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"The Contribution of the Frontier to the American Military Tradition "

Robert M. Utley, 1976

It is all a memory now, but what a memory, to cherish! . . . A more thankless task, a more perilous service, a more exacting test of leadership, morale and discipline no army in Christendom has ever been called upon to undertake than that which for eighty years was the lot of the little fighting force of regulars who cleared the way across the continent for the emigrant and settler.¹

So declared Capt. Charles King in an address to Indian War veterans after the disappearance of the frontier had indeed made it all a memory. In dozens of novels penned after the effects of Apache arrows and bullets placed him on the retired list in 1879, King verbalized and reinforced the frontier army's view of itself. That the images he evoked fall somewhat short of historical truth does not exclude them from a prominent place in the American military tradition.

Captain King's heroic picture contrasts with images evoked by bumper stickers proclaiming that Custer died for our sins and by motion pictures such as "Little Big Man" and "Soldier Blue" depicting the frontier troopers as brutes rampaging about the West gleefully slaughtering peaceable Indians. These images have been intensified and popularized in recent years by a national guilt complex that would expiate sin by bending history to modern social purposes, but they are rooted in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century humanitarians. "I only know the names of three savages upon the plains," declared the old abolitionist Wendell Phillips in 1870, "-Colonel Baker, General Custer, and at the head of all, General Sheridan." Baker's assault on a Piegan village in 1870 inspired a verse that could well have been written in the councils of the American Indian Movement a century later:

Women and babes shrieking awoke
To perish 'mid the battle smoke,
Murdered, or turned out there to die
Beneath the stern, gray, wintry sky.²

No more than King's images do these represent historical truth, and no less are they too a part of the American military tradition.

As these contrasting images suggest, I see the American military tradition as in part a record- a record as we perceive it today, not necessarily as it was in fact- of those people and events of the past that we have singled out to provide us with inspiration, edification, guidance, and even, as I have intimated, self-reproach. Besides this record, I take the American military tradition to be the accumulated body of military usage, belief, custom, and practice that has descended to us from the past. It is also policy, doctrine, thought, and institutions as they have evolved by selection, rejection, and modification through past generations to today. Let us examine how the frontier, which formed so long and prominent a part of the nation's military history, may have contributed-or indeed may have failed to contribute-to some of these aspects of the American military tradition.

Today's selective record of our frontier military experience may well be the frontier's most enduring contribution. From this heritage we have drawn a congeries of vignettes that loom conspicuously in the national memory and thus in the national military tradition. "Mad Anthony" Wayne's Legion sweeps with fixed bayonets through the forest debris of Fallen Timbers, routing the Indian defenders and planting the roots of the fledgling Regular Army. Andrew Jackson's infantry

storms the fortifications at Rorseshoe Bend, slaughtering more than five hundred Red Sticks and crushing a Creek uprising that threatens the Southwest in the War of 1812. Canby dies by assassination during a peace conference in California's lava beds, the only Regular Army general to lose his life in Indian warfare. The golden-haired Custer falls with every man of his immediate command in the best-known and most controversial of all frontier encounters. To Nelson A. Miles, Chief Joseph utters the moving words: "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever." This part of our tradition is one that arouses pride, or at least the thrill of adventure. Its symbols are battle and campaign streamers gracing the Army's colors, the military art of Frederic Remington, Charles Schreyvogel, and Rufus Zogbaum, and the motion picture depiction of the frontier army.

Especially the motion pictures. It is difficult to exaggerate their influence. John Ford was the master. In the climactic scene of "Fort Apache," for example, cavalry officer John Wayne philosophizes on the courage, stamina, skill, and jocular nature of the regular army troopers who opened the American West. A cavalry column with banners flying marches in silhouette against a desert sunrise as swelling music proclaims the majesty of their part in the epic of America. With such stirring scenes Ford shaped a whole generation's conception of the frontier army. In a television tribute, John Wayne conceded that Ford was not above perpetuating legends, consoling himself that if this was not exactly the way it happened, it was the way it ought to have happened.

Darker images form part of the picture too. Gen. Winfield Scott's troops uproot Cherokees and herd them, suffering and dying, over the "Trail of Tears" to new homes in the West. "Gen. Jimmy" Carleton's volunteers conduct Navajos on an eastward "Long March" replete with similar tragic scenes to new homes in the sterile bottoms of the Pecos River. Chivington's "hundred-dazers" slaughter Black Kettle's Cheyennes at Sand Creek. Exploding artillery shells shatter Big Foot's Sioux at Wounded Knee. Such scenes, likewise reinforced and distorted by motion pictures and television, take their place beside the stirring and the heroic in the mosaic of the national military tradition.

What we choose to remember and the way we choose to remember it may unduly flatter or unfairly condemn our military forebears, may indeed be more legend than history. Legends thus form a conspicuous part of our military tradition and are often far more influential in shaping our attitudes and beliefs than the complex, contradictory, and ambiguous truth. Our reading of truth, or at least the meaning of truth, changes from generation to generation. What is uplifting to one may be shameful to the next. We select and portray our heroes and villains to meet the needs of the present, just as we formulate doctrine, policy, practice, and other aspects of military tradition to meet the conditions of the present. The US Army's frontier heritage, replete with stereotypes and legends as well as with genuine historical substance, has furnished a galaxy of heroes and villains.

In the people and events of the military frontier we have found a major source of inspiration, guidance, pride, institutional continuity, and, not least, self-deprecation. But several centuries of Indian warfare should have contributed more to the national military tradition than a kaleidoscope of images.

The Regular Army was almost wholly a creature of the frontier. Frontier needs prompted creation of the Regular Army. Except for two foreign wars and one civil war, frontier needs fixed the principal mission and employment of the Regular Army for a century. Frontier needs dictated the periodic enlargements of the Regular Army in the nineteenth century.³ Frontier needs underlay Secretary of War John C. Calhoun's "expansible army" plan of 1820, which, though never adopted, contained assumptions that shaped US military policy until 1917. For a century the Regulars worked the frontier West. They explored and mapped it. They laid out roads and telegraph lines and aided significantly in the advance of the railroads. They campaigned against Indians. They guarded travel routes and protected settlers. By offering security or the appearance of it, together with a market for labor and produce, they encouraged further settlement. As enlistments expired, some stayed to help people the frontier themselves.

Citizen soldiers also contributed, though less significantly. From King Philip's War to the Ghost Dance, colonial and state militia, territorial and national volunteers, rangers, "minute

companies," spontaneously formed home guards, and other less admirable aggregations of fighting men supplemented or altogether supplanted the Regulars on the frontier. Often, indeed the two worked at dramatic cross-purposes.

The contribution of the frontier to American military history was of paramount significance, but its contribution to the American military tradition was not of comparable significance. Inviting particular attention is the influence of the special conditions and requirements of the frontier on military organization, composition, strategy, and especially doctrine. A century of Indian warfare, extending a record of such conflict reaching well back into colonial times, should have taught us much about dealing with people who did not fight in conventional ways, and our military tradition might reasonably be expected to reflect the lessons thus learned. Some were not without relevance in Vietnam.

In examining the role of the frontier in nineteenth-century military history, however, we encounter a paradox. It is that the Army's frontier employment unfitted it for orthodox war at the same time that its preoccupation with orthodox war unfitted it for its frontier mission. In this paradox we find the theories of Emory Upton and Samuel P. Huntington contradicting what seem to be fairly evident realities.

Emory Upton first stated the proposition that the Army had never been ready for a real war because it had been maintained chiefly to fight Indians.⁵ More recently, Samuel P. Huntington enlarged on Upton's thesis.⁶ As summed up by Huntington, "the requirements of the frontier shaped the strategy and structure of the Army." Organization, composition, command and staff, tactics, weapons, and the system of military education were all, in the Upton-Huntington view, decisively influenced if not altogether dictated by frontier mission.

If so, all these features of military policy proved singularly unresponsive to frontier conditions. A commanding general was supposedly needed for the operational direction of an active force on the frontier; yet he commanded scarcely more than his personal aides. A staff was needed not to plan for the next war but to support the ones currently underway on the frontier; yet the staff system contained flaws that severely impeded its logistical function. The organization of companies and regiments seems wholly conventional in nineteenth-century terms; it is difficult to see how they would have been differently organized for conventional war-and in fact they were not basically changed when conventional war came. The cavalry arm traced its beginnings to frontier needs, but the Mexican War or Civil War would surely have prompted the formation of mounted units anyway. The "rough and unsavory" rank and file that Huntington sees as well fitted for Indian fighting and road building were not well fitted for much of any duty, and the record of federalized volunteer units in the West during the Civil War plainly established the superiority of this class of troops over the typical peacetime regular. Nor, with the possible exception of the revolving pistol, a response to the frontier only insofar as mounted troops found a repeating handgun of great utility, can the evolution of military weaponry be linked to frontier needs.

So far as a system of border outposts constituted strategy, it was of course shaped by the frontier. But these forts represented less a deliberate plan than erratic responses to the demands of pioneer communities for security and local markets. The forts, incidentally, encouraged settlers to move beyond the range of military protection, stirred up the Indians, and led to still more forts, many beyond effective logistical support. Secretary of War Peter B. Porter lamented this trend toward overextension as early as the 1820s, but it continued for the balance of the century.⁷

On the operational level, strategy and tactics are clearly not a product of frontier conditions. Most army officers recognized their foe as a master of guerrilla warfare. Their writings abound in admiring descriptions of his cunning, stealth, horsemanship, agility and endurance, skill with weapons, mobility, and exploitation of the natural habitat for military advantage. Yet the Army as an institution never acted on this recognition. No military school or training program, no tactics manual, and very little professional literature provided guidance on how to fight or treat with Indians, although it should

be noted in minor qualification that Dennis Hart Mahan apparently included in one of his courses at West Point a brief discussion of Indian-fighting tactics.⁸

Lacking a formal body of doctrine for unconventional war, the Army waged conventional war against the Indians. Heavy columns of infantry and cavalry, locked to slow-moving supply trains, crawled about the vast western distances in search of Indians who could scatter and vanish almost instantly. The conventional tactics of the Scott, Casey, and Upton manuals sometimes worked, by routing an adversary that had foolishly decided to stand and fight on the white man's terms, by smashing a village whose inhabitants had grown careless, or by wearing out a quarry with persistent campaigning that made surrender preferable to constant fatigue and insecurity. But most such offensives merely broke down the grain-fed cavalry horses and ended with the troops devoting as much effort to keeping themselves supplied as to chasing Indians. The campaign of 1876 following the Custer disaster is a classic example.

The fact is, military leaders looked upon Indian warfare as a fleeting bother. Today's conflict or tomorrow's would be the last, and to develop a special system for it seemed hardly worthwhile. Lt. Henry W. Halleck implied as much in his *Elements of Military Art and Science*, published in 1846, and the thought lay at the heart of Emory Upton's attempted redefinition of the Army's role in the late 1870s.⁹ In 1876 Gen. Winfield S. Hancock informed a congressional committee that the Army's Indian mission merited no consideration at all in determining its proper strength, organization, and composition.¹⁰ In part the generals were motivated by a desire to place the Army on a more enduring basis than afforded by Indian warfare. But in part, too, they were genuinely concerned about national defense. Therefore, although the staff was not organized to plan for conventional war, or any other kind for that matter, the generals were preoccupied with it, and the army they fashioned was designed for the next conventional war rather than the present unconventional war.

However orthodox the conduct of Indian wars, the frontier not only failed as a training ground for orthodox wars, it positively unfitted the Army for orthodox wars, as became painfully evident in 1812, 1846, 1861, and 1898. Scattered across the continent in little border forts, units rarely operated or assembled for practice and instruction in more than battalion strength. The company was the basic unit, and it defined the social and professional horizons of most line officers. Growing old in grade, with energies and ambitions dulled by boredom and isolation, the officer corps could well subscribe to Gen. Richard S. Ewell's observation that on the frontier an officer "learned all there was to know about commanding forty dragoons, and forgot everything else."¹¹

That the Army as an institution never elaborated a doctrine of Indian warfare does not mean that it contained no officers capable of breaking free of conventional thought. The most original thinker was Gen. George Crook, who advocated reliance on mule trains as the means of achieving mobility and who saw the conquest of the Indian as dependent upon pitting Indian against Indian. Army organization provided for Indian scouts, but Crook's concept went considerably beyond their use as guides and trailers. "To polish a diamond there is nothing like its own dust," he explained to a reporter in 1886:

It is the same with these fellows. Nothing breaks them up like turning their own people against them. They don't fear the white soldiers, whom they easily surpass in the peculiar style of warfare which they force upon us, but put upon their trail an enemy of their own blood, an enemy as tireless, as foxy, and as stealthy and familiar with the country as they themselves, and it breaks them all up. It is not merely a question of catching them better with Indians, but of a broader and more enduring aim- their disintegration.¹²

Had the nation's leaders understood the lessons of General Crook's experience, they would have recognized that the frontier army was a conventional military force trying to control, by conventional

military methods, a people that did not behave like conventional enemies and, indeed, quite often were not enemies at all. They would have recognized that the situation usually did not call for warfare, merely for policing; that is, offending individuals needed to be separated from the innocent and punished. They would have recognized that the conventional force was unable to do this and that as a result punishment often fell, when it fell at all, on guilty and innocent alike.

Had the nation's leaders acted on such understandings, the Army might have played a more significant role in the westward movement- and one less vulnerable to criticism. An Indian auxiliary force might have been developed that could differentiate between guilty and innocent and, using the Indian's own fighting style, contend with the guilty. Indian units were indeed developed but never on a scale and with a continuity to permit the full effect to be demonstrated. Such an Indian force would have differed from the reservation police, which in fact did remarkably well considering their limitations.¹³ It would have been larger, better equipped, and less influenced by the vagaries of the patronage politics that afflicted the Indian Bureau. Above all, it would have been led by a cadre of carefully chosen officers imbued with a sense of mission and experienced in Indian relations- the kind of officers artist Frederic Remington said were not so much "Indian fighters" as "Indian thinkers."¹⁴ How different might have been the history of the westward movement had such a force been created and employed in place of the regular army line. How vastly more substantial might have been the contribution of the frontier to our traditions of unconventional warfare.

By contrast, a major aspect of twentieth-century practice owes a large debt to the frontier. Total war-warring on whole enemy populations-finds ample precedent in the frontier experience. Russell Weigley has pointed out how different the colonial Indian wars were from the formal and not very destructive warfare of the European pattern. In King Philip's War of 1675- 76, for example, the Indians almost wiped out the New England settlements, and the colonists in response all but wiped out the Indians. "The logic of a contest for survival was always implicit in the Indian wars," Weigley writes, "as it never was in the eighteenth century wars wherein European powers competed for possession of fortresses and countries, but always shared an awareness of their common participation in one civilization, Voltaire's 'Republic of Europe.'"¹⁵

Examples of total war may be found through subsequent centuries of Indian conflict, notably in the Seminole Wars, but it remained for Generals Sherman and Sheridan to sanctify it as deliberate doctrine. With the march across Georgia and the wasting of the Shenandoah Valley as models, they set forth in the two decades after the Civil War to find the enemy in his winter camps, kill or drive him from his lodges, destroy his ponies, food, and shelter, and hound him mercilessly across a frigid landscape until he gave up. If women and children fell victim to such methods, it was regrettable but justified because it resolved the issue quickly and decisively and thus more humanely. Although prosecuted along conventional lines and thus usually an exercise in logistical futility, this approach yielded an occasional triumph such as the Washita and Dull Knife fights that saved it from serious challenge. Scarcely a direct inspiration for the leveling of whole cities in World War II and Vietnam, frontier precedents of total war may nevertheless be viewed as part of the historical foundation on which this feature of our military tradition rests.¹⁶

Another area that might be usefully probed is the relationship of the frontier to the militia tradition, whose modern expression, after generations of modification, is the mass citizen army. Though not exclusively a product of the frontier, the militia owed a great debt to the recurring Indian hostilities that brought pioneers together for common defense, and it figured prominently enough in the American Revolution for Walter Millis to see it as the principal factor in the "democratization" of war that prompted the collapse of the set-piece warfare of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ So firmly implanted was the militia tradition in the thinking of the Revolutionary generation, together with abhorrence of standing armies, that the architects of the nation conceived it as the foundation of the military system, the chief reliance for national defense as well as frontier employment. Frontier experience demonstrated how wrong they were. The Indian rout of Harmer and St. Clair so dramatically exposed

the inadequacies of the militia as to give birth to the Regular Army, a contribution of the militia to US military history of no small significance, however negative. The organized militia fell apart after 1820, as foreign threats receded, but the militia tradition, nourished in part by the Indian frontier, evolved through various mutations into the twentieth century.

A clear and undeniable contribution of the frontier to the national military tradition is its large role in the rise of professionalism in the Army. Albert Gallatin wrote in 1802: "The distribution of our little army to distant garrisons where hardly any other inhabitant is to be found is the most eligible arrangement of that perhaps necessary evil that can be contrived. But I never want to see the face of one in our cities and intermixed with the people."¹⁸ And rarely for a century, except in the Mexican and Civil Wars, were the soldiers intermixed with the people. Physically, socially, and at last in attitudes, interests, and spirit, the regulars on the frontier remained isolated from the rest of the population. This separation, so costly in terms of public and governmental support, had one enduring benefit. Turning inward, the Army laid the groundwork for a professionalism that was to prove indispensable in the great world wars of the twentieth century. The postgraduate military school system, original thought about the nature and theory of warfare, and professional associations and publications find their origins in this time of rejection of the soldiers by their countrymen.¹⁹

A final feature of our military tradition with strong frontier roots is the prominent role of minorities. The Regular Army's black regiments served on the frontier for three decades following their organization in 1866 and wrote some stirring chapters of achievement. They saw harder service than the white regiments and, because they afforded continuous and honorable employment in a time when blacks found few other opportunities, boasted lower desertion rates and higher reenlistment rates. Immigrants, too, found a congenial home in the Army, as well as a means of learning the English language and reaching beyond the teeming port cities of the East where so many countrymen suffered in poverty and despair. And not to be overlooked are the Indians themselves, who loyally served the white troops as scouts, auxiliaries, and finally, for a brief time in the 1890s, in units integral to the regimental organization.

Today the American military tradition must be responsive to the imperatives of nuclear warfare, and nuclear warfare discloses few parallels with the small-unit Indian combats of forest, plains, and desert. But the tradition must also be responsive to the "limited wars" that the nuclear specter has spawned, and these do disclose parallels with frontier warfare. It is a measure of the failure of the Indian-fighting generations to understand their task that today's doctrine does not reflect the lessons of that experience. And yet, as we have seen, the American military tradition owes a debt of noteworthy magnitude to the frontier experience. As Captain King observed, it is all a memory now, but a memory to cherish.

1. Quoted in Robert G. Carter, *On the Border with Mackenzie* (1935; reprint, New York, 1961), pp.46-47. For a sketch of King see Don Russell's introduction to *King's Campaigning with Crook* (Western Frontier Library ed., Norman, OK, 1964), pp. vii-xxii. See also Russell's "Captain Charles King, Chronicler of the Frontier," *Westerners Brand Book* (Chicago), 9 (March 1952), 1-3, 7-8, which lists all 69 of King's books. 2. Quoted in Robert Winston Mardock, *The Reformers and the American Indian* (Columbia, MO, 1971), p.69. 3. The 1st and 2nd Dragoons in 1832 and 1836, the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen in 1846, the 1st and 2nd Cavalry and 9th and 10th Infantry in 1855. The Army Act of 1866 expanded the Regular Army to meet both frontier and Reconstruction duty, but the subsequent reduction of 1869, as Reconstruction needs diminished, left a net gain of four cavalry regiments (7th to 10th) and six infantry regiments (20th to 25th) that may be attributed to frontier needs. (All mounted regiments were restyled cavalry in 1861 and a 6th Cavalry was added that was a response to Civil War needs.) 4. Walter Millis, *Arms and Men: A Study in American Military History* (Mentor ed., New York, 1956), p.73. Calhoun's plan was an attempt to reconcile the differing

needs of war and peace. The frontier, of course, made a peacetime army necessary. See also Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York and London, 1962), chap. 3. 5. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Upton and the Army* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1964), p.106. 6. Samuel P. Huntington, "Equilibrium and Disequilibrium in American Military Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 76 (December 1961), p.490. 7. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York, 1973), p.69. 8. Had Emory Upton responded to Gen. Sherman's belief that the British experience in India held lessons for the US military frontier, Upton's *The Armies of Asia and Europe* (New York, 1878) might have ventured into the doctrine of unconventional war. In fact, Upton did see some parallels between India and the US frontier. He admired the organization, discipline, and record of native troops led by British officers. He likened the native peoples with whom the British dealt to the American Indians in their disposition to fight one another more than their colonial rulers, and he attributed British success to a policy of mingling in their quarrels and playing off one group against another. He declared that the British Indian army was worthy of US imitation. But except for rotation of officers between staff and line, scarcely a reform of special frontier application, he failed to spell out particulars. pp.75-80.) Continuing to Europe, Upton forgot about India in his enchantment with the Prussian war machine, and he finally concluded. p.97) that to the armies of Europe the United States must look for its models. See also in this connection Weigley, *Towards an American Army*, pp.105-06. Capt. Arthur L. Wagner's *The Service of Security and Information*, first published in 1893, contained a short chapter on Indian scouting, but it seems almost an afterthought to the substance of the book. Mahan's West Point lecture on Indian warfare is noted in William B. Skelton, "Army Officers' Attitudes Toward Indians, 1830-1860," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 67 (1976), 114, 121, citing Thomas E. Oriess, "Dennis Hatt Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism," PhD dissertation (Duke University, 1968), pp.306-07. 9. Weigley, *American Way of War*; pp.84-85. Ambrose, *Upton and the Army*, pp.106-07. 10. House Misc Docs., 45th Cong., 2nd sess., No.56, p.5. 11. Quoted in Huntington, "Equilibrium and Disequilibrium," p.499. 12. Charles F. Lummis, *General Crook and the Apache Wars* (Flagstaff, AZ, 1966), p.17. This is a series of articles correspondent Lummis wrote for the Los Angeles Times during the Geronimo campaign of 1886. 13. See William T. Hagan, *Indian Police and Judges* (New Haven, CN, 1966). 14. "How an Apache War Was Won," in Harold McCracken, ed., *Frederic Remington's Own West* (New York, 1961), pp. 49. 15. *American Way of War*, p.19. 16. The role of Sherman and Sheridan is discussed in my *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York, 1973), pp.144-46. 17. *Arms and Men*, pp.19-20,34. 18. Quoted in Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1809-1829* (New York, 1959), p.214. 19. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil- Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), Chap. 9. Uteley; *Frontier Regulars*, Chap. 4.

Mr. Robert M. Uteley has been the Assistant Director of the National Park Service for Park Historic Preservation since 1973. He received his M.A. from Indiana University in 1952. After army service, part of which he spent as Historian, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense, Mr. Uteley served with the National Park Service as Regional Historian, Southwest Region, from 1957 to 1964; Chief Historian, Washington, from 1964 to 1972; and Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, from 1972 to 1973. He is one of the founders of the Western History Association and served as its President from 1967 to 1968. His works include *Custer and the Great Controversy* (1962); *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963); *Frontiersmen in Blue: The US. Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (1967); and *Frontier Regulars: The US. Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (1973).

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