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The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

RICHARD WHITE

THE mounted warrior of the Great Plains has proved to be the most enduring stereotype of the American Indian, but like most stereotypes this one conceals more than it reveals. Both popularizers and scholars have been fascinated with the individual warrior to the neglect of plains warfare itself. Harry Turney-High, in his classic *Primitive Warfare*, provided the most cogent justification of this neglect. The plains tribes, he contended, were so loosely organized that they remained below the "military horizon"; there really was no warfare on the plains, only battles that were little more than "a mildly dangerous game" fought for largely individual reasons. In much of the literature, intertribal warfare has remained just this: an individual enterprise fought for individualistic reasons—glory, revenge, prestige, and booty. Robert Lowie's statement on warfare, in what is still the standard work on the Plains Indians, can be taken as typical of much anthropological thought: "The objective was never to acquire new lands. Revenge, horse lifting, and lust for glory were the chief motives. . . ."¹

There is, however, a second group of anthropologists, W. W. Newcomb, Oscar Lewis, Frank Secoy, and more recently Symmes Oliver, who have found this explanation of intertribal warfare unconvincing. These scholars, making much more thorough use of historical sources than is common among anthropologists, have examined warfare in light of economic and technological change. They have presented intertribal warfare as dynamic, changing over time; wars

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¹ W. W. Newcomb, Jr., "A Re-examination of the Causes of Plains Warfare," *American Anthropologist*, 52 (July–Sept. 1950), 317–30; Harry Holbert Turney-High, *Primitive Warfare: Its Practice and Concepts* (Columbus, 1971), 104, 134, 147, 169–70; Robert Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (New York, 1963), 114.

were not interminable contests with traditional enemies, but real struggles in which defeat was often catastrophic. Tribes fought largely for the potential economic and social benefits to be derived from furs, slaves, better hunting grounds, and horses. According to these scholars, plains tribes went to war because their survival as a people depended on securing and defending essential resources.²

Historians have by and large neglected this social and economic interpretation of plains warfare and have been content to borrow uncritically from the individualistic school. Western historians usually present intertribal warfare as a chaotic series of raids and counter-raids; an almost irrelevant prelude to the real story: Indian resistance to white invasion. This exaggerated focus on the heroic resistance of certain plains tribes to white incursions has recently prompted John Ewers, an ethnologist, to stress that Indians on the plains had fought each other long before whites came and that intertribal warfare remained very significant into the late nineteenth century.³

The neglect by historians of intertribal warfare and the reasons behind it has fundamentally distorted the historical position of the Plains Indians. As Ewers has noted, the heroic resistance approach to plains history reduces these tribes who did not offer organized armed resistance to the white American invaders, and who indeed often aided them against other tribes, to the position of either foolish dupes of the whites or of traitors to their race. Why tribes such as the Pawnee, Mandan, Hidatsa, Oto, Missouri, Crow, and Omaha never took up arms against white Americans has never been subject to much historical scrutiny. The failure of Indians to unite has been much easier to deplore than to examine.⁴

The history of the northern and central American Great Plains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is far more complicated than the tragic retreat of the Indians in the face of an inexorable white advance. From the perspective of most northern and central plains tribes the crucial invasion of the plains during this period was not necessarily that of the whites at all. These tribes had few illusions about American

² Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade* (New York, 1942), 53-59; Frank Raymond Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains (17th Century through Early 19th Century)* (New York, 1953); Symmes C. Oliver, *Ecology and Cultural Continuity as Contributing Factors in the Social Organization of the Plains Indians* (Berkeley, 1962), 13, 52, 59.

³ John C. Ewers, "Intertribal Warfare As the Precursor of Indian-White Warfare on the Northern Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly*, VI (Oct. 1975), 397-410.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 409-10.

whites and the danger they presented, but the Sioux remained their most feared enemy.

The Teton and Yanktonai Sioux appeared on the edges of the Great Plains early in the eighteenth century. Although unmounted, they were already culturally differentiated from their woodland brothers, the Santee Sioux. The western Sioux were never united under any central government and never developed any concerted policy of conquest. By the mid-nineteenth century the Plains Sioux comprised three broad divisions, the Tetons, Yanktons, and Yanktonais, with the Tetons subdivided into seven component tribes—the Oglala, Brulé, Hunkpapa, Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Two Kettles, and Sihaspas, the last five tribes having evolved from an earlier Sioux group—the Saones. Although linked by common language, culture, interest, and intermarriage, these tribes operated independently. At no time did all the western Sioux tribes unite against any enemy, but alliances of several tribes against a common foe were not unusual. Only rarely did any Teton tribe join an alien tribe in an attack on another group of Sioux.⁵

Between approximately 1685 and 1876 the western Sioux conquered and controlled an area from the Minnesota River in Minnesota, west to the head of the Yellowstone, and south from the Yellowstone to the drainage of the upper Republican River. This advance westward took place in three identifiable stages: initially a movement during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries onto the prairies east of the Missouri, then a conquest of the middle Missouri River region during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, finally, a sweep west and south from the Missouri during the early and mid-nineteenth century. Each of these stages possessed its own impetus and rationale. Taken together they comprised a sustained movement by the Sioux that resulted in the dispossession or subjugation of numerous tribes and made the Sioux a major Indian power on the Great Plains during the nineteenth century.

The Teton tribes who first appeared on the prairies of Minnesota in the eighteenth century were well-armed and formidable. They had acquired guns from the French, ending the Cree-Assiniboine monopoly of firearms that had enabled those tribes to push the Tetons and Yanktonais south from the headwaters of the Mississippi. To the east of

⁵ John C. Ewers, *Teton Dakota, Ethnology and History* (Berkeley, 1937), 63–64; Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*, 11. These divisions of the Tetons will be called tribes instead of bands since they were subdivided into smaller units to which the term band is more applicable.

the Tetons, the Ojibwas were growing in power, but the brunt of their attacks would be borne by the Santee Sioux who acted as a buffer against powerful eastern tribes. Thus, neither the Ojibwas nor the Crees drove the Sioux out onto the prairies. Instead, the potential profits of the region's abundant beaver and the ready food supply provided by the buffalo herds lured them into the open lands.⁶

Initially the profits of the beaver trade exerted a more powerful attraction than the subsistence gained from buffalo hunting. The fur trade brought to the Sioux European goods and the guns that not only enabled them to repulse the Crees and their Assiniboiné allies, but also to dispossess the tribes who held the western hunting and trapping grounds they desired. During the late seventeenth and early and mid-eighteenth centuries, the Tetons and Yanktonais pushed the Omahas, Otos, Cheyennes, Missouris, and Iowas to the south and west and occupied their lands.⁷

The western Sioux became the dominant trappers and traders of the prairies. Until the early years of the nineteenth century the Tetons, Yanktonais, and, later, the Yanktons, regularly gathered at the great trade fairs held with the Santee. First at the Blue Earth River and later at the Yanktonai villages on the Cheyenne and James Rivers, the western tribes traded their own catch of furs, plus those acquired from tribes further west, for European goods that the Santees had obtained. As late as 1796 Jean Baptiste Truteau described the Sioux as primarily trappers and traders who also hunted buffalo:

The Sioux tribes are those who hunt most for the beaver and other good peltries of the Upper Missouri. They scour all the rivers and streams without fearing anyone. They carry away every springtime . . . a great number of them, which they exchange for merchandise with the other Sioux situated on the St. Peter's [Minnesota] and Des Moines Rivers. . . .⁸

⁶ Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 42, 66–67; Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., *Journal and Letters of Pierre Gaultier De Varennes De La Verendrye and His Sons* (Toronto, 1927), 135–39, 210–12, 262, 380. James Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory and the John K. Bear Winter Count," *Plains Anthropologist, Memoirs* 11, 21 (Aug. 1976), 21. For a differing view see George Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk* (Norman, 1937), 3–8.

⁷ Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 75; Mildred Mott Wedel, "LeSueur and the Dakota Sioux," *Aspects of Upper Great Lake Anthropology: Papers in Honor of Lloyd A. Wilford* (St. Paul, 1974), 165–67.

⁸ Abraham Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri* (2 vols., St. Louis, 1952), II, 382; George Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brulé Sioux* (Norman, 1961), 14–15; Annie Heloise Abel, ed., *Tableau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri* (Norman, 1939), 120–23; Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents* (Urbana, 1962), 536; Victor Collot, *A Journey in North America* (Florence, 1924), I, 294; Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory," 6–7. "Trade fair" is a white term; to the Sioux these gatherings took place for religious and social reasons as well as economic.

The Sioux pushed westward, however, involving them in a cultural and economic dilemma to which they responded unevenly. The fur trade provided them with guns and trade goods, but they depended on buffalo hunting for their food supply and most of their other necessities. According to the winter counts, pictographic records kept by the Sioux, western Dakotas were trading for horses by 1707 and had almost certainly acquired some animals even earlier. But, surprisingly, the Sioux assimilation of the horse into existing cultural patterns occurred only gradually. The winter counts do not record a mounted war party until 1757–1758, and it was unsuccessful. But with the acquisition of the horse, buffalo hunting undoubtedly became easier and more lucrative.⁹

For years the two systems of hunting existed in an uneasy balance: during the summer the Sioux followed the buffalo; in the winters they trapped beaver; and with spring the bands traveled to the trade fairs. But by the late eighteenth century it had become obvious that the Teton bands to the west were devoting more and more time to the acquisition of horses and to the hunting of buffalo, while the Yanktons and Yanktonais still concentrated on beaver trapping. As late as 1803, the Yanktonais abandoned good buffalo hunting grounds along the Missouri to move to the headwaters of the Minnesota River where there were few buffalo but abundant beaver.¹⁰

This cultural evolution took place east of the Missouri River. By 1770 the advantage the gun had given the Sioux over the tribes further west had largely disappeared and the balance of tribal power on the eastern Great Plains seemed stable. The Sioux dominated the Missouri River drainage below the Arikara villages on the Great Bend, but these villages, along with those of the Mandans and Hidatsas further up the Missouri, blocked further advance. These horticultural peoples with their large populations, numerous horses, and fortified towns easily resisted incursions by the less numerous and poorly mounted Sioux. Further to the south the Omahas, under their great chief Blackbird, had acquired guns and halted the Sioux advance down the Missouri. The Sioux, of course, were not totally confined. Some bands regularly raided the Arikaras for horses, and the Tetons, either independently or in alliance with the Arikaras, moved across the Missouri to hunt or raid

⁹ Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory," 25; Garrick Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians* (Washington, 1893), 298, 304.

¹⁰ Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 84–85. Tabeau says Yanktons, but from the location he is obviously referring to the Yanktonais; Collot, *Journey in North America*, I, 294; Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 67.

the Mandans and Hidatsas. But the Sioux were only interlopers in this territory; their power was limited.¹¹

The deterioration of this balance of power and the beginning of the second stage of Sioux expansion resulted from a combination of internal and external developments. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Sioux hunters depleted the buffalo and beaver populations east of the Missouri. This, by itself, would have forced the Tetons and Yanktonais either to expand their hunting grounds or to alter their economy. The initial response of the Oglalas at least appears to have been not conquest, but rather imitation of the horticultural economy of the village tribes. The prosperity of these villagers—with their abundant supplies of corn, beans, squash, and their lucrative trade in hides, meat, and horses with the buffalo nomads to the west—seems to have exerted a real attraction for the Sioux. For a time the Oglalas actually settled with the Arikaras and adopted their horticultural and buffalo-hunting economy. But the arrival of European traders aborted this evolution of the Sioux into sedentary horticultural villagers.¹²

In the late eighteenth century French and Spanish traders moved up the Missouri River creating a new source of European trade goods for the villagers and for the nomadic tribes beyond. These white traders not only seriously undercut the Sioux role as middlemen, but they also set out to capture the trade of the Sioux. In the eyes of the Missouri traders, the Sioux, through their trade fairs, drew off the fur trade of the plains and Rockies from its natural route down the Missouri and diverted it into English Canada. For the French and Spanish, therefore, successful commerce on the Missouri necessarily meant the destruction of old Sioux trading patterns. The commerce they eventually succeeded in capturing, however, was not the old trade in beaver pelts, but a new trade in buffalo robes and pemmican. As products of the buffalo hunts became convertible into European trade goods, the Tetons found less and less reason to devote time to beaver trapping. By 1804 the major

¹¹ Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 301–08; Burpee, *Journal and Letters of La Verendrye*, 313, 321, 333; “Journal of Jean Baptiste Trudeau [sic],” *Missouri Historical Society Collections*, 4 (1912–1913), 28; Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 123; R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (8 vols., New York, 1905), I, 220; Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, I, 282–89; Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 72–74.

¹² Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, I, 268–69; *ibid.*, II, 378–79, 382; Preston Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains* (Lincoln, 1970). For later attempts of the Sans Arcs (1815–1817) and the Yanktonais (1850s) to become sedentary villagers see Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 316–17; House Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess. (16 vols., Washington, 1856), IX, No. 65, pp. 5–6; Howard, “Yanktonai Ethnohistory,” 7–8; Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 104.

Teton trade items were buffalo robes and hides, and the need for horses and hunting grounds had replaced trapping grounds as the major motives for war.¹³

But far more significant in stimulating Sioux expansion than any deliberate action traders took was the accidental, if inevitable, result of their presence: the arrival of European epidemic diseases. The Sioux, because they lived in small wandering groups, were far less vulnerable to these epidemics than the populous agricultural villages. The Brulé winter counts record smallpox in 1779–1780, 1780–1781, and 1801–1802 (the epidemics are dated slightly differently in other winter counts), but their losses were slight when compared to those of the Arikaras, Hidatsas, and Mandans. In 1795 Truteau reported that the Arikaras had been reduced from “32 populous villages” to two and from 4,000 warriors to 500—a loss of population, which, in turn, caused severe social and economic disruption. The smallpox reached the Mandan and Hidatsa villages in 1781, inflicting losses proportionate to those of the Arikaras. On the lower Missouri during the opening years of the nineteenth century, the smallpox reduced the Omahas from 700 to 300 warriors and killed Blackbird, their famous and powerful chief. These losses broke their power and their control of the Missouri below the Sioux.¹⁴

The epidemics not only weakened the powerful tribes that had previously held the Sioux in check, but they also ended any attempts of the Oglalas to become horticultural villagers themselves. During the late eighteenth century the Sioux pushed the Arikaras steadily up the Missouri where they joined with their old enemies, the Mandans and Hidatsas, now also under great pressure from the Sioux. By the 1790s pre-epidemic horse raids had given way to war parties of up to 2,000 men that had succeeded in pushing the Mandans out of the Heart River country into the Knife River district of their Hidatsa allies. Although not always successful, Sioux attacks could be overwhelming, as when, in the early 1790s, the Sioux captured and destroyed an entire Mandan village near Deer Creek. The alliance of the Mandans and Hidatsa with

¹³ Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 123, 168, 169; Collot, *Journey in North America*, I, 294.

¹⁴ Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 308–13; Garrick Mallery, *Pictographs of the North American Indian: A Preliminary Paper* (Washington, 1886), 103; Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 123, 168–69; Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, I, 299; Frank Stewart, “Mandan and Hidatsa Villages in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Plains Anthropologist*, 19 (Nov. 1974), 287; Elliot Coues, ed., *Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson* (3 vols., Minneapolis, 1897), I, 345–48; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, VI, 88, 106, 107; Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 524.

the Arikaras was short-lived, however, and by 1800 the Arikaras had moved back downstream. According to white traders, their return made them little more than serfs of the Sioux who cut them off from the buffalo, cheated them, robbed them, and, as the Sioux said, made them fulfill the economic role of women.¹⁵

This intertribal warfare was no game, no mere pattern of revenge killings against ancient enemies. Enemies of the Sioux, faced with disastrous losses, repeatedly sought peace. In 1803, for example, the Omahas and Poncas attempted to end their warfare with the Brulés. The largest Brulé band under BlackBull agreed, but simultaneously the Partisan, a leader of another Brulé band and supposedly envious of BlackBull's growing influence, led a horse raid against the Poncas. When the Poncas retaliated by stealing nine Sioux horses, they attacked the wrong Brulé village, BlackBull's, not the Partisan's, and the fragile peace was broken. In 1804 the Brulés, under BlackBull, fell upon a Ponca village killing half of its inhabitants, and in September of that year they destroyed an Omaha village of forty lodges, killing seventy-five men. In desperation the Omahas and Poncas abandoned their permanent villages and crops, which made them vulnerable to both the smallpox and the nomadic Sioux. For a time they became horse nomads, not from desire, but from necessity. But even this strategy weakened them, diminishing their access to the guns the traders brought up the Missouri. By 1809 some white observers predicted that the once powerful Omahas would disappear entirely. Their difficulties vividly demonstrated the near impossibility of securing peace with the loosely organized Sioux.¹⁶

Thus by 1803–1804, when the arrival of Merriwether Lewis and William Clark announced the new American presence on the Missouri,

¹⁵ Collot, *Journey in North America*, I, 284; Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, I, 268–69; *ibid.*, II, 378–79; Abraham P. Nasatir, trans. and ed., "Spanish Explorations of the Upper Missouri," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIV (June 1927), 59. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels 1748–1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), Vol. XXIII: *Part II of Maximilian, Prince of Wied's Travels in the Interior of North America 1832–1834*, 230–32; Coues, *Manuscript Journals of Henry and Thompson*, I, 330–33; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, I, 220; V, 347–48; VI, 89; Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 169–71; Stewart, "Mandan and Hidatsa Villages," 292–93. Why this seemingly natural alliance of village peoples failed to hold until the mid-nineteenth century has never been adequately explained.

¹⁶ Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 165, 99–101, 110; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, I, 168, VI, 88; Donald Jackson, ed., "Journey to the Mandans, 1809: The Lost Narrative of Dr. Thomas," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, 20 (April 1964), 186. That warfare at this period was a serious and costly endeavor provoked by real economic needs does not mean that pre-contact warfare did not conform to the game model. Other evidence, however, suggests it may not have fit the game model either. See Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 34; Lewis, *Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture*, 49–51.

the Sioux had reduced the old borders and balance of power on the river to shambles. The Mandans, Hidatsas, Arikaras, and Omahas possessed only the shadow of their former strength. The Sioux now dominated the upper Missouri nearly to the Yellowstone River. Furthermore, the Sioux had crossed the Missouri, fighting and hunting in the area bordering the Mandan-Hidatsa villages. An Oglala party under Standing Bull had reached the Black Hills in 1775–1776, and by the turn of the century the Oglalas were contesting the plains country between the Missouri and those mountains with the Kiowas, Arapahos, Crows, and Cheyennes.¹⁷

Lewis and Clark immediately recognized the Sioux as the dominant power on the Missouri, the one tribe that could seriously threaten American commerce on that river. Because of their trade fairs (in decline, but still viable) the Sioux could disrupt white trade without fear of economic retaliation. They could always obtain needed European goods at the spring fairs further east. Lewis and Clark vilified the Sioux, but their very abuse revealed their high estimation of Sioux power.

These are the vilest miscreants of the savage race, and must ever remain the pirates of the Missouri, until such measures are pursued by our government as will make them feel a dependence on its will for their supply of merchandise. Unless these people are reduced to order by coercive measures I am ready to pronounce that the citizens of the United States can never enjoy but partially the advantages which the Missouri presents.¹⁸

American invective, however, was much stronger than American power in the area and was totally incapable of subjugating the Sioux. In 1807 the Sioux and their Arikara dependents first obtained tribute from a trading party under Manuel Lisa, and then drove a government party under Nathaniel Pryor, sent to escort the Mandan chief Shahaka to his

¹⁷ Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 166, 228; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, VI, 96, 98, 100, 103; Mallery, *Pictographs of the North American Indian*, 130, 132–33. The Yanktons and Yanktonais were above the Little Sioux River, the Oglalas were between Cheyenne River and the Teton River. The Brulés were near the Great Bend and on the White River drainage. The Miniconjous hunted near the Cheyenne River while the other Saones were below the Arikaras.

Some scholars date Sioux expansion onto the Great Plains west of the Missouri much earlier than the nineteenth century, but thus far the evidence simply does not seem adequate to sustain this position. The recently published John K. Bear winter count has a Yanktonai war party near the Big Horn Mountains in 1725, but this seems unlikely for several reasons. The Yanktonais historically moved out onto the Great Plains behind the Tetons, yet the earliest winter count record of the Tetons in the plains beyond the immediate Missouri River region is that of the Oglala party that reached the Black Hills in 1775. Furthermore the Big Horn area was never Yanktonai territory in any sense, making it even more unlikely that they would penetrate it so early. The Yanktonais remained a Missouri River tribe. Lastly, the John K. Bear winter count refers at least once to an event (the Pawnee defeat of the Spanish in 1720, recorded for 1732) that does not even concern the Sioux. The Big Horn entry could be a similar reference to an event they did not participate in. Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory," 29.

¹⁸ Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, VI, 98.

village, back downstream. "I suppose a severe punishment of the Aricaras indispensable, taking for it our time and convenience," Thomas Jefferson wrote to Lewis the next year. And another year passed before Lewis decided to send a force of 250 soldiers, trappers, and traders with 300 Indian auxiliaries against the Arikaras. The party he actually dispatched in the summer of 1809, however, consisted of only 150 men, and when Pierre Chouteau, who commanded it, attempted to recruit his 300 auxiliaries among the Tetons, the very bands who had attacked Pryor, he found them more interested in looting the expedition than joining it. According to Chouteau, the Sioux warned him that "one tribe ought not countenance an attempt to destroy another, and if I still persisted in that resolution myself and my party might be destroyed before we reached the Ricaras." They advised Chouteau to pardon the Arikaras and distribute presents, and the supposedly punitive expedition eventually did exactly that.¹⁹

White Americans obviously represented an important new element in the intertribal politics of the upper Missouri; but as the Chouteau and Pryor expeditions had demonstrated, they hardly dominated the region. And, despite their initial conflicts, the Sioux found the Americans to be useful, if dangerous, allies during their third period of expansion. For over three decades after the Chouteau expedition, the ambitions of the Sioux and the Americans proved generally complimentary, and as late as 1838 Joshua Pilcher, the American agent for the upper Missouri, would write that "no Indians ever manifested a greater degree of friendship for the whites in general, or more respect for our Government, than the Sioux."²⁰

The conquests of the western Sioux during the nineteenth century were politically united in only the loosest sense. The various Sioux tribes expanded for similar demographic, economic, and social reasons, however, and these underlying causes give a unity to the various wars of the Sioux.

Unlike every other tribe on the Great Plains during the nineteenth century, the Sioux appear to have increased in numbers. They were not immune to the epidemics that decimated the other tribes, but most of the Tetons and Yanktonais successfully avoided the disastrous results of

¹⁹ Elliot Coues, ed., "Letters of William Clark and Nathaniel Pryor," *Annals of Iowa*, I (Jan. 1895), 615-19; Clarence Carter, *The Territorial Papers of the United States: Vol. 14: The Territory of Louisiana-Missouri, 1806-1814* (Washington, 1949), 222, 345, 348-50; Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540-1854* (Topeka, 1972), 61.

²⁰ Senate Exec. Docs., 25 Cong., 3 Sess. (5 vols., Washington, 1839), I, No. 1, p. 499.

the great epidemics, especially the epidemic of 1837 that probably halved the Indian population of the plains. Through historical accident the very conquests of the Sioux protected them from disease. This occurred in two opposite ways. The advance of Oglalas and Brulés to the southwest simply put them out of reach of the main epidemic corridor along the Missouri. Furthermore, Pilcher, the Indian agent on the Missouri, succeeded in giving them advance warning of the danger in 1837, and, unlike the Blackfeet and other nomadic tribes that suffered heavily from the epidemic, they did not come in to trade. The Tetons were infected, and individual tribes lost heavily, but the losses of the Sioux as a whole were comparatively slight. The Yanktons, Yanktonais, and portions of the Saone Tetons, however, dominated the Missouri trade route, but paradoxically this probably helped to save them. In 1832 the Office of Indian Affairs sent doctors up the river to vaccinate the Indians. Many of the Sioux refused to cooperate, but well over a thousand people, mostly Yanktonais, received vaccinations. Only enough money was appropriated to send the doctors as far upriver as the Sioux; so the Mandans and Hidatsas further upriver remained unvaccinated. As a result, when smallpox came, the Yanktonais were partially protected while their enemies in the villages once again died miserably in great numbers. The renewed American efforts at mass vaccination that followed the epidemic came too late for the Mandans, but in the 1840s thousands more Sioux were given immunity from smallpox.²¹

The combination of freedom from disease, a high birth rate (in 1875 estimated as capable of doubling the population every twenty years), and continued migration from the Sioux tribes further east, produced a steadily growing population for the western Sioux. Although the various censuses taken by the whites were often little more than rough

²¹ Mallery, *Pictographs of the North American Indian*, 108; Mallery, *Picture Writing of the American Indians*, 317. This paper deals largely with external influences on the Sioux, not with the internal political and social changes that took place within the Confederacy during this period. This is an important study in its own right. Dr. M. Martin, Vaccination Report, Nov. 28, 1832, and Martin to Lewis Cass, Nov. 27, 1832, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs, RG 75 (National Archives); Thwaites, *Part II of Maximilian*, 359; J. Pilcher to Wm. Clark, Feb. 27, 1838, July 3, 1838, and Sept. 12, 1838, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs. The winter counts differ. The Sans Arc, Yanktonais, Miniconjou, and Oglala counts in Garrick Mallery do not mention the epidemic. Mallery, *Pictographs of the North American Indian*, 117. The counts in James Howard do, with four saying few died and one saying many died. James Howard, "Dakota Winter Counts as a Source of Plains History," Bureau of American Ethnology *Bulletin* 173 (1960), 374. Edwin Denig notes that the Hunkpapa, one of the tribes included in the divergent account in Howard, did suffer heavily in 1838. Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, John C. Ewers, ed. (Norman, 1961), 28.

estimates, the western Sioux appear to have increased from a very low estimate of 5,000 people in 1804 to approximately 25,000 in the 1850s. This population increase, itself partly a result of the new abundance the Sioux derived from the buffalo herds, in turn, fueled an increased need for buffalo. The Sioux used the animals not only to feed their expanding population, but also to trade for necessary European goods. Since pemmican, buffalo robes, hides, and tongues had replaced beaver pelts as the main Indian trade item on the Missouri, the Sioux needed secure and profitable hunting grounds during a period when the buffalo were steadily moving west and north in response to hunting pressure on the Missouri.²²

Increased Indian hunting for trade contributed to the pressure on the buffalo herds, but the great bulk of the destruction was the direct work of white hunters and traders. The number of buffalo robes annually shipped down the Missouri increased from an average of 2,600 between 1815 and 1830 to 40,000 to 50,000 in 1833, a figure that did not include the numbers slaughtered by whites for pleasure. In 1848 Father Pierre-Jean De Smet reported the annual figure shipped downriver to St. Louis to be 25,000 tongues and 110,000 robes.²³

Despite what the most thorough student of the subject has seen as the Indians' own prudent use of the buffalo, the various tribes competed for an increasingly scarce resource. By the late 1820s the buffalo had disappeared from the Missouri below the Omaha villages, and the border

²² The following censuses fall into a definite pattern—15,000–17,000 in the 1820s, 11,000–30,000 in the 1830s, and about 25,000 for the 1840s and 1850s. The variation in the 1830s probably resulted from the exclusion of the Brulés and Oglalas by some writers after these tribes left Missouri for the Platte. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, VI, 96–98; Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 536; House Exec. Docs., 19 Cong., 1 Sess. (10 vols., Washington, 1826), VI, No. 117, pp. 8–10; Estimate of the Current Expenses for the Upper Missouri Agency, Sept. 1828, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Remarks, J. L. Bean, 1st quarter, 1831, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Pilcher to Clark, July 18, 1835, Oct. 1835, and Sept. 1837, *ibid.*; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 22, 29; D. D. Mitchell to H. Crawford, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Senate Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess. (20 vols., Washington, 1856), XIII, No. 76, pp. 15–16; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels 1748–1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), Vol. XXII: *Part I of Maximilian, Prince of Wied's Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832–1834*, 304–05; F. V. Hayden, *Contributions to the Ethnography and Philology of the Indian Tribes of the Missouri Valley* (Philadelphia, 1862), 371; Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 29–30; Senate Exec. Docs., 22 Cong., 1 Sess. (3 vols., Washington, 1832), II, No. 90, p. 47; Tho. Harvey to Wm. Medill, Feb. 4, 1847, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs.

²³ Senate Exec. Docs., 22 Cong., 1 Sess., II, No. 90, pp. 52–53; Thwaites, *Part I of Maximilian*, XXII, 380–81; Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, eds., *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801–1873* (4 vols., New York, 1905), II, 635. Also see Lewis, *Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture*, 28.

tribes were already in desperate condition from lack of game. The Indians quickly realized the danger further up the Missouri, and upper Missouri tribes voiced complaints about white hunters as early as 1833. By the 1840s observations on the diminishing number of buffalo and increased Indian competition had become commonplace. Between 1833 and 1844 buffalo could be found in large numbers on the headwaters of the Little Cheyenne, but by the mid-1840s they were receding rapidly toward the mountains. The Sioux to a great extent simply had to follow, or move north and south, to find new hunting grounds. Their survival and prosperity depended on their success.²⁴

But buffalo hunting demanded more than territory; it also required horses, and in the 1820s, the Sioux were hardly noted for either the abundance or the quality of their herds. Raids and harsh winters on the plains frequently depleted Sioux horse herds, and the Sioux had to replenish them by raiding or trading farther to the south. In this sense the economy of the Sioux depended on warfare to secure the horses needed for the hunt. As Oscar Lewis has pointed out in connection with the Blackfeet, war and horse raiding became important economic activities for the Plains Indians.²⁵

The Yanktonais, Yanktons, and Saone Tetons had a third incentive for expansion. Power over the sedentary villagers secured them what Tabeau had called their serfs. Under Sioux domination these villages could be raided or traded with as the occasion demanded, their corn and beans serving as sources of supplementary food supplies when the buffalo failed. A favorite tactic of the Sioux was to restrict, as far as possible, the access of these tribes to both European goods and the hunting grounds, thus forcing the village peoples to rely on the Sioux for trade goods, meat, and robes. To escape this exploitation, the villagers, in alliance

²⁴ Buffalo herds did not, as was once believed, migrate hundreds of miles each spring and fall. The herds migrated within a restricted range. See Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in its Wild State* (Toronto, 1951), 116–18, 505–06; Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wuertemberg, "First Journey to North America in the Years 1822 to 1824," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, 19 (1938), 369; Senate Exec. Docs., 22 Cong., 1 Sess., II, No. 1, pp. 52–53; J. Dougherty to Thom. McKenney, Sept. 14, 1827, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Speech of Big Elk, June 24, 1828, *ibid.*; Dougherty to Clark, July 16, 1835, *ibid.*; J. Sanford to Clark, Aug. 17, 1833, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Mitchell to O. Brown, Oct. 13, 1849, *ibid.*; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 22–29.

²⁵ Wilhelm, "First Journey to North America," 406; F. G. Roe, *The Indian and the Horse* (Norman, 1955), 302; Lewis, *Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture*, 54; John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Culture With Comparative Material From Other Western Tribes* (Washington, 1955), 174.

with the nomadic tribes who traded with them, waged a nearly constant, if often desultory, war.²⁶

It is in this context of increasing population, increasing demand for buffalos and horses, the declining and retreating bison populations, and attempted domination of the sedentary villagers that the final phase of Sioux expansion during the nineteenth century took place. And, as the Omahas had found out, the loose structural organization of the western Sioux worked to make the impetus of their advance even more irresistible. Accommodation with one band or tribe often only served to increase inroads from others. There was no way for a tribe to deal with the whole Sioux nation.

On the Missouri the Sioux had long feared the logical alliance of all the village tribes against them, and they worked actively to prevent it. After 1810, the Arikaras sporadically attempted to break away from Sioux domination by allying themselves with the Mandans and Hidatsas. In response, the Sioux blockaded the villages, cutting them off from the buffalo and stopping the white traders who came up the Missouri from supplying them. The Mandan-Arikara alliance, in turn, sent out war parties to keep the river open. But these alliances inevitably fell apart from internal strains, and the old pattern of oscillating periods of trade and warfare was renewed.²⁷

But if the Sioux feared an alliance of the sedentary village tribes, these tribes had an even greater fear of a Sioux-American partnership on the Missouri. The Arikaras, by attacking and defeating an American fur trading party under William Ashley in 1823, precipitated exactly the combination from which they had most to fear. When 1,500 Sioux warriors appeared before their village that year, they were accompanied by United States troops under Colonel Henry Leavenworth. This joint expedition took the Arikara village and sacked it, but the Sioux were disgusted with the performance of their American auxiliaries. They blamed American cautiousness for allowing the Arikaras to escape further upstream. Although they remained friendly to the United

²⁶ Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 130-35, 151; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-1907), Vol. V: *Bradbury's Travels in the Interior of North America, 1809-1811*, 103, 173; John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, Stella M. Drumm, ed. (St. Louis, 1920), 104; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 56-57; Coues, *Manuscript Journals of Henry and Thompson*, I, 336.

²⁷ Abel, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition*, 130; *Bradbury's Travels*, 103, 108, 113; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-1907), Vol. VI: *Brackenridge's Journal up the Missouri, 1811*, 98-99; Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition*, 68-69, 76, 79, 82, 104, 108, 115, 127.

States, the whole affair gave them a low estimation of the ability of white soldiers that would last for years. They finished the removal of the Arikaras themselves, forcing them by 1832 to abandon both their sedentary villages and the Missouri River and to move south to live first with, and then just above, the Skidi Pawnees. The Yanktonais, 450 lodges strong, moved in from the Minnesota River to take over the old Arikara territory.²⁸

With the departure of the Arikaras, the Mandans and Hidatsas alone remained to contest Sioux domination of the Missouri. In 1836 the Yanktonais, nearly starving after a season of poor hunts, began petty raids on the Mandans and Hidatsas. In retaliation, a Mandan-Hidatsa war party destroyed a Yanktonai village of forty-five lodges, killing more than 150 people and taking fifty prisoners. The Sioux counterattacks cost the Mandans dearly. During the next year they lost over sixty warriors, but what was worse, when the smallpox hit in 1837, the villagers could not disperse for fear of the hostile Yanktonais who still occupied the plains around the villages. The Mandans were very nearly destroyed; the Hidatsas, who attempted a quarantine, lost over half their people, and even the luckless Arikaras returned in time to be ravaged by the epidemic. The villages that survived continued to suffer from Yanktonai attacks and could use the plains hunting grounds only on sufferance of the Sioux.²⁹

The Oglala-Brulé advance onto the buffalo plains southwest of the Missouri was contemporaneous with the push up the Missouri and much more significant. Here horse raids and occasional hunts by the Sioux gave way to a concerted attempt to wrest the plains between the Black Hills and the Missouri from the Arapahos, Crows, Kiowas, and Cheyennes. By 1825, the Oglalas, advancing up the drainage of the Teton River, and the Brulés, moving up the drainage of the White River, had dispossessed the Kiowas and driven them south, pushed the Crows west to Powder River, and formed with the Cheyennes and

²⁸ Wilhelm, "First Journey to North America," 405; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 56-57; Annie Heloise Abel, *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-39* (Pierre, S.D., 1932), 205, 311-12; Dougherty to Clark, Nov. 12, 1834, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Pilcher to Clark, July 18, 1835, *ibid.*; Sanford to Clark, July 17, 1832, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs.

²⁹ Mitchell to Wm. N. Fulkerson, June 10, 1836, and Fulkerson to Clark, Oct. 1, 1835, Oct. 1, 1837, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Abel, *Chardon's Journal*; Senate Exec. Docs., 25 Cong., 2 Sess. (6 vols., Washington, 1838), I, No. 1, p. 557; House Exec. Docs., 37 Cong., 3 Sess. (12 vols., Washington, 1863), I, No. 1, p. 194.

Arapahos an alliance which would dominate the north and central plains for the next half century.³⁰

Historians have attributed the movement of the Sioux beyond the Black Hills into the Platte drainage to manipulations of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which sought to capture the Sioux trade from the American Fur Company. But, in fact, traders followed the Sioux; the Sioux did not follow the traders. William Sublette of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company did not lure the Sioux to the Platte. He merely took advantage of their obvious advance toward it. He was the first to realize that by the 1830s Brulé and Oglala hunting grounds lay closer to the Platte than to the Missouri, and he took advantage of the situation to get their trade. The arrival of the Sioux on the Platte was not sudden; it had been preceded by the usual period of horse raids. Nor did it break some long accepted balance of power. Their push beyond the Black Hills was merely another phase in the long Sioux advance from the edge of the Great Plains.³¹

What probably lured the Sioux toward the Platte was an ecological phenomenon that did not require the total depletion of game in the area they already held and that was not peculiar to the plains. Borders dividing contending tribes were never firm; between the established hunting territory of each people lay an indeterminate zone, variously described as war grounds or neutral grounds. In this area only war parties dared to venture; it was too dangerous for any band to travel into these regions to hunt. Because little pressure was put on the animal populations of these contested areas by hunters, they provided a

³⁰ House Exec. Docs., 19 Cong., 1 Sess., VI, No. 117, p. 9. The Kiowa resisted as late as 1814–1815. It should be emphasized that the Oglala and Brulé formed the alliance with the Cheyenne; the Yanktonais apparently did not make peace with them until much later. Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 316, 281; Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains*, 75. Nor does it appear that the Oglala-Cheyenne alliance was without its disruptions. Mallery, *Pictographs of the North American Indian*, 139. Why these tribes allied with the Sioux at all is not clear.

³¹ The development of this myth may be followed in Hiram Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (3 vols., New York, 1902), I, 305; Bernard De Voto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (Boston, 1947), 224; Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 43–46; Robert A. Trennert, Jr., *Alternative to Extinction: Federal Indian Policy and the Beginnings of the Reservation System, 1846–51* (Philadelphia, 1975), 161. Only Bernard De Voto questioned the evidence, and even he finally accepted it. The main evidence cited is a letter from Lucien Fontenelle to Pierre Chouteau saying William Sublette had built a fort on the Platte to capture the Sioux trade. But, as Joshua Pilcher pointed out, the Sioux for years had been going as far south as the Arkansas to raid, and winter counts record battles on the Platte in 1832–1833. Pilcher to G. Harris, Jan. 23, 1837, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 319. Another letter indicates that the Rocky Mountain Fur Company was trying to win the trade of the Oglalas already present on the Platte. Wm. Laidlaw to Pratte and Chouteau, Oct. 26, 1835, Ayer Ms. 486, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library (Chicago).

refuge for the hard-pressed herds of adjacent tribal hunting grounds. Since buffalo migrations were unpredictable, a sudden loss of game in a large part of one tribe's territory could prompt an invasion of these neutral grounds. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, there usually lay at the edges of the Sioux-controlled lands, a lucrative area that held an understandable attraction for them. In the contest for these rich disputed areas lay the key not only to many of the Sioux wars, but also to many other aboriginal wars on the continent.³²

These areas were, of course, never static. They shifted as tribes were able to wrest total control of them from other contending peoples, and so often created, in turn, a new disputed area beyond. Between 1830 and 1860, travelers on the plains described various neutral or war grounds ranging from the Sand Hills north of the Loup River in Nebraska down to the Pawnee Fork of the Arkansas. But for the Sioux four areas stand out: the region below Fort Laramie between the forks of the Platte in dispute during the 1830s; the Medicine Bow-Laramie plains country above Fort Laramie, fought over in the 1840s; the Yellowstone drainage of the Powder, Rosebud, and Big Horn rivers initially held by the Crows but reduced to a neutral ground in the 1840s and 1850s; and portions of the Republican River country contested from the 1840s to the 1870s. Two things stand out in travelers' accounts of these areas: they were disputed by two or more tribes and they were rich in game.³³

Francis Parkman vividly described and completely misinterpreted an episode in the Sioux conquest of one of these areas, the Medicine Bow Valley, in 1846. He attributed the mustering of the large expedition that went, according to his account, against the Shoshones, and according to others against the Crows, to a desire for revenge for the loss of a son of Whirlwind, an important Sioux chief, during a horse raid on the Shoshones. But in Parkman's account, Whirlwind, who supposedly organized the expedition, decided not to accompany it, and the Oglalas and Saones who went ended up fighting neither the Crows nor the Shoshones. What they did, however, is significant. They moved into

³² For insights into this phenomenon and the general formulation of it, see an excellent article by Harold Hickerson, "The Virginia Deer and Intertribal Buffer Zones in the Upper Mississippi Valley," Anthony Leeds and Andrew P. Vayda, eds., *Man, Culture and Animals: The Role of Animals in Human Ecological Adjustments* (Washington, 1965), 43-66.

³³ Rufus B. Sage, *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1846), 125; Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (Madison, 1969), 197; *American State Papers, Military Affairs*, 24 Cong., 1 Sess. (7 vols., Washington, 1837), VI, No. 654, p. 138; Senate Exec. Docs., 35 Cong., 1 Sess. (16 vols., Washington, 1858), II, No. 11, p. 461; Senate Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess., XIII, No. 76, p. 9; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of De Smet*, II, 657, 665; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-1907), Vol. XXIX: *De Smet's Oregon Missions and Travels over the Rocky Mountains, 1845-1846*, 365; House Exec. Docs., 36 Cong., 1 Sess. (12 vols., Washington, 1855-1860), II, No. 78, p. 24.

disputed Medicine Bow country west of Fort Laramie, land which all of these tribes contested.

The Sioux entered the area warily, took great precautions to avoid, not seek out, Crow and Shoshone war parties, and were much relieved to escape unscathed after a successful hunt. Parkman was disgusted, but the Sioux were immensely pleased with the whole affair. They had achieved the main goal of their warfare, the invasion and safe hunting of disputed buffalo grounds without any cost to themselves. White Shield, the slain man's brother, made another, apparently token, attempt to organize a war party to avenge his loss, but he never departed. The whole episode—from the whites' confusion over what tribe was the target of the expedition, to their misinterpretation of Indian motives, to Parkman's failure to see why the eventual outcome pleased the Sioux—reveals why, in so many accounts, the logic of Indian warfare is lost and wars are reduced to outbursts of random bloodletting. For the Sioux, the disputed area and its buffalo, more than the Shoshones or Crows, were the targets of the expedition; revenge was subordinate to the hunt. Their ability to hunt in safety, without striking a blow, comprised a strategic victory that more than satisfied them. To Parkman, intent on observing savage warriors lusting for blood revenge, all this was unfathomable.³⁴

Not all expeditions ended so peacefully, however. Bloodier probes preceded the summer expedition of 1846, and others followed it. When the Sioux arrived in strength on the Platte in the mid-1830s, their raiding parties were already familiar to peoples from the Pawnee south to the Arkansas and the Santa Fe Trail. As early as the 1820s, their allies, the Cheyennes and Arapahos, had unsuccessfully contested hunting grounds with the Skidi Pawnees. But by 1835, these tribes had agreed to make peace.³⁵

The arrival of the Oglalas and Brulés at the Laramie River presented both the Pawnees and the Crows with more powerful rivals. The Crows were by now old enemies of the Tetons. Initially as allies of the Mandans and Hidatsas, and later as contestants for the hunting grounds of the plains, they had fought the Sioux for at least fifty years. By the 1840s, however, the once formidable Crows were a much weakened people. As late as the 1830s they had possessed more horses than any other tribe on the upper Missouri and estimates of their armed strength had ranged

³⁴ Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, 121–22, 135, 137, 140, 197, 206, 214–24; Dale Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail* (2 vols., Georgetown, Cal., 1963), II, 573; I, 214.

³⁵ Thwaites, *Part I of Maximilian*, 304–05; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), Vol. XIX: *Part I of Gregg's Commerce of the Prairies*, 321; *American State Papers, Military Affairs*, 24 Cong., 1 Sess., VI, No. 654, pp. 143, 133.

from 1,000 to 2,500 mounted men, but the years that followed brought them little but disaster. Smallpox and cholera reduced their numbers from 800 to 460 lodges, and rival groups pressed into their remaining hunting grounds. The Blackfeet attacked them from the north while the Saones, Oglalas, and Brulés closed in on the east and south. Threatened and desperate, the Crows sought aid west of the Rockies and increasingly allied themselves with the Shoshones and Flatheads.³⁶

The Pawnees, the last powerful horticultural tribe left on the plains, did not have a long tradition of warfare with the Sioux. The four Pawnee tribes—the Republicans, Skidis, Tapages, and Grands—lived in permanent earth-lodge villages on the Platte and Loup rivers, but twice a year they went on extended hunts in an area that stretched from between the forks of the Platte in the north to the Republican, Kansas, and Arkansas rivers in the south. Sioux horse raids had originally worried them very little, but, after the wars with Arapahos and Cheyennes, the growing proximity of the Sioux and their advantage in firearms had begun to concern the Pawnees enough to ask Americans to act as intermediaries in establishing peace. In the 1830s they remained, in the words of their white agent, along with the Sioux, one of the “two master tribes in the Upper Indian Country . . . who govern nearly all the smaller ones.”³⁷

Under BullBear the Oglalas spearheaded the conquest of the Platte River hunting grounds of the Skidi Pawnees. By 1838, the Pawnee agent reported that the Skidis, fearing the Sioux would soon dominate the entire buffalo country, were contesting “every inch of ground,” and, he added, “they are right for the day is not far off when the Sioux will possess the whole buffalo region, unless they are checked.” In 1838, smallpox struck both the Oglalas and the Pawnees, but, as happened further north, the populous horticultural villages of the Pawnees suffered far more than the nomadic Sioux bands. The next year the intertribal struggle culminated in a pitched battle that cost the Pawnees between eighty and one-hundred warriors and led to the *de facto* surrender of the Platte hunting grounds by the Skidis.³⁸

³⁶ Hayden, *Contributions to the Ethnology and Philology of the Indian Tribes*, 394; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 142, 144–45, 166, 185–86, 353; Thwaites, *Part I of Maximilian*, 351.

³⁷ Dougherty to Clark, Nov. 29, 1832, Nov. 12, 1834, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Dougherty to C. H. Harris, June 27, 1837, Council Bluffs, Letters Received, *ibid.* The best account of the Pawnees is Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe* (New York, 1965). A badly biased and far less useful history is George E. Hyde, *Pawnee Indians* (Denver, 1951).

³⁸ Senate Exec. Docs., 25 Cong., 3 Sess., I, No. 1, 504; Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, 320–21; “Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission in the Pawnee Country Near Bellvue, Neb., 1831–1849,” *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society*, 1915–1918, XIV (1918), 630–31; Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 46–47.

The murder of the BullBear in 1841 during a factional quarrel prompted a split in the Oglalas. One band, the Kiyuskas, BullBear's old supporters, continued to push into the Pawnee lands along the Platte and Smoky Hill Rivers, while the other faction, the Bad Faces, moved west and north often joining with the Saone bands who were pushing out from the Missouri in attacks on the Crows. During these advances the Utes and Shoshones would be added to the ranks of Teton enemies, and further north the Yanktonais and Hunkpapas pushed into Canada, fighting the Metis, Plains Crees, and Assiniboines.³⁹

The Oregon, California, and Utah migrations of the 1840s made the Platte River Valley an American road across the plains. Like the traders on the Missouri before them, these migrants drove away game and created a new avenue for epidemic diseases, culminating in the cholera epidemic of 1849–1850. For the first time, the whites presented a significant threat to Sioux interests, and this conflict bore as fruit the first signs of overt Teton hostility since Chouteau's and Pryor's expeditions. But on the whole whites suffered little from the initial Teton reaction to the Oregon trail. The Crows and Pawnees bore the consequences of the decline of the Platte hunting grounds.⁴⁰

The Brulé and Kiyuska Oglalas attacked the Pawnee on the South Platte and the Republican. The Tetons did not restrict their attacks to the buffalo grounds; along with the Yanktons and Yanktonais from the Missouri, they attacked the Pawnees in their villages and disrupted the whole Pawnee economy. While small war parties stole horses and killed women working in the fields, large expeditions with as many as 700 men attacked the villages themselves. This dual assault threatened to reduce the Pawnees to starvation, greatly weakening their ability to resist.⁴¹

The Sioux struck one of their most devastating blows in 1843, destroying a new village the Pawnees had built on the Loup at the urging of the whites. They killed sixty-seven people and forced the Pawnees back to the Platte, where they were threatened with retribution by whites for their failure to remove as agreed. The Pawnees vainly cited American obligations under the treaty of 1833 to help defend them from attacks by other tribes; and they also repeatedly sought peace. Neither

³⁹ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 22–23, 25, 29; James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln, 1965), 20–21; House Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess., XIII, No. 65, pp. 5–6; J. Hewitt, ed., *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz* (Washington, 1937), 191–92.

⁴⁰ Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, 160–92; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 16–18.

⁴¹ "Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission," 659, 664, 730; Harvey to L. H. Crawford, July 25, 1845, Harvey to Medill, Oct. 17, 1847, Nov. 22, 1847, and H. Wharton to G. Manypenny, Dec. 1851, Council Bluffs, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; John Dunbar, "The Pawnee Indians: Their Habits and Customs," *Magazine of American History*, V (Nov. 1880), 341–42.

availed. Unlike the Otos, Omahas, and Poncas, who eventually gave up all attempts to hunt on the western plains, the Pawnees persisted in their semiannual expeditions. The tribal census taken in 1859 reveals the price the Pawnees paid. When Zebulon Pike had visited the Pawnees in 1806 he found a roughly equivalent number of men and women in each village. In his partial census, he gave a population of 1,973 men and 2,170 women, exclusive of children. In 1859, agent William Dennison listed 820 men and 1,505 women; largely because of war, women now outnumbered men by nearly two to one.⁴²

The final blow came in 1873, three years before the Battle of the Little Bighorn, when the Sioux surprised a Pawnee hunting party on the Republican River, killing about 100 people. The Pawnees, now virtually prisoners in their reservation villages, gave in. They abandoned their Nebraska homeland and, over the protests of their agents, moved to Indian Territory. White settlers may have rejoiced at their removal, but it was the Sioux who had driven the Pawnees from Nebraska.⁴³

The experience of the Crows was much the same. Attacked along a front that ran from the Yellowstone to the Laramie Plains, they were never routed, but their power declined steadily. The Sioux drove them from the Laramie Plains and then during the 1850s and 1860s pushed them farther and farther up the Yellowstone. In the mid-1850s, Edwin Denig, a trapper familiar with the plains, predicted their total destruction, and by 1862 they had apparently been driven from the plains and into the mountains. They, too, would join the Americans against the Sioux.⁴⁴

In a very real sense the Americans, because of their destruction of game along the Missouri and Platte, had stimulated this warfare for years, but their first significant intervention in intertribal politics since

⁴² "Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission," 659, 730. Daniel Miller to Mitchell, Dec. 23 and 24, 1843, Harvey to Medill, Oct. 17, 1847, Council Bluffs, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; "The Expedition of Major Clifton Wharton in 1844," *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1923-1925*, XVI (1925), 284-85; Donald Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* (2 vols, Norman, 1966), II, 41; Wm. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, July 16, 1859, Otoe Agency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Wm. Albin to W. Dole, Oct. 1, 1864, Pawnee Agency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs.

⁴³ John W. Williams to Wm. Burgess, Aug. 12, 1873, Letter of Pawnee Chiefs to E. P. Smith, Aug. 21, 1874, Speeches in Council with Quakers, N. D. [circa Aug. 1874], and Petition of Pawnee Chiefs and Head Men, Oct. 8, 1874, Pawnee Agency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs. For warfare in alliance with white Americans, see George Bird Grinnell, *Two Great Scouts and their Pawnee Battalion* (Cleveland, 1928).

⁴⁴ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 19, 204; House Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess. (16 vols., Washington, 1856), IX, No. 65, pp. 10, 14; Stanley Vestal, *New Sources of Indian History, 1850-1891* (Norman, 1934), 167-72; House Exec. Docs., 37 Cong., 3 Sess., I, No. 1, p. 193.

the Leavenworth expedition came with the celebrated Laramie Peace Conference of 1851. Although scholars have recognized the importance of both intertribal warfare and the decline of the buffalo in prompting this conference, they have, probably because they accepted without question the individualistic interpretation of Indian wars, neglected the Indian political situation at the time of the treaty. They have failed to appreciate the predominance of the Sioux-Cheyenne-Arapaho alliance on the northern and central plains.⁴⁵

By 1851, American Indian officials had recognized that white travel and trade on the Great Plains had reduced the number of buffalo and helped precipitate intertribal wars. They proposed to restore peace by compensating the Indians for the loss of game. Their motives for this were hardly selfless, since intertribal wars endangered American travelers and commerce. Once they had established peace and drawn firm boundaries between the tribes, they could hold a tribe responsible for any depredations committed within its allotted area. Furthermore, by granting compensation for the destruction of game, the government gave itself an entrée into tribal politics: by allowing or withholding payments, they could directly influence the conduct of the Indians.⁴⁶

Although American negotiators certainly did not seek tribal unity in 1851, it is ethnocentric history to contend that the Fort Laramie treaty allowed the Americans to "divide and conquer." Fundamentally divided at the time of the treaty, the plains tribes continued so afterward. The treaty itself was irrelevant; both the boundaries it created and its prohibition of intertribal warfare were ignored from the beginning by the only tribal participants who finally mattered, the Sioux.⁴⁷

Indeed the whole conference can be interpreted as a major triumph for the Tetons. In a sense, the Fort Laramie Treaty marked the height of Sioux political power. Of the 10,000 Indians who attended the conference, the great majority of them were Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos. Sioux threats kept the Pawnees and all but small groups of Crows, Arikaras, Hidatsas, and Assiniboines from coming to Fort Laramie. The Shoshones came, but the Cheyennes attacked their party

⁴⁵ American expeditions on the Great Plains from Lewis and Clark to Colonel Dodge made attempts at establishing intertribal peace, but none of these efforts was on the same scale as the Laramie Conference. For the two most thorough treatments of policy during this period, see Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, 178-97; James C. Malin, *Indian Policy and Westward Expansion* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1921), 72-75.

⁴⁶ Mitchell to Brown, Oct. 13, 1849, and Mitchell to Brown, March 9, 1851, St. Louis Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Senate Exec. Docs., 31 Cong., 1 Sess. (2 vols., Washington, 1850), I, No. 70.

⁴⁷ Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction* 191, 188-92.

and part turned back. With the Sioux and their allies so thoroughly dominating the conference, the treaty itself amounted to both a recognition of Sioux power and an attempt to curb it. But when American negotiators tried to restrict the Sioux to an area north of the Platte, Black Hawk, an Oglala, protested that they held the lands to the south by the same right the Americans held their lands, the right of conquest: "These lands once belonged to the Kiowas and the Crows, but we whipped those nations out of them, and in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of the Indians." The Americans conceded, granting the Sioux hunting rights, which, in Indian eyes, confirmed title. The Sioux gladly accepted American presents and their tacit recognition of Sioux conquests, but, as their actions proved, they never saw the treaty as a prohibition of future gains. After an American war with the Sioux and another attempt to stop intertribal warfare in 1855, Bear's Rib, a Hunkpapa chief, explained to Lieutenant G. K. Warren that the Tetons found it difficult to take the American prohibition of warfare seriously when the Americans themselves left these conferences only to engage in wars with other Indians or with the Mormons.⁴⁸

After the treaty, the lines of conflict on the plains were clearly drawn. The two major powers in the area, the Sioux and the Americans, had both advanced steadily and with relatively little mutual conflict. Following the treaty they became avowed and recognized rivals. Within four years of the treaty, the first American war with the Tetons would break out; and by the mid-1850s, American officers frankly saw further war as inevitable. The Sioux, in turn, recognized the American threat to their interests, and the tribes, in a rare display of concerted action, agreed as a matter of policy to prohibit all land cessions and to close their remaining productive hunting grounds to American intrusions. These attempts consistently led to war with the Americans. After a century of conquest the Sioux had very definite conceptions of the boundaries of their tribal territory. Recent historians and some earlier anthropologists contended that Indians never fought for territory, but if this is so, it is hard to explain the documented outrage of the Saones,

⁴⁸ Percival G. Lowe, *Five Years a Dragoon and Other Adventures on the Great Plains* (Kansas City, 1906), 78-81; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of De Smet*, II, 679-80, 687; Capt. H. M. Wharton to Capt. M. Seville, June 6, 1852, Council Bluffs, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, 188-90; Senate Exec. Docs., 35 Cong., 2 Sess. (18 vols., Washington, 1859), II, No. 1, 630-31; *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, Oct. 29, 1851, and Nov. 9, 1851.

Oglalas, and Brulés at the cession of land along the Missouri by the Yanktons in 1858. The Tetons had moved from this land decades before and had been replaced by the Yanktons, but from the Teton point of view the whole western Sioux nation still held title to the territory and the Yanktons had no authority to sell it. Fearing that acceptance of annuities would connote recognition of the sale, the Saone tribes refused them, and the cession provoked a crisis on the western plains and hardened Teton ranks against the Americans.⁴⁹

The warfare between the northern plains tribes and the United States that followed the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 was not the armed resistance of a people driven to the wall by American expansion. In reality these wars arose from the clash of two expanding powers—the United States, and the Sioux and their allies. If, from a distance, it appears that the vast preponderance of strength rested with the whites, it should be remembered that the ability of the United States to bring this power to bear was limited. The series of defeats the Sioux inflicted on American troops during these years reveals how real the power of the Tetons was.

Even as they fought the Americans, the Sioux continued to expand their domination of plains hunting grounds, as they had to in order to survive. Logically enough, the tribes the Sioux threatened—the Crows, Pawnees, and Arikaras especially—sided with the Americans, providing them with soldiers and scouts. For white historians to cast these people as mere dupes or traitors is too simplistic. They fought for their tribal interests and loyalties as did the Sioux.

It is ironic that historians, far more than anthropologists, have been guilty of viewing intertribal history as essentially ahistoric and static, of refusing to examine critically the conditions that prompted Indian actions. In too much Indian history, tribes fight only “ancient” enemies, as if each group were doled out an allotted number of adversaries at creation with whom they battled mindlessly through eternity. Historians have been too easily mystified by intertribal warfare, too willing to see it as the result of some ingrained cultural pugnacity. This is not to argue that the plains tribes did not offer individual warriors incentives of wealth

⁴⁹ Letter of G. K. Warren to George Jones, “Relative to his explorations of Nebraska, Jan. 28, 1858,” printed copy, Graff Collection, Newberry Library (Chicago); House Exec. Docs., 34 Cong., 1 Sess., XIII, No. 65, pp. 4–5, 10–11; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 30, 32–33; W. H. Wessels to Adj. Gen., July 7, 1858, Central Superintendency, Letters Sent, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, 13–15; Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Indian in America* (New York, 1975), 64–65; Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*, 114; Senate Exec. Docs., 35 Cong., 2 Sess., II, No. 1, 630–33, 668–70.

and prestige that encouraged warfare, but, as Newcomb pointed out, the real question is why the tribe placed such a premium on encouraging warriors. This is essentially a historical question. Without an understanding of tribal and intertribal histories, and an appreciation that, like all history, they are dynamic, not static, the actions of Indians when they come into conflict with whites can be easily and fatally distorted.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Out of what must only be habit Wilcomb E. Washburn described the Sioux as confronting their "Ancient enemies," the Snakes (Shoshones), at Ft. Laramie in 1851 at a time when the Sioux advance had only recently prompted warfare between these previously widely separated peoples. Washburn, *Indian in America*, 192; Newcomb, "A Re-examination of the Causes of Plains Warfare."