

3 Sitting Bull and the Sioux Resistance

ROBERT M. UTLEY

In the forty years after the Civil War, American pioneers conquered and exploited an immense inner frontier that lay between California and the Mississippi River. It was an area as diverse as it was expansive, a region of windy prairies, towering mountains, painted deserts, and awesome canyons. Heading east out of California or west from the Mississippi, Americans by the thousands poured into this great heartland, laying out cattle ranches and farms, building towns and mining camps, and creating a variety of local and state governments. People moved to the frontier for various reasons: to start a new life, seek glory and adventure, strike it rich in a single, fabulous windfall, and prevail over the West's challenging environment.

Still, the winning of the West was not all romance. Driven by the aggressive, exploitive imperatives of their culture, American pioneers—especially whites—infiltrated Indian lands and hunting grounds, and conflicts between settlers and Indians broke out all across the frontier line, thus opening a gruesome chapter in the westward movement after the Civil War. The fact was that white-dominated America tended to regard the Indians as savages who deserved violent treatment. If these "ignorant nomads" blocked the advance of Christian civilization across the West, they should be "removed." And so, terrible fights erupted whenever whites and Indians came into contact. Trying to reduce the violence, the government sent out additional federal troops, including several African American regiments; instead of enforcing existing treaties, the soldiers usually defended whites who violated the pacts, which only provoked the Indians all the more.

In 1867, the federal government decided to confine the Indians to small, remote reservations in areas of the West spurned by United States settlers. Herein lies a paradox, for the whites' handling of the Indians in the late 1860s contrasted sharply with the way they treated southern blacks. The Congress that approved the small reservation policy, with its philosophy of strict segregation and inequality for western Indians, was the same Congress that attempted to give African American men in the South political rights equal to those of white men.

*But many Indian bands refused to surrender their ancient hunting grounds, refused to be herded onto reservations and made to "walk the white man's road," and they fought back tenaciously. None did so with more resolve than the warrior elements of the proud, buffalo-hunting Lakota (or Sioux) of the northern Plains, who united behind Sitting Bull and vowed to throw the white invaders out of Lakota country. Sitting Bull, the great holy man and war chief of the Hunkpapa Lakota, is the subject of the selection by Robert M. Utley, a distinguished historian and biographer of the American West. Based on his biography, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and**

Times of Sitting Bull (1993), Utley's essay affords rare insight into Lakota culture and what happened to it when it collided with a rapacious, acquisitive invader whose superior military power, forked tongue, and deadly diseases brought doom to Native Americans everywhere.

As Utley points out, the government's small-reservation policy, which was implemented by treaties in 1868, split the Lakota into two camps. The agency Indians, under the leadership of Red Cloud of the Oglala Sioux, accepted reservation life and tried to adapt to it. The nonreservation Indians, headed by Sitting Bull, elected to fight the United States Army in a desperate attempt to save "the free life of old." Indeed, rising to the unprecedented position of head chief of all the Lakota, Sitting Bull assembled the most formidable Indian force in the West, one that on a hot June day in 1876 massacred George Armstrong Custer and 262 men of the United States Seventh Cavalry in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana. But it was a Pyrrhic victory for the Lakota and their Cheyenne allies: in the fall, the army trapped them and compelled them to surrender. Sitting Bull escaped to Canada, and his followers ended up in out-of-the-way reservations in the Dakota Territory.

The other western tribes met the same fate. Overwhelmed by superior firepower and faced with starvation, because whites were exterminating the buffalo, the Indians' "commissary," the Native Americans had no choice but to abandon their way of life and submit to segregation on small reservations in the Dakotas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. The federal government systematically obliterated Indian culture and tribal organization, placed the Indians on individual plots of land, and ordered them to become farmers and accept the culture of their conquerors. By 1890, thanks to generations of bloodletting and sickness, scarcely 200,000 Indians remained in the United States, compared with the 2 million Indians in North America at the time of the European discovery.

Meanwhile, Sitting Bull himself returned from Canada and surrendered to the military, which placed him on the Standing Rock Reservation as a prisoner of war. Here, as Utley says, the Indian agent—a petty tyrant—attempted to destroy Sitting Bull's reputation among his incarcerated people. Yet the great Lakota war chief and holy man remained indomitable: he accepted schooling for his offspring but rejected all other government efforts to make Indians into "imitation whites."

Defeated and broken in spirit, many reservation Indians turned to religion for comfort in a hostile world. First the Indians of Nevada, then the Lakota and other Plains Indians took up the Ghost Dance, a sacred ritual that reaffirmed tribal unity and prophesied the return of the old days, when the buffalo would be plentiful again and the Indians would be free of the white invaders. Intimidated by such a "frightful conglomeration of rituals and customs," as one white put it, the United States government outlawed the Ghost Dance. But Sitting Bull and his people kept on dancing. Indeed, Sitting Bull became "the high priest of the religion at Standing Rock," which put him on a collision course with the Indian agent and his Lakota police. Utley recounts the violent, ironic climax to Sitting Bull's life and goes on to observe that he lost his struggle with white

Americans, not because of any personal failing but because of "impersonal forces beyond his control or even his understanding." As you study Sitting Bull's life, the evolution of his three distinct personalities, and his tragic end, you might want to consider this question: Which do you think was the better way for the Indians to deal with the white invaders—the appeasement of Red Cloud, or the uncompromising resistance of Sitting Bull?

GLOSSARY

ARROW CREEK, BATTLE OF (August 13, 1872) Here Sitting Bull performed a feat of bravery that awed his followers: he seated himself and calmly smoked his pipe within range of the soldiers' guns.

BLACK HILLS (SOUTH DAKOTA) Sacred Lakota domain called Paha Sapa; gold miners invading the Black Hills helped ignite the Great Sioux War of 1876.

BROTHERTON, MAJOR DAVID H. Accepted Sitting Bull's surrender in 1881.

CRAZY HORSE An Oglala Lakota and the greatest of all the Sioux war chiefs, he also fought to drive the white invaders away and save the old ways.

CROW FOOT Sitting Bull's favorite son, who died with him in the confrontation with Indian police in 1890.

CROWS Plains Indian tribe and traditional enemy of the Lakota.

FORT LARAMIE TREATY (1868) Set aside all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River as the Great Sioux Reservation.

FOUR HORNS Sitting Bull's uncle who was wounded in the Battle of Killdeer Mountain.

GHOST DANCE RELIGION Begun by a Paiute messiah named Wovoca, the Ghost Dance movement swept the Plains Indians incarcerated on reservations; it prophesied the end of the white invaders and the return of the buffalo and all previous generations of Indians.

HUNKPAPA Sitting Bull's division of the Lakota; the other six divisions were Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Two Kettle, Brule, Oglala, and Blackfoot Sioux (not to be confused with the Blackfoot tribe that lived and hunted northwest of the Lakota).

KILLDEER MOUNTAIN, BATTLE OF (July 28, 1864) A "calamitous" defeat for the Lakota that pointed up the futility of the Indians' fighting an open battle with well-armed soldiers.

LITTLE BIGHORN, BATTLE OF (June 25, 1876) More than two thousand Sioux warriors "massacred" Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his 265 men in this remote location in southeastern Montana.

LONG KNIVES Indian name for white soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets.

MCLAUGHLIN, JAMES Agent of the Standing Rock Lakota Reservation who tried to shape the Indians into "imitation whites" and to destroy Sitting Bull's reputation.

RED CLOUD Chief of the Oglala Sioux, Red Cloud led Indian resistance to the Bozeman Trail and the three forts that guarded it. The trail ran through Indian country in Montana and Colorado. Red Cloud's raids and the so-called "Fetterman Massacre" forced the United States in 1868 to abandon the trail and the forts and to "regard the Powder River country as 'unceded Indian country.'" As Utley says, Red Cloud had "won his war."

SULLY, GENERAL ALFRED Commanded United States Army forces in the Battle of Killdeer Mountain.

SUN DANCE The central ceremony in the sacred life of the Lakota; in it the dancers engaged in self-sacrifice and self-torture in order to gain the favor of the Great Mysterious and ensure a successful buffalo hunt.

WAKANTANKA Lakota word for the Great Mysterious.

WICHASHA WAKAN Lakota term for a holy man such as Sitting Bull.

Sitting Bull's fighting days ended on July 20, 1881, when he led his little band of faithful headmen into the cramped office of the commanding officer at Fort Buford, Dakota Territory. All were shabbily dressed and gaunt from the hunger of their Canadian exile. Sitting Bull, once the mightiest chief of the Lakota Sioux, wore a threadbare calico shirt and black leggings; a tattered, dirty blanket was loosely draped around his waist. Suffering a severe eye infection, he had tied a kerchief turbanlike around his head and drawn it partly across his eyes. Beneath, his dark seamed face with jutting nose and chin and perpetually downturned mouth registered both resignation and despair.

His men grouped behind him, the Sioux chief sat next to the blue-clad soldier chief. Placing his Winchester rifle beneath the chair, Sitting Bull drew to him his five-year-old son Crow Foot. Major David H. Brotherton opened the council by setting forth the terms on which the surrender would be received. In fact, they were no terms at all, since the U.S. government's adamant insistence on unconditional surrender had put off this day until starvation left no other recourse.

After the officer ceased speaking, Sitting Bull slumped in his chair, silent and glum. Brotherton invited him to speak. He sat motionless for five minutes—as if in a trance, thought one witness. He said a few words to his men, then gestured to Crow Foot, who picked up his father's rifle and handed it to the army officer. Then Sitting Bull spoke in words that the interpreter translated:

I surrender this rifle to you through my young son, whom I now desire to teach in this manner that he has become a friend of the Americans. I wish him to learn the habits of the

"Sitting Bull" by Robert M. Utley, *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, Vol. V, No. 4 (Summer 1993). Reprinted by permission.

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whites and to be educated as their sons are educated. I wish it to be remembered that I was the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle. This boy has given it to you, and he now wants to know how he is going to make a living.

The ceremony at Fort Buford marked the end, at age fifty, of Sitting Bull's career as a warrior, war leader, and tribal war chief, a career that had begun at the age of fourteen, when he counted his first coup on a Crow Indian. He had achieved power and distinction in other fields, too—as a *wichasha wakan*, a holy man; as a band chief; and finally, a post unique in Sioux history, as supreme chief of all the Lakota tribes. His war honors and trophies, however, provided his greatest satisfaction. That he understood the tragic symbolism of giving up his rifle he betrayed in a song composed to connect what had been to what would be: A warrior / I have been / Now / It is all over / A hard time / I have.

What “had been” began in 1831 with Sitting Bull's birth into a distinguished family of the Hunkpapa tribe, one of the seven tribes of Teton or Lakota Sioux. A nomadic people, the Lakotas occupied the high plains between the Missouri River and the Bighorn Mountains while ranging north to the British possessions and south as far as the Platte and Republican rivers. Together, they numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 people. Other Sioux lived to the east—Yanktons and Yanktonais east of the Missouri River, and Dakotas, or Santees, in Minnesota.

At the age of fourteen, his name was not yet Sitting Bull but Jumping Badger, although his deliberate and willful ways had earned him the nickname Hunkesni, or “Slow.” Much against his parents' counsel, Slow insisted on accompanying a war party of ten men striking westward from the Powder River in search of horses and scalps of the enemy Crow tribe. Unproven lads often tagged along on such expeditions as errand boys. They learned the ways of war without actually fighting.

On the third day out, crossing a divide, the party spotted a dozen mounted Crows gathered in confer-

ence beside a creek. Whooping and shouting, the Lakotas raced down the slope in a headlong charge. Startled, the Crows spread out to receive the attack. But one Crow spurred his horse to escape. Slow, mounted on a sturdy gray horse his father had given him, his naked body painted yellow from head to foot and hung with colorful strands of beads, shrieked a war cry and galloped in pursuit. The powerful gray swiftly overtook the quarry. Pulling abreast, Slow smashed his adversary with a tomahawk and knocked him from his mount. Another warrior hurried in to finish the act and count second coup. In fierce fighting, the Sioux killed all but four of the Crows, who fled the field.

In a jubilant ceremony at the home village, Slow donned his first white eagle feather, emblem of a first coup, and entered one of the world's most highly developed warrior societies. His mother presented him with the beaded, feathered lance that became his favorite offensive weapon. His father presented a shield bearing a sacred design that appeared to him in a dream. From his father also came his own name, to replace Slow and resonate in the history of not only the Sioux but their enemies as well: Tatanka-Iyotanka, Sitting Bull.

As Sitting Bull's adolescent years fell behind in the 1840s, he took on his adult build. With a heavy, muscular frame, a big chest, and a large head, he impressed people as short and stocky, although he stood five feet ten inches tall. His dark hair reached to his shoulders, often braided with otter fur on one side, hanging loose on the other. A severe part at the center of the scalp glistened with a heavy streak of crimson paint. A low forehead surmounted piercing eyes, a broad nose, and thin lips. Although dexterous afoot and superbly agile mounted, he was thought by some to be awkward and even clumsy.

In adulthood Sitting Bull developed into the Hunkpapa incarnate, the admired epitome of the four cardinal virtues of the Lakotas: bravery, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom. “There was something in Sitting Bull that everybody liked,” one of

his tribesmen recalled. "Children liked him because he was kind, the women because he was kind to the family and liked to settle family troubles. Men liked him because he was brave. Medicine men liked him because they knew he was a man they could consider a leader."

Sitting Bull evolved three distinct personalities. One was the superlative warrior and huntsman, adept at all the techniques of war and the hunt, boastful of his deeds, laden with honors and ambitious for more, celebrated and rewarded with high rank by his people. Another personality was the holy man, suffused with reverence and mysticism, communing constantly with Wakantanka, the Great Mysterious, dreaming sacred dreams and carrying out the rites and ceremonies they mandated, entreating for the welfare of his people, offering sacrifices ranging from a buffalo carcass to his own flesh. A third was the good tribesman, a man of kindness, generosity, and humility, unostentatious in dress and bearing, composer and singer of songs, a friend of children and old people, peacemaker, sportsman, gentle humorist, wise counselor, and leader. That he excelled in all three realms testified to uncommon merit.

The Lakota culture was hardly a generation old at the time of Sitting Bull's birth. Only around the beginning of the nineteenth century did the Lakotas become fully mounted on horses and begin to acquire guns. Horses and guns enabled them to seize and defend their rich hunting grounds, to follow the great migrating herds of buffalo that shaped their distinctive way of life, and by the middle of the nineteenth century to evolve into the proud and powerful monarchs of the northern Great Plains. Ironically, by furnishing the horses and guns, white people made possible the Lakota way of life; then, in less than a century, they destroyed it.

In the years of Sitting Bull's youth, the Hunkpapas had little conception of the white world. The only whites they knew were traders based at posts along

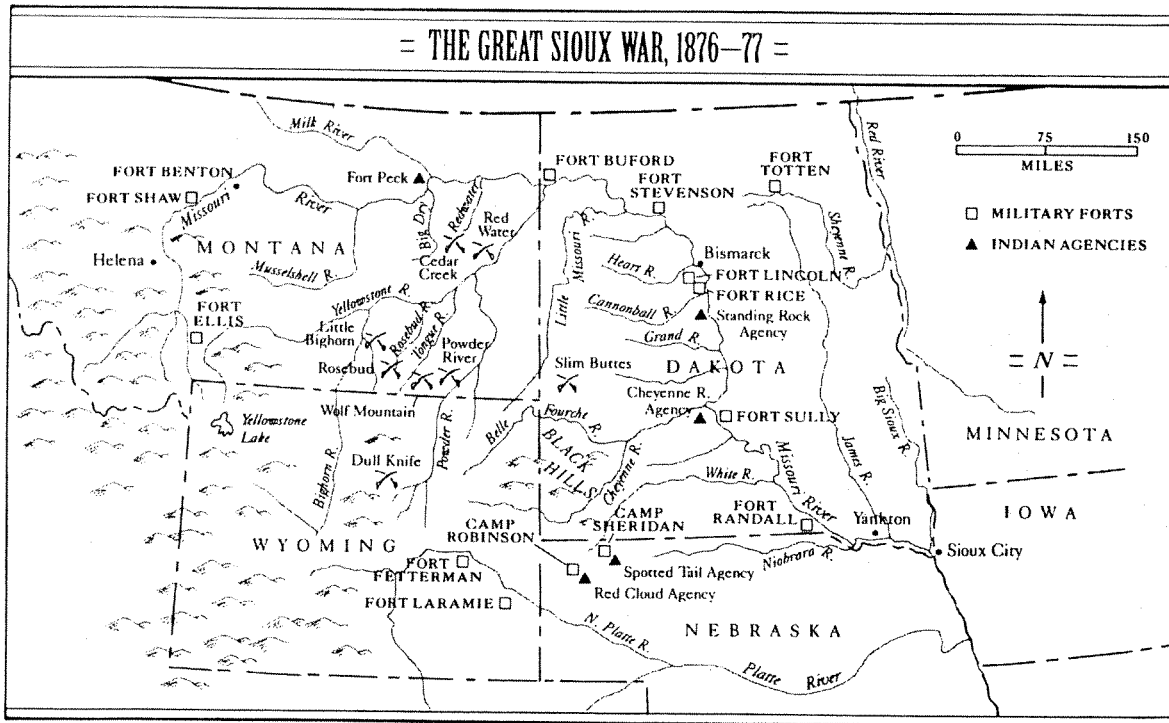
the Missouri River. From them, or other tribes acting as intermediaries, came the horses and guns, along with other useful manufactures. Whites in substantial numbers lived 500 miles to the southeast; the Hunkpapas sensed no threat from them. Their hostility was reserved for enemy tribes such as the Crows, Flatheads, Assiniboines, and Arikaras.

By Sitting Bull's thirtieth birthday, however, the white world had begun to intrude alarmingly on the Hunkpapas. Treaty makers, government agents, and soldiers had begun to appear along the upper Missouri in the 1850s, and by the 1860s the menace had grown distressingly clear. Settlers fingered up the river valleys to the south. Emigrants bound for the gold mines of western Montana killed the buffalo and grazed their livestock on the choice grasses. The voracious boilers of the steamboats consumed the timber stands in the river valleys. The Hunkpapas began to add the whites to their list of enemies.

By this time Sitting Bull had participated in many war expeditions. These were usually limited both in objectives and in scale, though large-scale expeditions and pitched battles sometimes occurred. He had performed many feats of bravery that won the applause of his people and membership in the men's societies that played a major part in Lakota life. He became a war chief of the Hunkpapa tribe. His very name struck terror in the hearts of enemy warriors. Observing this effect, his comrades sometimes disconcerted an opponent by shouting, "Tatanka-Iyotanka tahoksila!"—"We are Sitting Bull's boys!"

Sitting Bull and his "boys" fought for a variety of motives. Where their range overlapped with that of others, they fought for control of hunting grounds. They fought in defense against the aggressions of others; for plunder, chiefly the horses that constituted the prime measure of wealth; for revenge of injuries real and fancied; for glory and the strictly prescribed war honors that determined prestige and leadership.

In any battle, whatever the scale, the Hunkpapas, like all Plains Indians, fought in time-honored



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fashion. Singly and in knots they galloped back and forth, firing arrows or musket balls at the enemy. Sometimes they gathered in bunches for a thrust aimed at overrunning their foes. Each man indulged in a variety of flashy escapades to display bravery; he followed a leader only when it suited his convenience or inclination. In any such encounter, Sitting Bull's role was chiefly, through exhortation and example, to inspire men to exhibit ever greater personal daring and to join with him in whatever tactical move circumstances seemed to dictate. Neither he nor any other chief "commanded," as whites used the term.

Typifying this mode of combat and Sitting Bull's part in it was the Lakotas' most memorable fight with an enemy tribe. This occurred in the winter of

1869-70, and they remembered it as the Thirty-Crows-Killed battle.

Sitting Bull's band wintered that year in Montana, along the Missouri River and Big Dry Creek. In the middle of the winter, amid bitter cold and deep snow, two Hunkpapa boys were returning from a day of hunting when a party of thirty Crows cut their trail in the snow. Except for two men mounted on one pony, the Crows were afoot. The two hurried to overtake the boys and succeeded in killing one. Wounded, the other escaped to carry word to the Hunkpapa village.

At once Sitting Bull organized a revenge expedition of about 100 warriors. Guided by the surviving boy, the men found their enemies posted behind rock breastworks at the head of Big Dry Creek. As dawn

broke, the Hunkpapas attacked. A few on each side had firearms, but most had only bow and arrows. The Hunkpapas fought in the usual fashion, each man for himself, each striving for deeds of bravery and the coups that added to war honors. Although outnumbered more than three to one, the Crows enjoyed the advantages of defense from a fortified position. Steady in their own bravery, they sold their lives dearly. But as the morning hours slipped by, the Hunkpapas gradually took their toll on the Crows.

Like his warriors, Sitting Bull charged as chance presented and retreated when the fire grew too hot. Once he darted to the breastworks and reached across with his bow to count three coups. Finally, as noon approached, he and his comrades surged forward, leaped the walls, and in desperate hand-to-hand fighting killed the last of the Crows. Hunkpapa casualties were much lighter: Thirteen died and seventeen limped off with serious wounds.

This style of combat worked well enough against an enemy practicing the same style, as Crows, Assiniboines, and other Plains tribes did. Pursued in battles with white people, especially white soldiers, it had severe drawbacks.

Sitting Bull's Hunkpapas and other Lakotas of the upper Missouri had their first combat with United States troops in 1863-64. In two summer campaigns, Generals Henry H. Sibley and Alfred Sully led formidable expeditions to the Dakota plains, at first to round up Santee Sioux fugitives from the Minnesota uprising of 1862, then to punish Lakotas who had interfered with the migration to the newly discovered Montana mines.

Almost certainly, Sitting Bull fought in the battles of Dead Buffalo Lake and Stony Lake, July 26 and 28, 1863. He may have been at Whitestone Hill on September 3, 1863. He unquestionably played a leading part in the battles of Killdeer Mountain and the Badlands, July 28 and August 7-9, 1864. In all these fights, the Indians relied on their traditional techniques, and in all they suffered severe to calamitous defeats.

Killdeer Mountain should have shown the Sioux the perils of trying to take on the soldiers in open battle. As many as 1,400 lodges representing four Lakota tribes traced the southern edge of a low range of rugged, wooded mountains falling away on the north to the Little Missouri badlands. A series of buttes and ridges, separated by deep gorges, rose stairlike to the dominating mountain mass. In this natural fortress, emboldened by a force exceeding 2,000 warriors, the Sioux felt confident of routing the approaching army of General Sully.

With 2,200 cavalry and artillery, Sully advanced across the parched plains from the south. Judging the terrain too broken for mounted action, he dismounted and pushed forward on a broad front of skirmishers. Horseholders, then wagons and artillery, brought up the rear.

The Indians came out to meet him. Resplendent in paint and war costume, they sat their ponies in little clusters on every hill and ridge facing the blue lines and curling around their flanks. When within range, the two forces opened fire.

For five miles the fighting roiled northward toward the village at the foot of Killdeer Mountain, the Lakotas attacking in typical fashion. Despite their numbers, however, they could not slow the steady advance of the soldiers.

Mounted on a fast sorrel and armed with musket and bow and arrows, Sitting Bull fought with his usual bravery. As the soldiers launched a final assault aimed at the village itself, he saw a bullet slam into the back of his revered uncle, Chief Four Horns. "I am shot," yelled Four Horns, clinging grimly to his mount.

Sitting Bull dashed to the rescue, seized the horse's bridle, and, as his young nephew White Bull steadied the injured man, led the way into a sheltering thicket. There Sitting Bull gave Four Horns water to drink, applied medicine to the wound, and bandaged it. The bullet remained inside, Four Horns said; he could feel it and it hurt. (Later he recovered and explained that the bullet had dropped into his stomach and never bothered him again.)

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While Sitting Bull doctored his uncle, the soldiers won final victory, scattering men, women, and children into the mountains and seizing the village. The next day they methodically destroyed everything that could benefit the Indians. Lodges, meat, robes, utensils—all went up in flames. The troops counted more than a hundred Sioux bodies left on the battlefield; how many dead and wounded were carried away is not known. By contrast, Sully reported casualties of two killed and ten wounded.

The Sibley-Sully campaigns, especially Killdeer Mountain, gave Sitting Bull his first taste of battle with the Long Knives. They did not, he discovered, fight like Indians. Instead they fought in organized formations, obedient to commands of their officers, and brought overwhelming firepower to bear. Their rifled muskets claimed greater range, accuracy, and hitting force than the feeble smoothbore trade muskets of the Indians. The soldiers' cannon in particular were frightening and deadly.

The lessons were clear: Acquire better firearms, and avoid open battle with the Long Knives, relying instead on the hit-and-run tactics at which the Sioux excelled. Sitting Bull's record suggests that he fully grasped the first lesson, only partly the second. Not surprisingly in view of the dictates of culture, neither he nor any other chief ever thought to fight in disciplined formations maneuvered by a hierarchy of command.

The Battle of Killdeer Mountain heralded two decades of conflict with the Long Knives. As whites edged onto the northern Great Plains, soldiers came to protect them. Their "war houses" on the Missouri River, along with the steamboats that carried people and merchandise to the Montana mines, infuriated the Sioux. No chief took a more uncomplicated or inflexible view of this invasion than Sitting Bull. Except for traders, he held, the whites must all get out of Lakota domain and quit traveling through it. If they would not go peaceably, they would be driven out.

It now fell to Sitting Bull to embody the spirit of Lakota resistance to the white threat. Throughout

the late 1860s he led the Hunkpapa offensive against the whites. In this aggressive war, he wielded his favorite attack weapon, the lance, which symbolized his role as the offensive arm of the Hunkpapa tribe.

Principal objectives of the offensive were the military posts of the upper Missouri: Forts Rice, Stevenson, Totten, and Buford. Permanent abodes of the detested Long Knives, the forts stood for the resolve of the whites to possess Lakota territory. The campaign took the form mainly of raids near the forts. Logging details, stock herders, mail riders, and travelers bound for the mines periodically ran afoul of nearby war parties.

Sioux usually regarded direct assaults as risks not worth the prospective gain, but twice they launched such attacks, in each instance with Sitting Bull in the lead. The first occurred at Fort Rice on July 28, 1865. In four hours of desperate fighting, the garrison of "Galvanized Yankees"—Confederate prisoners enlisted for Indian duty—held the defenses and drove off the assailants with well-directed rifle and artillery fire. The second clash occurred on December 24, 1866, when Sitting Bull and his warriors seized the outbuildings of Fort Buford and battled their foes until routed by artillery and charging infantry.

Sitting Bull's offensive on the upper Missouri paralleled an even more determined one to the west, in the Powder River country, over the same issues. Spearheaded by Red Cloud's Oglala tribe, Lakotas fought to close the Bozeman Trail to the Montana mines and get rid of the three forts the army had built to guard travelers. Unlike Sitting Bull, Red Cloud won his war. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the United States yielded the three forts and agreed to regard the Powder River country as "unceded Indian country." There the Sioux could live so long as the buffalo sustained their way of life.

The Treaty of 1868 profoundly shaped the destiny of both Red Cloud and Sitting Bull. Besides the unceded territory, it defined a Great Sioux Reservation—all the present state of South Dakota west of

the Missouri—and bound all Sioux to settle there eventually. Within a few years Red Cloud and many of his followers had settled there, launching him on a career as mediator between his people and government authorities.

For his part, Sitting Bull scorned the treaty, the reservation, and everything else associated with the whites (except trade goods, especially arms and ammunition). He had not signed this or any other treaty, and never would. He intended to live as always, following the buffalo, raiding Crows and Assiniboines, and defending his homeland. “You are fools,” he had lectured some agency Indians, “to make yourselves slaves to a piece of fat bacon, some hard-tack, and a little sugar and coffee.”

In Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, the Treaty of 1868 personalized two powerful magnetic poles of leadership. Red Cloud emerged as the principal chief of the agency Lakotas, those who chose to live within the Great Sioux Reservation and accept government dole. Sitting Bull emerged as the principal chief of the nonreservation Lakotas, who ranged the plains country in the free life of old. Indeed, he had his followers proclaim him supreme chief of all the Lakotas. Such a post had never existed, but his force of personality gave it substance.

The Sitting Bull bands, the “northern Indians,” the “hunting bands,” or simply the “hostiles,” in the white lexicon, numbered about 450 lodges, about 4,000 people including about 800 fighting men. Ranging the valleys of the Yellowstone River and its southern tributaries, many bands came together in the summer for the annual sun dance and perhaps a communal buffalo hunt and a big war expedition against an enemy tribe. In the winter they scattered to remote valleys to sit out the cold, hungry months. In the warm season their numbers swelled with reservation kin out for a summer’s lark. In the frigid season their numbers dwindled as rations at the agencies beckoned.

In the aftermath of the Treaty of 1868, with the Lakotas increasingly divided into reservation and non-



Sitting Bull in 1885, four years after his surrender. The great Lakota was both a holy man and a war chief who embodied the four cardinal virtues of his people: bravery, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom. The crucifix he wears in this photograph was supposedly presented to him by a Jesuit missionary in 1868. (Library of Congress)

reservation factions, Sitting Bull called off his offensive against the Missouri River forts. From now on he would fight the white people only in defense of his homeland—the Powder and Yellowstone country that roughly coincided with the unceded territory of the treaty. Sitting Bull’s last raid on Fort Buford occurred in September 1870. Now the shield instead of the lance symbolized his role among Lakotas.

Staunchly backing Sitting Bull in his new defense posture was the greatest of all Lakota war leaders—

Crazy Horse of the Oglalas. He shared Sitting Bull's aversion to the reservation and the ways of the white people. To the hunting bands, he was a chief second in stature only to Sitting Bull.

Of more ambiguous conviction was another war chief, Gall of the Hunkpapas. Close to Sitting Bull since childhood, Gall tended to take counsel in expediency. Sometimes he even slipped into the Hunkpapa agency at Grand River to sample government rations.

The defensive policy expressed itself most forcibly in the opposition of the hunting bands to the Northern Pacific Railroad. In the summers of 1872 and 1873, they fought army units escorting company surveyors marking out a rail route in the Yellowstone Valley. This was the heart of Lakota hunting grounds and the more valuable to them because only recently wrested from the Crows at great cost in blood.

At the Battle of Arrow Creek on August 13, 1872, Sitting Bull performed one of his most memorable feats of bravery. Urged on by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, Lakota and Cheyenne warriors struck engineers and their cavalry guardians in the bend of a dry streambed in the upper Yellowstone Valley.

As the sun rose on the battlefield, all eyes turned in wonder to Sitting Bull, who staged a spectacle of bravery so imaginative that it surpassed all others that day. Getting his pipe and tobacco pouch from his horse, he walked from the bluffs out into the open valley to within enemy range. Seating himself on the ground, he shouted, "Who other Indians wish to smoke with me come." As Sitting Bull calmly and with studied deliberation filled the bowl with tobacco, his nephew White Bull, Gets-the-Best-Of, and two Cheyennes ventured into the open and seated themselves beside the chief.

The "smoking party," as White Bull termed it, was a terrifying experience. After kindling the tobacco, Sitting Bull puffed placidly, then passed the pipe to his companions. With pounding hearts, each puffed vigorously and passed it quickly down the

line. Throughout he said nothing, just looked around and smoked quietly as bullets kicked up dirt and sang through the air. When all the tobacco had burned, Sitting Bull picked up a stick, thoroughly cleaned the bowl, and stowed the pipe in its pouch. He rose and slowly walked back to the admiring knots of fellow tribesmen. The other smokers ran back.

This ingenious exhibition, so captivating to people who placed great emphasis on daring, added to Sitting Bull's long list of valorous deeds. It reinforced his reputation for bravery and answered those who, in the worsening factionalism of the early 1870s, mocked his pretensions. It was, White Bull remembered, "the bravest deed possible."

After 1873 the Northern Pacific faded from the Lakotas' list of grievances. In four inconclusive battles and a few skirmishes, they had expressed their violent opposition, but they had not stopped the railroad. The Panic of 1873 did that, and the railhead rested at Bismarck, on the Missouri, until after other events had neutralized the Sioux.

Although furious, the Sitting Bull bands offered no violent opposition to a far more blatant assault on their territory. Blazing the "Thieves' Road" into the Black Hills, the Custer Expedition of 1874 saw only a few Lakotas and fought none. But the discovery of gold set off a rush that doomed the Indians' possession of the hills.

It also confronted the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant with a hard dilemma. The Black Hills lay within the Great Sioux Reservation, inarguably guaranteed the Indians by the Treaty of 1868. Yet miners flocked to the hills, and the electorate demanded that the government legalize the invasion. In part because of intimidation by the Sitting Bull bands, however, the reservation chiefs refused to sell. Not until the independent bands yielded to government control, federal officials concluded, could they buy the Black Hills.

A rationale was necessary to force the hunting bands onto the Great Sioux Reservation. They had

not interfered with the gold rush, and although they had not signed the Treaty of 1868, it sanctioned their residence in the unceded territory. The defensive policy of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, furthermore, left only the thinnest pretext for military force. But their young men had raided Crows, Assiniboines, and Arikaras, as they had always done. They had also terrorized whites on the upper Yellowstone, more in fear of what might happen than of what had happened. In these treaty violations by people who had never subscribed to a treaty, the government found its excuse to order the Sitting Bull bands to the reservation or face military action. Such were the origins of the Great Sioux War of 1876.

Even when confronted with the government's ultimatum in their winter villages, Sitting Bull and his fellow chiefs did not understand that a war was brewing. They were minding their own business and had no plans to fight the white soldiers. Then, on March 17, 1876, cavalry stormed through a village on Powder River, killing two and wounding several others; now the hunting bands knew the Long Knives had declared war.

Sitting Bull drew the winter camps together for self-defense. As spring gave way to summer, reservation Indians began to make their way westward, to join in the defense. By late June his village had swollen from 3,000 to 7,000 people, from 800 to 1,800 warriors.

Now forty-five, Sitting Bull no longer took the lead on the battlefield. He was the "old man chief" and holy man whose judgment and counsel guided the policies and decisions of the allied tribes. Crazy Horse, Gall, and other fighters set the example in combat.

At a sun dance early in June, in supplication to Wakantanka, Sitting Bull gave 100 pieces of flesh from his arms. He also fasted and danced while gazing at the sun. Just below the sun he saw soldiers and horses bearing down on an Indian village. They rode

upside down, their feet to the sky, their heads to the earth with hats falling off. A voice proclaimed: "These soldiers do not possess ears. They are to die." The vision and prophecy thrilled his people.

Soldiers were coming—three armies from three directions. They were led by General Alfred H. Terry, Colonel John Gibbon, and "Three Stars," George Crook. With Terry rode "Long Hair," George Armstrong Custer. On June 17, 1876, Sitting Bull's warriors confronted General Crook on the upper reaches of Rosebud Creek. Shoshone and Crow auxiliaries broke the Sioux charge and saved Crook's force from being overrun. Sitting Bull, his arms cut and useless from the sun-dance sacrifice, ranged the lines, exhorting the warriors. Crook limped back to his supply base.

The Battle of the Rosebud did not fulfill Sitting Bull's prophecy. Crook's soldiers had not fallen into the Sioux camp and died. But a week later, Long Hair Custer and his cavalymen fell into the Sioux camp. It sprawled sleepily in the Little Bighorn Valley on that hot Sunday of June 25, 1876. As depicted in the sun-dance vision, many soldiers died.

A stunned white world gave Sitting Bull all the credit. The "Napoleon of the Sioux," the *New York Herald* labeled him two weeks later, and in subsequent issues self-appointed experts explained how such a catastrophe had happened. One of them declared that the famed Jesuit missionary Father Pierre-Jean De Smet had taught Sitting Bull to speak and read French; the chief had then studied French histories of the Napoleonic Wars and "modeled his generalship after the little Corsican corporal." An army officer, who should have known better, wrote, "The tactics of Sitting Bull seem to have been those pursued by the great Napoleon in his famous campaign of 1814, and were the same practiced by General Lee at Richmond in 1864-65." Soon the nation would be told that Sitting Bull, in a youthful guise, had attended West Point.

In such fantasies a dazed public and a mortified army sought explanations for the disaster that had

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befallen a supposedly elite regiment and its valiant commander. They wanted to believe that Custer's 7th Cavalry had been overwhelmed by superior numbers commanded by a military genius, the Napoleon of the Sioux.

The truth, of course, was that, as at Killdeer Mountain and all other encounters with Plains tribes, there had been no Indian general at the Little Bighorn. As one of his followers pointed out, "The chief might give orders to fight but he does not direct how to proceed."

The Indians did not win the battle because of generalship or even leadership. They won because they outnumbered the enemy three to one, because they were united, confident, and angry, and above all because the threat to their women and children fired every man with determination to save his family. The Indians won, too, because their foes let themselves be beaten in fragments. Both in the valley and on the battle ridge where the "last stand" occurred, command and control collapsed, discipline evaporated, and men panicked, which left the initiative to the Indians.

If whites ascribed Napoleonic genius to Sitting Bull in 1876, in less than a decade they had produced another interpretation. On the reservation, abetted by Indians currying favor with the Great Father, white officials now said Sitting Bull had not participated in the battle at all; he had remained in his teepee making medicine, or fled to the hills in terror, even abandoning his family, or skulked somewhere else safely out of danger.

In truth, at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull was a chief several times over whose bravery no one questioned. He was far more valuable as a counselor than as a fighting man. Leave that to the young warriors striving for glory. Chiefs were expected to fight only to protect noncombatants, and that is what he did when soldiers led by Major Marcus Reno threatened the women and children at the upper end of the village.

After that threat receded, he could have withdrawn with honor. Instead he continued to fire at

the soldiers and shout encouragement to the warriors, hovering on the edge of the fighting until everyone left to confront Custer downstream. Then he posted himself at the village's northern end, where many women and children had collected. More than enough men swarmed on the battle ridge to wipe out Long Hair, which they did in less than an hour.

Sitting Bull's significance at the Little Bighorn lay not in flaunting bravery, or directing the movements of warriors, or even inspiring them to fight. It lay instead in leadership so wise and powerful that it drew together and held together a muscular coalition of tribes, one so infused with his defiant cast of mind that it could rout Three Stars Crook at the Rosebud and rub out Long Hair Custer at the Little Bighorn. Never had the Sioux triumphed so spectacularly—and they never would again. For that triumph, more than any other chief they could thank Sitting Bull.

But the triumph contained the seeds of defeat. A stunned nation lashed back, and the Sioux country swarmed with regiments of "Custer avengers." By the spring of 1877, most of the hunting bands had surrendered and gone to the reservation, setting the stage for the government to seize the Black Hills and legalize the invasion.

Sitting Bull could not stomach such humiliation. With a die-hard following he crossed the "medicine road" into the land of the Grandmother. There he got along famously with the queen's redcoats, the North-West Mounted Police, and formed his first close ties to white men. But the buffalo were disappearing in Canada as they were in the United States, and "Bear Coat"—General Nelson A. Miles—watched the boundary like a hawk. After four years of hardship, starvation overcame humiliation, and young Crow Foot handed his father's rifle to Major Brotherton.

The final decade was one of despair. After nearly two years as a prisoner of war, Sitting Bull went to the reservation. At Standing Rock Agency, Agent James McLaughlin's goal was to transform his charges into imitation whites. He sought to make

them into tillers of the soil embracing Christianity, Americanism, and the customs and values of the white people. Sitting Bull refused to be made over. He accepted what he thought would be beneficial, such as schooling for his children and grandchildren, and rejected the rest. Finding him unpliant, McLaughlin launched the campaign of ridicule and derision that included the imputation of cowardice at the Little Bighorn.

Hunger, disease, a decade of cultural breakdown, and another land grab made the Sioux reservations fertile ground for the Ghost Dance religion that took root in 1890. It promised a new world, without whites, peopled by all the generations of Indians that had gone before, and stocked with an abundance of buffalo and other game. Whether Sitting Bull truly believed, he functioned as the high priest of the religion at Standing Rock. The government decided to remove him to a distant military post.

Irony and tragedy stalked Sitting Bull's final days. Not the Long Knives of old, but *ceska maza*, "metal breasts" (for their police badges) of his own tribe, closed in on their former leader. At dawn on December 15, 1890, a platoon of Indian policemen forced their way into his cabin on Grand River and placed him under arrest. Excited Ghost Dancers crowded around the cabin, and his own son Crow Foot, now fourteen, taunted him for giving up. The volatile confrontation blew up in a paroxysm of gunfire and hand-to-hand fighting. Sitting Bull went down, shot at close range in the chest and the back of the head by *ceska maza*. Crow Foot died too, beaten and shot by enraged policemen.

The Hunkpapas, even those who had forsaken the old ways, knew McLaughlin's portrait of Sitting Bull to be grotesquely flawed. They well remembered he had been a magnificent warrior, an inspiring war chief, a statesman and political leader of vast wisdom, a holy man of marvelous power, and to his last day a leader of compelling force.

The world remembers Sitting Bull not for what he achieved in his own culture but for his battle against

the westward movement of the American people. It is this battle that gives him nearly universal name recognition beyond his own culture. In this struggle, as both lance and shield, his inflexibility served him well. He acted on faultless reasoning: The land of the Lakotas belonged to the Lakotas, and no whites had any right to be there. He fought to keep them out, and when that failed, he fought to defend his people and his territory from invasion. He lost not because of failings of leadership or, given his cultural outlook, failings of judgment, but because of impersonal forces beyond his control or even his understanding.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 How did Lakota culture change during the nineteenth century? What effect did white settlers have on that culture throughout the century?
- 2 What was the traditional Lakota manner of fighting, and what values did it highlight? Why did this style of warfare not work against white troops, and what lessons does Robert Utley think Sitting Bull should have learned from this?
- 3 Describe Sitting Bull and his three "personalities." Discuss the stance he took toward whites and compare it with that taken by Red Cloud. Which one of them do you think was right and why?
- 4 What were the principal interests of Americans in Sioux territory, and how did Americans generally react to Sitting Bull's effort at resistance? How did the United States government deal with the Lakota Sioux? How and on what pretext did they finally break the resistance of Sitting Bull's people?
- 5 What is the significance of the Ghost Dance religion and of Sitting Bull's tragic death? How do you feel about Utley's conclusion that Sitting Bull lost, not because of any personal or cultural failings but because of forces beyond his control?