 1961), 258.

²⁰ Katherine Gibson Fougere, *With Custer's Cavalry* (1940; reprint, Lincoln, 1986), 144-45; Wayne Gard, *The Great Buffalo Hunt* (Lincoln, 1959), 64; Utley, ed., *Life in Custer's Cavalry*, 53.

Officers stationed at Forts Hays and Wallace took a heavier toll in animals in a match that was dubbed "the buffalo shooting championship of the world." Each team placed a \$500 bet on its own hunter, "Buffalo Bill" Cody and the well-known scout "Medicine Bill" Comstock, respectively. Cody downed no less than sixty-nine animals in three runs; Comstock killed forty-six.²¹

On another occasion Major Frank North, commander of a celebrated battalion of Pawnee scouts, afforded Cody an opportunity to exhibit his deadly marksmanship. While on their march along the Republican the Pawnees spotted a herd of buffalo that they planned to fall upon. Cody wanted to join the hunt, but the Pawnees objected to North saying, "the white talker would scare them away."²² North relented and, unaccompanied by Cody, the Pawnee scouts bagged twenty-three animals. Later that day, when another herd was sighted, North insisted that Cody be given a chance to prove his skill. Cody responded by slaying forty-eight buffalo in thirty minutes.

The total number of buffalo killed by the frontier army in the post-Civil War period should not be underestimated. Individual soldiers, especially officers, ran up huge kills in their careers in buffalo country. In 1887, for instance, Sherman's close personal friend, General Stewart Van Vliet, who had no particular reputation as a buffalo hunter, matter-of-factly informed Spencer F. Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, that he had personally killed "hundreds." Furthermore, the soldiers' inexperience at hunting buffalo or their ignorance about the animals' needs sometimes led to the deaths of large numbers. Thus, on a hunt outside Camp McIntosh shooting troopers accidentally stampeded sixty-four buffalo and many antelope over a seventy-foot precipice to their deaths in a writhing mass below. The sportsmen adventurer John Mortimer Murphy claimed to have seen a troop of cavalry lasso one hundred buffalo calves and bring them to a corral near the post barracks. Although the little ones had sufficient room to run about and an abundance of hay and grass, "few of them lived more than a week."²³

Nothing better exemplified the callousness with which the frontier army destroyed buffalo than its use of artillery to obliterate the unwanted beasts. Captain J. Lee Humfreville claimed that the soldiers at Fort Kearney fired cannons into herds to keep them out of the post. In his retirement, Major General D. S. Stanley recalled the soldiers' use of cannon at Fort Cobb to drive away from the post a huge herd of buffalo moving north in its annual spring migration. In Stanley's words, "cannon were fired, men foolishly shot the poor beasts by the hundreds," until the herd had finally passed. Soon thereafter, "the weather turned very warm and the folly of shooting the poor beasts appeared. The putrefying carcasses, by their stench—nearly ran the people out

²¹ Colonel W. F. Cody, *An Autobiography of Buffalo Bill* (New York, 1920), 122-27; Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, 1960), 91-94.

²² *Wild Life on the Plains and Horrors of Indian Warfare* (St. Louis, 1891), 450.

²³ William T. Hornaday, "The Extirpation of the American Bison," *Report of the National Museum*, 1887 (Washington, DC, 1889), 403; Mari Sandoz, *The Buffalo Hunters: The Story of the Hide Men* (New York, 1954), 346; John Mortimer Murphy, *Sporting Adventures in the Far West* (1879; reprint, New York, 1880), 199.

of the post, and for a week the whole command was kept busy hauling carcasses into heaps and burning them.”²⁴

Colonel Grierson's Tenth Cavalry, composed of black enlisted men remembered as the “Buffalo Soldiers,” attempted to keep buffalo herds away from Fort Sill by gunning them down in great numbers. Despite the Tenth's resolute efforts, however, it was unable to drive the animals off. With regard to these endeavors the Kiowa woman, Old Lady Horse, remembered: “There was war between the buffalo and the white men. The white men built forts in the Kiowa country, and the woolly-headed buffalo soldiers shot the buffalo as fast as they could, but the buffalo kept coming on, coming on, even into the post cemetery at Fort Sill. Soldiers were not enough to hold them back.”²⁵

Of all the white people's activities in Indian country none enraged and disheartened the Native Americans more than the destruction of their buffalo. Hide hunter Billy Dixon reminisced that the annihilation “lay at the very heart of the grievances of the Indian against the white man in frontier days.” At the Medicine Lodge Treaty Council of 1867, the great Kiowa chief Satanta complained bitterly about the army's shooting of his buffalo. “A long time ago this land belonged to our fathers,” lamented Satanta, “but when I go up to the river I see a camp of soldiers, and they are cutting my wood down, or killing my buffalo. I don't like that, and when I see it my heart feels like bursting with sorrow.” Satanta was furious at the army because the two infantry companies that escorted the peace commissioners from Fort Larned to Medicine Lodge Creek had wantonly slaughtered buffalo along the route of their march. Riding spare cavalry horses, most of the soldier hunters had dismounted to cut the tongues from the animals they had dropped; others sliced hump steaks from their kills; some merely left the dead buffalo lying where they fell and rode on to continue the bloodshed. In response, Satanta complained to General William Harney, asking “has the white man become a child, that he should recklessly kill and not eat? When the red men slay game, they do so that they may live and not starve.”²⁶

Even before the Medicine Lodge Treaty Council, the army's high command on the plains was convinced that the buffalo were on the brink of extinction. That the herds on the eastern plains were fast disappearing was apparent to many observant persons. Indians complained about the diminishing numbers of animals and about their absence from old haunts; traders had raised the price of buffalo robes because

²⁴ Humfreville, *Twenty Years*, 433; D. W. Moody, *The Life of a Rover, 1865 to 1926* (n. p., n. d.), 28; D. S. Stanley, *Personal Memoirs of Major General D. S. Stanley*, U. S. A. (Cambridge, MA, 1917), 55. For an account of how the army killed buffalo with twelve-pound howitzers, see Colonel Henry Inman, *The Old Santa Fé Trail: The Story of a Great Highway* (New York, 1897), 214.

²⁵ Peter Nabokov, ed., *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-1992* (New York, 1991), 175.

²⁶ Billy Dixon, *Life and Adventures of “Billy” Dixon of Adobe Walls, Texas Panhandle* (Guthrie, OK, 1914), 55; Henry M. Stanley, *My Early Travels and Adventures in America* (1895; reprint, Lincoln, 1982), 249; Tom McHugh, *The Time of the Buffalo* (New York, 1972), 282-83.

they were less available; and eastern plains buffalo trails were "mossed over" from disuse. In the 1866 edition of his memoir, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border*, Inspector General Randolph B. Marcy quoted Minnesota Indian fighter, General Henry H. Sibley, who had predicted that the trade in buffalo robes would "soon result in the extermination of the whole race." In 1859, Marcy himself had journeyed from Fort Randall on the lower Missouri to Fort Laramie without seeing a single buffalo. The experience had convinced him that the animals were "rapidly disappearing, and a few years will, at the present rate of destruction, be sufficient to exterminate the species."²⁷

At Fort Dodge in April 1867, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, then commander of the Department of the Missouri, which embraced Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico, reminded several Arapaho chiefs, including Little Raven, of some hard realities. "You know well that the game is getting very scarce," lectured Hancock, "and that you must soon have some other means of living; you should therefore cultivate the friendship of the white man, so that when the game is all gone, they may take care of you if necessary." At a council held at Fort Larned on 1 May 1867, Hancock said substantially the same thing to Satanta. Douglas C. Jones's study of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge reveals that the United States Peace Commission composed of seven men, three of whom were generals in the regular army, took for granted the impending extinction of the buffalo and did not even discuss saving the herds.²⁸

At the time of the famous Fort Laramie Treaty of April 1868, Sherman had joined the Peace Commission, increasing its membership to four generals and four civilians. The commissioners created the Great Sioux Reservation in western South Dakota but allowed the relocated bands to retain "the right to hunt on any lands north of North Platte, and on the Republican Fork of the Smoky Hill River, so long as the buffalo may range thereon in such numbers as to justify the chase."²⁹

By his own admission, Sherman was at first "utterly opposed" to that clause of the treaty. He was determined to clear the central plains region between the Platte and the Arkansas of Indians so that the railroads, stage lines, and telegraph could operate unmolested. In the end, however, Sherman's fellow commissioners convinced him that the treaty's odious clause was, in his words, "merely temporary." Soon "the buffalo would cease to range as far north as the Republican" and the Indians "would assist in

²⁷ Theodore R. Davis, "The Buffalo Range," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 38 (January 1869): 153; Colonel R. B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* (1866; reprint, Philadelphia, 1963), 301.

²⁸ John M. Carroll, ed., *General Custer and the Battle of the Washita: The Federal View* (Bryan, TX, 1978), 182, 199; Douglas C. Jones, *The Treaty of Medicine Lodge: The Story of the Great Treaty Council as Told by Eyewitnesses* (Norman, 1966), 119.

²⁹ *Treaty With the Sioux—Brulé, Oglala, Miniconjou, Yanktonai, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, Sans Arcs, and Santee—and Arapaho, 1868*, in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, comp. and ed. Charles J. Kappler (Washington, DC, 1904), 2:1002.

their destruction.”³⁰ Sherman had learned a lesson that many other frontier army officers would also learn: sometimes Indians themselves could be used to help destroy their beloved buffalo.

On 29 February 1868, Sheridan arrived at Fort Leavenworth to assume command of the Department of the Missouri. He was promptly confronted with the problem of “Indian depredations” resulting from raids by southern plains warriors who had refused to remain confined to the reservations assigned to them by the Medicine Lodge Treaty. In a 15 October 1868 letter to Sherman, Sheridan set forth his plans for dealing with such hostiles: “The best way for the government is to now make them poor by the destruction of their stock, and then settle them on the lands allotted to them.” Sheridan’s strategy for destroying the hostiles’ stock, by which he meant their buffalo and horses, included the restoration to duty of the suspended Custer, who was to play a prominent role in a winter campaign of total war. Among the troops employed were those of Lieutenant Colonel Luther P. Bradley, who, in command of six companies of infantry and two troops of cavalry, was to help clear the central plains of buffalo and Indians. In his “Private Journal,” Bradley described his mission: “Ordered to the forks of the Republican to make permanent camp: to kill all the buffalo we find, and drive the Arapahoes and Cheyennes south, and the Sioux north.”³¹ Bradley carried out his orders energetically, but his troops were able to find and kill comparatively few buffalo.

Evidently, then, at the outset of his winter campaign of 1868-1869, Sheridan was under the impression that the western army could significantly reduce the buffalo herds, thereby demoralizing the plains tribes. Sheridan’s confidence in the army’s ability to eradicate the buffalo evaporated as his participation in the campaign gave him a better appreciation of the immensity of the southern herd. On 3 December 1868, from a depot on the North Canadian, Sheridan wrote to the army’s assistant adjutant general informing him that the federal government “makes a great mistake in giving these Indians any considerable amount of food under the supposition of necessity. The whole country is literally covered with game. There are more buffalo than will last the Indians for 20 years.” Sheridan also realized that north of the Union Pacific Railroad there ranged another enormous herd. In it he had personally observed “not less than 200,000 in one day.”³²

After the completion of the winter campaign, in which the soldiers killed great numbers of buffalo for meat, Sheridan returned to Fort Dodge in the first week of March 1869. There, he and his quartermaster, Major Henry Inman, had a conversation with Robert M. Wright, the post trader. Years later Wright maintained that the

³⁰ Sherman to Sheridan, 2 May 1873, *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel no. 17; Congress, House, “Report of Lieutenant General W. T. Sherman,” 39th Cong., 2d sess., 1866, Ex. Doc. 1, p. 21.

³¹ Sheridan to Sherman, 15 October 1868, *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel number 86; 13 September 1868 entry in Luther P. Bradley’s “Private Journal,” Box 1, Luther P. Bradley Papers, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

³² Carroll, ed., *Custer and the Battle of the Washita*, 45.

two officers called him in to help form an accurate estimate of the numbers of buffalo in a one-hundred-mile-wide strip between Fort Dodge and Camp Supply. Wright remembered that the officers initially estimated the numbers to be *ten billion* animals. But then the incredulous Sheridan decided that such an astronomical number “won’t do.” So, according to Wright, “they figured it again, and made it one billion. Finally they reached the conclusion that there must be one hundred million; but they said they were afraid to give out these figures; nevertheless they believed them.”³³

Believing that there were at least one hundred million buffalo in the southern herd alone, Sheridan was forced to abandon all hope of using his tiny army to wipe out the animals. At that time, Sheridan also assumed a less aggressive position toward the plains tribes so as to accommodate President Grant’s “Peace Policy” toward the Indians. As historian Francis Paul Prucha has written, Grant’s Peace Policy reflected “a state of mind, a determination that since the old ways of dealing with the Indians had not worked, new ways which emphasized kindness and justice must be tried.”³⁴

For a short time then, before the hide hunters actually demonstrated their capacity to exterminate the buffalo, Sheridan was disposed to rely on Grant’s proposed reforms to resolve the “Indian problem.” Without encouragement from the army’s high command to annihilate the animals, the frontier army on the southern plains was for a time inclined to hunt buffalo only for fresh meat to feed the troops. As Captain Robert G. Carter, an officer of the Fourth Cavalry who served with Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie in the early 1870s wrote, “the rule of those days, and before the slaughter of the buffalo and their extermination by ‘pot hunters’ for their skins began—was to kill only as many as were necessary for the use of our garrisons or commands in the field to eke out their rations.”³⁵

Beyond Sheridan’s belief that the buffalo were too numerous to be rapidly extirpated, there are several other explanations for the opposition of some officers to the indiscriminate slaughter of the great beasts. In the early 1870s, Colonel Edward W. Wynkoop, agent for the Cheyennes, furnished one important reason to Henry Bergh, president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Wynkoop wrote a revealing letter to Bergh, who was then engaged in a campaign to gain support for congressional legislation to protect the buffalo from white hunters. Wynkoop urged that the slaughter must be terminated, because

it is one of the greatest grievances the Indians have and, to my personal knowledge, frequently has been their strongest incentive to declare war. Little Robe, the Cheyenne chief who recently visited Washington, at one time remarked to me after I had censured him for allowing his young men to kill a white farmer’s ox: ‘Your people make big talk, and

³³ Robert M. Wright, “Personal Reminiscences of Frontier Life in Southwest Kansas,” *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society* 7 (1901-02): 78.

³⁴ Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900* (Norman, 1976), 30.

³⁵ Carter, *On the Border With Mackenzie*, 39.

sometimes make war, if an Indian kills a white man's ox to keep his wife and children from starving. What do you think my people ought to do when they see their cattle—the buffaloes—killed by your race when they are not hungry?"³⁶

If principled officers like Wynkoop opposed the buffalo slaughter because it enraged Indians and exacerbated interracial tensions, other officers opposed it because they considered it both unnecessary and wasteful. Accordingly, on 20 January 1872, Colonel William B. Hazen, not usually one to respect Indian rights, wrote to Bergh:

The theory that the buffalo should be killed to deprive the Indians of food is a fallacy, as these people are becoming harmless under a rule of justice. I earnestly request that you bring this subject before Congress with the intention of having such steps taken as will prevent this wicked and wanton waste, both in the lives of God's creatures and of the valuable food they furnish.³⁷

In addition, some frontier officers had immoderate pride in the fighting ability of their own military units or in the United States Army as a whole. The flamboyant "Long Hair" Custer boasted that he "could whip all the Indians on the Continent with the Seventh Cavalry." The equally arrogant and ill-fated Captain William J. Fetterman, who crowed, "give me eighty men and I would ride through the whole Sioux nation," also exemplifies the type.³⁸ To such foolish men the notion that the army had to resort to wiping out the buffalo in order to subdue mere "savages" was not only preposterous, but it also reflected badly on the army's fundamental competence.

Officers who viewed themselves as true sportsmen also disdained the great buffalo slaughter because it bore no resemblance whatever to the so-called "noble pastime." Lieutenant Colonel Albert Brackett of the Second Cavalry expressed this view to Bergh: "All reports about fine sport and good shooting are mere gammon. It would be equally good sport, and equally dangerous, to ride into a herd of tame cattle and butcher them indiscriminately. The wholesale butchery of buffaloes upon the plains is as needless as it is cruel."³⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Dodge, who fancied himself a bona fide sportsman, regarded buffalo as "the most unwieldy, sluggish, and stupid of all plains animals." To the hunter on foot, buffalo were by no means difficult to kill in large numbers. "If not alarmed at sight or smell of a foe," wrote Dodge, "he will stand stupidly gazing at his companions in their death throes until the whole herd is shot down." To be sure, Dodge regarded buffalo hunting on horseback as exciting and dangerous. But though

³⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 42d Cong., 2d sess., 1872, pt. 2, Appendix, 179-80.

³⁷ *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* (Topeka), 2 February 1872.

³⁸ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (Garden City, NY, 1975), 401; Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York, 1964), 108.

³⁹ Gard, *Great Buffalo Hunt*, 208.

chasing buffalo was thrilling to the novice, Dodge thought that "frequent repetition is like eating quail on toast every day for a month—monotonous."⁴⁰

The more the "pot hunters" annihilated the buffalo for profit, the more sports-minded officers like Dodge disdained buffalo hunting. In the spring of 1871, Dodge himself was forced to kill twenty-six buffalo in order to split a herd that was stampeding down upon him. Apologetically he recalled that this was "the greatest number of buffalo that my conscience can reproach me for having murdered on any single day. I was not hunting, wanted no meat, and would not voluntarily have fired at these herds. I killed only in self-preservation, and fired almost every shot from the wagon."⁴¹

In the early years of Grant's first presidential term, because the army's high command was obliged to give the Peace Policy a chance to succeed and because Sheridan himself then believed the buffalo were too numerous to be rapidly destroyed, the army temporarily abandoned its efforts to exterminate the animals. This is not, by any means, to imply that the blue-coated soldiers' prodigal killing of the buffalo ceased, for the army had no difficulty in rationalizing its excesses. Even before the end of Grant's first term, however, events made it evident to the army's high command that the buffalo must and could be annihilated.

Intensified Indian attacks on the southern plains in the early 1870s compelled the army to forsake peaceful methods for resolving the Indian problem. There, the off-reservation tribes had to be forced to give up their traditional nomadic existence and agency Indians had to be coerced into remaining on their assigned lands. Sherman discovered for himself the gravity of the Indian menace while on an inspection tour of Texas military posts in the spring of 1871. Narrowly escaping the ambush of a Kiowa raiding party, Sherman soon learned of the tragic fate of twelve teamsters whose wagon train was attacked by the same war party. Now convinced of the genuineness of the Indian threat on the southern plains, an enraged Sherman ordered Colonel Mackenzie to employ the crack Fourth Cavalry to bring peace and order to the region. Sherman thereby abandoned the Peace Policy and Sheridan, as commander of the Division of the Missouri, was responsible for all military matters in the million-square-mile expanse of the Indian insurrection.

Confronted with amplified Indian warfare, Sheridan found that he had new means to end it. The fate of the southern herd was sealed in 1871, the year a Pennsylvania tannery developed a method of converting buffalo hides into commercial leather, especially useful for harnesses and the machine belting needed by an industrializing America. With every hide worth between \$1 and \$3, swarms of hide hunters invaded western Kansas where the animals still abounded and where the Kansas Pacific and the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroads could carry the hides to eastern markets.

⁴⁰ Dodge, *Plains of the Great West*, 119, 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 120-21.



Buffalo Skinners at Work. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

The “buffalo runners,” as the hunters liked to call themselves, decimated the central plains herds with shocking rapidity. In the fall of 1873, Lieutenant Colonel Dodge described the devastation that the hide hunters had wreaked in Kansas: “Where there were myriads of buffalo the year before, there were now myriads of carcasses. The air was foul with a sickening stench, and the vast plain, which only a short twelvemonth before teemed with animal life, was a dead, solitary, putrid desert.”⁴²

Having eliminated the herds in Kansas, the runners hoped to find fresh killing fields farther south. But the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 had reserved for the Kiowas, Comanches, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahoes, “the right to hunt on any lands south of the Arkansas so long as the buffalo may range thereon in such numbers as to justify the chase.” By 1873, the “hard case” hidemen had already invaded the Indian hunting grounds in southwestern Kansas to the south of the Arkansas without interference from the army. But they feared that if they crossed the Cimarron, then patrolled by troops from Fort Dodge, the soldiers would confiscate their teams.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.

Therefore, a young runner named Steel Frazier proposed that the hidemen send a delegation to Fort Dodge to ask its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dodge, what the penalty would be if the hunters crossed into the Texas Panhandle, where they knew buffalo still abounded. The runners need not have feared opposition from Dodge, for despite his own sportsmanlike unwillingness to squander buffalo, he, like most of his comrades-in-arms, believed that the Indian problem would be resolved as soon as the buffalo were gone. Indeed, back in 1867 when Sir W. F. Butler had penitently admitted that he and his party had killed over thirty bulls on a hunt near Fort McPherson, Dodge had responded: "Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."⁴³

According to buffalo runner J. Wright Mooar, who went with Frazier to the fort, Dodge received them "very cordially," after canceling his other engagements. Dodge thoroughly enjoyed their visit and when asked what his policy would be if the hidemen hunted in Texas, responded: "Boys, if I were a buffalo hunter I would hunt buffalo where buffalo are." Dodge then took the hidemen by the hands, bid them goodbye, and wished them success.⁴⁴

In the spring of 1874, a contingent of buffalo runners left Fort Dodge, crossed the "dead line," and opened a base of operations in the Texas Panhandle at Adobe Walls on the north fork of the Canadian River. Several hundred enraged Comanches and Cheyennes attacked that outpost on 27 June 1874. Learning of the Indian attack, the governor of Kansas appealed to General John Pope, commander of the Department of the Missouri, to send troops to the relief of the runners. Pope was neither disposed to coddle Indians nor to preserve the buffalo, but he still refused to comply. In justifying his conduct to the secretary of war, Pope wrote that the "trading post" at Adobe Walls "sold arms and ammunition, whisky, not only to the hunters, but to the Indians, and the very arms and ammunition thus furnished to the Indians they afterward used to attack and break up this trading post, which was put there to enable the white hunters to invade unlawfully the Indian reservation."⁴⁵

Pope's military superior, Sheridan, who hoped for the southern herd's destruction in order to terminate the tribal treaty rights to hunt, was angry with Pope for refusing to protect the hidemen. Sheridan excoriated Pope in a letter to Sherman and defended his position in his annual report to the secretary of war. Sheridan's report affirmed that the hide hunters were not guilty of provoking an Indian war because "the business in which these parties were engaged made war an exceedingly undesirable thing for them." The hard cases headquartered at Adobe Walls probably survived the Indian attack because they were warned of it by an army scout who carried the news

⁴³ Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs*, 980-88; Sir W. F. Butler, *Sir William Butler: An Autobiography* (London, 1911), 97.

⁴⁴ J. Wright Mooar, "The First Buffalo Hunting in the Panhandle," *West Texas Historical Association Year Book* (1930): 109-10.

⁴⁵ Congress, House, "Report of Bvt. Maj. Gen. John Pope," 43d Cong., 2d sess., 1874-1875, Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2, p. 30.



A buffalo hunting camp in Texas. Courtesy of the Archives Division, Texas State Library.



Buffalo hunters camp, Texas Panhandle, 1874. Courtesy of the Archives Division, Texas State Library.

from Camp Supply with the protection of a military escort. Having driven off the attacking Indian warriors at Adobe Walls, the buffalo runners were escorted safely back to Dodge City by three companies of cavalry from Fort Dodge.⁴⁶

Despite the danger of Indians, however, the hide hunters returned to Texas to continue their bloody work. In response, conservation-minded men in the state legislature introduced a buffalo protection bill in 1875. The prospect of saving the herds alarmed Sheridan who, it is said, appeared before a joint session of the Texas Senate and House in that year. The general supposedly told the legislators—no official record of this meeting has been found—that they were making a sentimental mistake in attempting to protect the buffalo. In his published reminiscences, the aging buffalo killer John R. Cook recalled Sheridan's testimony:

He told them that instead of stopping the hunters they ought to give them a hearty, unanimous vote of thanks, and appropriate a sufficient sum of money to strike and present to each one a medal of bronze, with a dead buffalo on one side and a discouraged Indian on the other. He said, 'These men have done in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary; and it is a well-known fact that any army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; but, for the sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.'⁴⁷

Cook, himself a buffalo runner, may appear to some to be a biased witness, for he regarded his occupation as a patriotic service and proudly cited Sheridan's words as proof that the army, the cutting edge of civilization, heartily approved the work of the hide hunters. Nevertheless, Cook's account is credible. Sheridan, as will be seen, soon opposed efforts to protect the northern herd. Moreover, Grant himself no longer wished to preserve the herds. In 1874, he pocket-vetoed a bill to protect the buffalo that had passed both houses of the Congress. In essence, the bill made it unlawful for any non-Indian to kill a female buffalo or to kill a greater number of males than were needed for food. A fine of \$100 for each animal unlawfully killed would have been imposed. There were insufficient votes to override Grant's veto, and the bill died a quiet death.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27; J. Wright Moorar, "Buffalo Days: The Real Story of the 'Cracked Ridgepole' at Adobe Walls," *Holland's, The Magazine of the South* (March 1933): 8; Charles Goodnight et al., *Pioneer Days in the Southwest, From 1850 to 1879* (Guthrie, OK, 1909), 64.

⁴⁷ John R. Cook, *The Border and the Buffalo: An Untold Story of the Southwest Plains* (1907; reprint, Chicago, 1938), 163-64.

⁴⁸ Hornaday, *Extirpation of the American Bison*, 514-16. When visited by a complaining Sioux delegation in 1871, Grant's secretary of the interior, Columbus Delano, refused to take action to keep white hunters out of Sioux country. In his annual report for 1873, Delano summed up the administration's position on the matter of preserving the buffalo: "I would not seriously regret the total disappearance of the buffalo from our western prairies, in its effect upon the

President Grant was also unwilling to use the army to keep the hide hunters out of Indian country, even though he had promised a delegation of Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes that he would do so. On 30 September 1874, the tribes' agent, John D. Miles, wrote to the commissioner of Indian Affairs, summing up the grievances of his charges:

The Cheyennes and Arapahoes were assured by the President on their recent visit to Washington that improper white men and Buffalo Hunters should be kept from their country at all hazards, and they very naturally expected that some effort would be made to keep that promise, but they looked in vain—and the Cheyennes being the most restless of the two tribes grew tired and endeavored to avenge their own wrongs.⁴⁹

The evidence that best substantiates Cook's contention is the army's moral and material support for the hide hunters and its own systematic efforts to obliterate the southern herd.⁵⁰ As for the army's moral support for the runners, Frank H. Mayer a leathery old hide man who bought his first Sharps buffalo rifle from Lieutenant Colonel Dodge, recalled a conversation that he had with "a high ranking officer" on the buffalo range in the 1870s. The officer said:

Mayer, there's no two ways about it, either the buffalo or the Indian must go. Only when the Indian becomes absolutely dependent on us for his every need, will we be able to handle him. He's too independent with the buffalo. But if we kill the buffalo we conquer the Indian. It seems a more humane thing to kill the buffalo than the Indian, so the buffalo must go.⁵¹

Cook himself maintained that during his hide-hunting years in Texas from 1875 to 1878 "the destruction of the buffalo . . . had the approval of all frontier army officers." Cook noted that on one occasion Captain Nicholas Nolan of the Tenth Cavalry had commended a group of runners by saying: "Congress ought to pass a memorial in your behalf, for you are making future Indian wars an impossibility by the destruction of the buffaloes."⁵²

Indians. I would regard it rather as a means of hastening their sense of dependence upon the soil." *Congressional Record*, 43d Cong., 1st sess., 1874, pt. 3, 2105.

⁴⁹ Agent John D. Miles to Edward Smith, commissioner of Indian Affairs, 30 September 1874, *Upper Arkansas Agency Records, Letters Received 1871-74*, Microcopy 234, Roll 882, M1209, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵⁰ "Billy" Dixon, a runner who had fought at the Battle of Adobe Walls, contended (in *Life and Adventures*, 56) that in order "to subdue and conquer the Plains tribes for all time," General Sheridan had "urged and practiced" the extermination of the buffalo.

⁵¹ Frank H. Mayer and Charles B. Roth, *The Buffalo Harvest* (Denver, 1958), 29-30.

⁵² Cook, *Border and the Buffalo*, 444, 368.

The army's approval was surely welcomed; but far more useful to the hide hunters was the free ammunition that they could obtain at any military post on the southern plains. In Mayer's words:

army officers in charge of plains operations encouraged the slaughter of buffalo in every possible way. Part of this encouragement was of a practical nature that we runners appreciated. It consisted of ammunition, free ammunition, all you could use, all you wanted, more than you needed. All you had to do to get it was apply at any frontier army post and say you were short of ammunition, and plenty would be given you. I received thousands of rounds in this way. It was in .45-.70 caliber, but we broke it up, remelted the lead, and some runners used government powder.⁵³

Beyond the free ammunition provided, the frontier military posts also furnished protection, supplies, equipment, markets, storage, and shipping facilities to the hide hunters. A case in point is Fort Griffin, the rough-hewn settlement that had grown up in the shadow of the protective military post by the same name, founded in 1867. By 1874, the town had become the principal shipping and supply depot for the buffalo runners in West Texas. William C. Lobenstein, a dealer in hides, pelts, and leather with headquarters at Fort Leavenworth, had established in the town a branch office for buying hides. Mountains of them were stockpiled there for transshipment by wagon to Fort Worth, where the Texas and Pacific Railroad had completed a line in 1876. The Texan J. N. Atkinson claimed that in the 1870s there was in the town of Fort Griffin a stack of buffalo hides as long as a city block and "as high as a man could reach throwing hides out of a wagon, and so wide that it must have been made by driving wagons down both sides of the pile in stacking."⁵⁴ The army's protection, cooperative encouragement, and assistance enabled the hide hunters to fan out onto the buffalo ranges not only from Fort Griffin, but also from such posts as Forts Dodge, Concho, and Richardson.

Under Sheridan's leadership the army not only abetted the hide hunters, it also annihilated buffalo in the southern herd or drove the animals away from Indian hunting grounds. Sheridan himself orchestrated a campaign consisting of five separate military columns that converged on the hostile bands in the Texas Panhandle. The ensuing Red River War of 1874-75 ended with the final conquest of the southern plains tribes. Among the thousands of bluecoats engaged were eight troops of the Sixth Cavalry and four companies of the Fifth Infantry under the overall command of the doggedly ambitious Colonel Nelson A. Miles.

⁵³ Mayer and Roth, *Buffalo Harvest*, 29.

⁵⁴ Mary Jourdan Atkinson, *The Texas Indians* (San Antonio, TX, 1935), 331. The Texas cattleman, James H. Cook recounted in his *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier as Cowboy, Hunter, Guide, Scout, and Ranchman* (New Haven, 1923), 84, that he had seen at Fort Griffin in the 1870s, "a pile of buffalo hides near the sutler's store at least fifty yards square and ten feet high."

On 5 August 1874, Miles's command, together with a company of buffalo hunters, left Fort Dodge headed for the Washita River where the hostiles were reported to be gathering in force. Four months later, nearly out of supplies and immobilized in a camp on the Washita where he awaited grain from Camp Supply, Miles outlined his future plans to Lieutenant Colonel George A. Forsyth. Once resupplied, Miles proposed "to send a small but very effective force to head of Red River, thence to move East clearing out those breaks and canons, and leaving them as barren as possible." After the "clearing out" was accomplished Miles intended "to move all the force then remaining in the field towards Supply or Sill as circumstances may warrant, and I would leave as few Indians or Buffalo behind, and as little for them to subsist on as possible."⁵⁵ Years later, in his *Personal Recollections*, Miles exhibited no regrets about the virtual extermination of the plains buffalo. In describing the manner in which the hide hunters eradicated the herds, Miles justified the result:

This might seem like cruelty and wasteful extravagance but the buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress, and the decree had gone forth that they must both give way. . . . The same territory which a quarter of a century ago was supporting those vast herds of wild game, is now covered with domestic animals which afford the food supply for hundreds of millions of people in civilized countries.⁵⁶

Was Miles's allusion to "the decree" that "had gone forth" actually a reference to a military order that had been issued for the destruction of the buffalo? Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian School, testified that such an order was actually given. Pratt, who was a Tenth Cavalry lieutenant in charge of Indian scouts during the Red River War, recalled from his retirement that "the general destruction of the buffalo was ordered as a military measure because it was plain that the Indians could not be controlled on their reservations as long as their greatest resource, the buffalo, were so plentiful."⁵⁷

No such written order has ever been found in the extant military records, but this is not surprising. It is probable that Sheridan deliberately refused to issue the relevant written orders knowing that orally conveyed orders could be more easily concealed or more plausibly denied. His Civil War experience had not only taught him the value of destroying the enemy's resources, it had also taught him that the perpetrators of such warfare were despised and vilified by its victims and their supporters. Why subject himself and the army to avoidable Indian enmity and humanitarian disapproval? And why encourage an impression that the army was not competent enough to subdue

⁵⁵ Alice Blackwood Baldwin, *Memoirs of the Late Frank D. Baldwin* (Los Angeles, 1929), 77; Nelson A. Miles Papers, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

⁵⁶ General Nelson A. Miles, *Personal Recollections and Observations* (1896; reprint, New York, 1969), 135.

⁵⁷ Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom*, 63.

mere "savages" without having to resort to destroying their food supply? From Sheridan's perspective, the army had to promote the destruction of the buffalo in the interest of civilization, but, in its own interests, it must do so covertly.

Sheridan was perfectly capable of conducting covert military operations while refusing to issue explicit written orders. Indeed, in 1873, he secretly ordered Colonel Mackenzie and his Fourth Cavalry to invade Mexico to crush the Kickapoos, Lipans, and Mescalero Apaches who were engaged in raids into the United States from their northern Mexican sanctuaries. Sheridan issued secret spoken orders to Mackenzie in meetings held at Fort Clark and elsewhere. No record of these meetings was kept. The only source of information about what transpired is Lieutenant Robert G. Carter, Mackenzie's adjutant. Carter did not attend the meetings, but he learned from Mackenzie what had occurred. As Carter told it, Sheridan ordered Mackenzie to invade Mexico and to conduct against the hated Indian raiders a "campaign of annihilation, obliteration, and complete destruction." When Mackenzie requested more explicit orders Sheridan angrily pounded the table and, according to Carter, raged: "Damn the orders! Damn the authority! You are to go ahead on your own plan of action, and your authority and backing shall be General Grant and myself. With us behind you in whatever you do to clean up this situation, you can rest assured of the fullest support. You must assume the risk. We will assume the final responsibility should any result."⁵⁸

Three years later, in the face of renewed Indian raids from Mexico, the new commander of the Department of Texas, General Edward O. C. Ord, sent American troops across the border in another secret operation. In justifying this invasion of Mexico, Ord assured Sherman that "Sheridan gave me quasi permission when I was in Washington, by saying why the devil don't you do it."⁵⁹

With the many-sided assistance of the frontier army, the buffalo runners managed to destroy virtually the entire southern herd by 1879. As the animals dwindled in numbers in the late 1870s, a few hide hunters relocated to the northern range, then limited to western Dakota, northern Wyoming, and eastern Montana. After the surrender of the great Oglala Lakota war leader Crazy Horse and his followers to the army in the spring of 1877, the northern plains became appreciably safer for white interlopers. But army commanders on the northern plains remained worried about Sitting Bull's band, which had defied the policy of keeping the reservation Indians confined to their assigned lands by fleeing to Canada. Unable to persuade Sitting Bull to return to the United States and unwilling to antagonize the Canadian authorities by pursuing him into Canada, the army's high command resolved to starve him into surrender by depriving him of his commissary on the hoof—the buffalo.

With the notable exception of Mari Sandoz, American historians of the trans-Mississippi frontiers have been reluctant to accept that hard reality. Canadian

⁵⁸ Carter, *On the Border With Mackenzie*, 422-23.

⁵⁹ Edward O. C. Ord to Sherman, 27 June 1876, *The Papers of William T. Sherman*, microfilm reel no. 23, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

historians, however, have long argued that the United States government deliberately promoted the destruction of the northern plains herd to force Sitting Bull to sue for peace. In 1912, Canadian historian, Archibald Oswald MacRae, relying upon information from Colonel Lawrence W. Herchmer, former commissioner of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, concluded that the official policy of the United States government had been to destroy the northern herd, "in order to force the Sioux and kindred warlike tribes to sue for peace and mercy because of starvation." MacRae's countryman and fellow historian, Norman Fergus Black, writing one year later, concurred. Black cited testimony that he had obtained from "well informed buffalo traders," such as Jean Louis Le Garé, the man who convinced Sitting Bull to return to the United States.⁶⁰

Yet another Canadian historian of the early twentieth century, C. M. MacInnes, detailed the manner in which the United States army starved Sitting Bull and his band into surrendering. The American army, according to MacInnes, formed a cordon of soldiers, Indian auxiliaries, and Red River "half-breeds" to drive the buffalo southward whenever they moved north toward the border. Sandoz echoed MacInnes and added that it was in the region between the Missouri River and the Yellowstone, shut in by a line of prairie fire and guns, that the last and greatest slaughter of the northern herd took place.⁶¹

The scholar inclined to believe that Sheridan was responsible for the slaughter ought not be deterred by a letter that he wrote on 31 October 1879 to Adjutant General Edward D. Townsend. In that letter, Sheridan did indeed express his belief that the "wholesale slaughter of the buffalo should be stopped." But the killing to which Sheridan objected was taking place, General Alfred Terry had assured him, on the Great Sioux Reservation itself.⁶² Sheridan opposed that destruction because the reservation was off limits to unauthorized whites and, more importantly, because the buffalo there helped to feed and thus pacify hungry Indians, who were inadequately supplied with food by the federal government.

As for the animals outside the reservation, Sheridan hoped to deal with them just as he had dealt with the southern herd. To provide the hide hunters with an easily accessible railroad, Sheridan was determined to push the Northern Pacific tracks westward from Bismarck, Dakota Territory, where they had arrived in the summer of 1873. In promoting the westward extension of the Northern Pacific, Sheridan was acting on Sherman's advice. The latter wrote to Sheridan in 1872, "I think our interest is to favor the undertaking of the Road, as it will help to bring the Indian problem to a final solution." Sheridan zealously assisted the Northern Pacific, for he viewed

⁶⁰ Archibald Oswald MacRae, *History of the Province of Alberta* ([Calgary?], 1912), 1:377; Norman Fergus Black, *History of Saskatchewan and the Old North West* (1913; 2d ed., Regina, Saskatchewan, 1913), 200.

⁶¹ C. M. MacInnes, *In the Shadow of the Rockies* (London, 1930), 145-46; Sandoz, *Buffalo Hunters*, 340.

⁶² Sheridan to Adjutant General E. D. Townsend, 31 October 1879, *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel no. 62.

the railroads as "new factors that cannot be ignored in the settlement of the Indian question."⁶³

With the army's unstinting support, the Northern Pacific reached the Dakota-Montana border, near the center of the buffalo range, in 1880. Glendive, Montana Territory, on the Yellowstone River, promptly became the headquarters for hundreds of buffalo runners who shipped thousands of hides east on both the railroad and on steamboats that carried them down the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers to St. Louis.

By 1881, with the army's help, the Northern Pacific reached Miles City, Montana Territory. This raw frontier settlement, protected by the military post at Fort Keogh, joined Glendive as a headquarters for the hide hunters. Fort Buford, at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri, was another major outfitting center for the buffalo runners. As on the southern plains, the northern hunters relied on military posts to serve as supply-distribution and hide-purchasing centers.

Perhaps the army's logistical support for the hide hunters gave Montana pioneers the impression that the slaying was the federal government's policy. This is what Granville Stuart, a prominent early cattleman in Montana Territory believed. En route from the Porcupine to Miles City in April of 1880, Stuart noted that the bottoms were strewn with buffalo carcasses:

In many places they lie thick on the ground . . . all murdered for their hides which are piled like cord wood all along the way. . . . Such a waste of the finest meat in the world! Probably ten thousand have been killed in this vicinity this winter. Slaughtering the buffalo is a government measure to subjugate the Indians."⁶⁴

Of course, army commanders on the northern plains could encourage the killing of buffalo for seemingly legitimate purposes that obscured their real reasons for wanting the herds obliterated. Food needs enabled them to rationalize exorbitant death-dealing. In 1882, a herd appeared on the northern side of the Yellowstone where a high plateau overlooked Miles City and Fort Keogh in the valley below. Fifth Infantrymen sent from the post killed so many animals that their meat filled a half-dozen four-mule team wagons. General Hugh Scott remembered that soldiers had no trouble keeping a six-mule team wagon carrying fresh buffalo meat into Fort Meade "all the time," early in 1883.⁶⁵

⁶³ Sherman to Sheridan, 7 October 1872, *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel no 17; Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1880* (Washington, DC, 1880), 1:56.

⁶⁴ Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier* (Glendale, CA, 1957), 2:104. The Montana cowpuncher E. C. Abbott, better known as "Teddy Blue," shared Stuart's views on the government's role in the annihilation. As "Blue" put it (in E. C. Abbott ("Teddy Blue") and Helen Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North* (Norman, 1939), 101-2), "all this slaughter was a put-up job on the part of the government to control the Indians by getting rid of their food supply."

⁶⁵ Hornaday, *Extirpation of the American Bison*, 509; Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier*, 124.

The troops also required cold-weather gear to protect them from the sub-zero temperatures of northern plains winters. In response, the Quartermaster Department by the 1880s issued long buffalo overcoats manufactured from the hides of cows killed in the winter months when their coats were in prime condition. General George Crook ordered for his men arctic boots made from buffalo-fur overshoes, wrapped around cork-soled Indian moccasins. Hungry Northern Pacific Railroad construction crews, protected by the army, were fed elephantine amounts of buffalo and other wild game. And the army still provided military escorts for sportsmen bent upon killing "the monarch of the plains." In 1881, Major James Bell and twelve specially picked Seventh Cavalrymen located a huge herd and helped to ensure several successful hunts for George O. Shields's party, visitors to Montana Territory.⁶⁶

In the same year, with the northern herd rapidly declining, Sheridan privately expressed his satisfaction. His note, "respectfully forwarded" to an unknown recipient, probably Sherman, betrays his true feelings:

If I could learn that every Buffalo in the northern herd were killed I would be glad. The destruction of this herd would do more to keep Indians quiet than anything else that could happen, except the death of all the Indians. Since the destruction of the southern herd . . . the Indians in that section have given us no trouble.⁶⁷

Sheridan got his wish. Within two years the northern herd had almost disappeared. General Sherman was no less pleased than Sheridan with the advancement of civilization at the expense of the buffalo. Sherman recalled in his *Memoirs* the Civil War veterans who "flocked to the plains" and helped to win the West from savagery. "This was another potent agency in producing the result we enjoy to-day," wrote Sherman, "in having in so short a time replaced the wild buffaloes by more numerous herds of tame cattle, and by substituting for the useless Indians the intelligent owners of productive farms and cattle-ranches."⁶⁸

In conclusion, then, Generals Sherman and Sheridan, among other high-ranking commanders of the post-Civil War frontier army, applied to the Plains Indians the lessons that they had learned in defeating the Confederate states. The army's high command decided to halt its efforts to destroy the buffalo herds during President Grant's first term. But this decision, dictated by Grant's "Peace Policy," was only a partial and temporary interruption in the general pattern of destruction. Once Sherman, Sheridan, and like-minded commanders became disillusioned with peaceful methods, they resumed their strategy of trying to conquer the plains tribes by destroying their commissary on the hoof.

The destruction of the buffalo proceeded through three phases: the killing of the animals on the central plains in the early 1870s; the slaughter of the herds on the


⁶⁶ Shields, *Hunting in the Great West*, 133-170.

⁶⁷ *Sheridan Papers*, microfilm reel no. 12.

⁶⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2:413-14.

southern plains in the mid and late 1870s; and the near extermination of the great beasts on the northern plains in the early 1880s. Sheridan was the officer most responsible for promoting the annihilation. But because of his tendency, when dealing with contentious or potentially embarrassing matters, to issue oral rather than written commands, document-minded historians have failed to appreciate the army's covert role in the great buffalo slaughter. Undeniably, a few individual officers opposed the destruction, for as historian Sherry C. Smith has shown, "there was no monolithic military mind"; but these dissenters proved unable to influence events.⁶⁹

In the end, the frontier army's well-calculated policy of destroying the buffalo in order to conquer the Plains Indians proved more effective than any other weapon in its arsenal. Too small and too inept to vanquish the plains tribes expeditiously, the army aided and was in turn aided by the "sportsmen" and professional hunters who, along with the army itself, managed to destroy the Indians' staff of life. With the mainstay of their diet gone the Indians had no choice but to accept a servile fate on a reservation where they could subsist on government handouts. From the Indian perspective the buffalo's disappearance was a shattering blow. Crow Chief Plenty Coups described its impact to Frank Linderman: "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere." Sitting Bull summed up the results of the annihilation: "A cold wind blew across the prairie when the last buffalo fell—a death-wind for my people."⁷⁰



⁶⁹ Smith, *View From Officers' Row*, 182.

⁷⁰ Frank B. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows* (Lincoln, 1962), 311; Norman B. Wiltsey, "The Great Buffalo Slaughter," in *The American West*, ed. and comp. Raymond Friday Locke (Los Angeles, 1971), 134.