FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Footnotes

The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center

Search

What Students Need to Know about the Frontier Wars

by Vance Skarstedt

September 2008
Vol. 13, No. 24

Vance Skarstedt is Dean of the School of Intelligence Studies, National Defense Intelligence College. This essay is based on his presentation at the FPRI **Wachman Center's** July 26–27 history institute, What Students Need To Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919. The Institute was co-sponsored and hosted by the Cantigny First Division Foundation of the McCormick Foundation in Wheaton, Ill. It was webcast to registrants worldwide. For videocasts, texts of lectures, and slides, see **www.fpri.org/education/americaswars1**. Core support for the History Institute is provided by the Annenberg Foundation. Funding for the military history program is provided by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The next history weekend is **Teaching the History of Innovation**, October 18–19, 2008, in Kansas City.

For a number of reasons, one can say that the frontier wars are the most complex and difficult of all the nation's wars to teach. The conflict that raged for centuries on the North American continent still touches nerves in contemporary American academic, cultural, and political circles. As the American people continuously debate and struggle to define their history, the frontier wars represent a continuing source of friction in discussing American history, morality, consistency, military conduct, and government policy. Simply put, as the debate over the status and treatment of American Indians goes on and becomes more politicized, so does the discussion of the long years of conflict that comprise the frontier wars.

While there are many schools of thought regarding the frontier wars throughout American scholarship, the predominant view leaves the American Indian as a hapless victim that was swarmed over by a never-ending wave of unscrupulous European and later, American settlers, soldiers and businessmen who, armed with superior technology, stole, infected, massacred and imprisoned the native peoples on their way to building the nation as we know it today.

In a recent edition of John Tebbel and Keith Jennison's *The American Indian Wars*, the summary stated, "The Native nations, living in peace and prosperity for the most part, despite the intermittent but limited intertribal warfare, learned that the white invaders cold not be trusted, and that their object was not the peaceful intercourse of trade, which the Natives offered them, but flagrant conquest." The term "conquest" along with others such as "encroachment," "invasion," "genocide," and "subjugation," appear in many historical discussions of the frontier wars, and while the American Indians lost a way of life they had known for thousands of years, to simply present the history of these wars as one society exterminating another is simplistic, inaccurate, and denies students the different aspects of what were truly fascinating, complex, and relevant wars. I say relevant because the outcome of those wars not only completed the establishment of the United States on the North American continent, but also generated invaluable lessons regarding warfare that are still being taught today.

The complexity involves the identity of the combatants, especially as it relates to the indigenous peoples whom the Europeans and later Americans encountered. To lump these people under one term such as Indians or Native Americans is very misleading. I would begin any course or class on the frontier wars by discussing the indigenous peoples themselves and who they really were. Historians have estimated that at the time Columbus landed, there existed almost 4 million people in three thousand tribes speaking more than 2,200 different languages. Hollywood images of nomadic tribal units wandering a vast wilderness wearing war bonnets and following bison herds pales when compared to the real history of the North American Indians. Their societies varied from being nomadic, to forest and coastal dwelling, to stationary tradesmen in cities. In teaching undergraduates, I always asked how many of them had

ever heard of, let alone visited, Cahokia. I'd usually get one or two that had heard of it. Seldom had anyone who lived outside of a 20-mile radius of St Louis ever been there.

American students should know the diversity and advanced nature of the many pre-Colombian cultures. Cahokia was a thriving economic center and home to as many as 40,000 people. Evidence exists that Cahokian traders, or Mississippians as some refer to them, plied their goods as far away as the Atlantic Coast and as far south Mexico. These people created intricate tools, molded beautiful jewelry, demonstrated advanced agricultural techniques and actually devised ways to change the flow of the Mississippi River to irrigate their crops. They built structures of clay and dirt that rivaled the stone temples of Tenochtitlan, Angkor Wat and Thebes. Little else is known of this culture because, unlike the Egyptians, the Cahokians did not write in Sanskrit or hieroglyphics or some other ancient tongue lent towards translation by a Rosetta Stone. We're sure they were peaceful due to the fact that, unlike the warrior Egyptians who went to their next world armed to the teeth, Cahokian graves included few if any weapons. Cahokia did not stand alone as an advanced culture. The Pueblo Indians of Taos built five-story apartment buildings and successfully irrigated crops in the New Mexico dessert. The cave-dwellers of Mesa Verde carved intricate and multi-storied communal structures in the sides of mountains. Again, little is known of these cultures due to a lack of written records of their time.

Archaeology has determined that most of these advanced cultures were gone 200–300 years before Columbus's arrival and given that at the time Columbus arrived, the former domains of the peaceful Cahokians, Pueblos, and Anasazis were supplanted by the fierce Creek, Navajo, Comanche and Apache tribes. This leads to the next point I believe students should be aware of when studying the frontier wars, which is the war-fighting skills possessed by the tribes that were here when Europeans started to seriously colonize North America in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

My students often asked about the relevance of studying the combat of these wars. Today's students can easily relate some war history to contemporary events, but they often do not see the point in devoting significant study to the frontier wars, as they seem so remote in terms of time as well as methods. Not to mention the fact, the generation we're teaching did not grow up watching the Western genre in movie theaters, or at least Westerns that dealt with Indians. I always answer by showing them photos of Indian warriors like the famous shot of Geronimo and three of his comrades, which shows a variety of weapons ranging from a muzzle-loading musket to a cavalry carbine to a couple of lever-action repeating rifles. They're armed with some good technology for the time, able to travel fast and given their experience and knowledge of their environment, would prove to be elusive and hard to pin down.

How did the U.S. Army deal with this kind of foe? With horse-mounted cavalry traveling in groups ranging from regimental size to small detachments of perhaps a dozen or fewer soldiers and Indian scouts. While these tactics never achieved the all time decisive victory Americans for some reason see as the only way to end a war, these tactics kept pressure on their Indian targets and eventually, when it became clear the Americans weren't going to go away, the fiercest American Indian warriors, including Geronimo, Crazy Horse, Dull Knife, Red Cloud and Little Wolf, surrendered in the closing years of the frontier wars and represent the last of the American Indian generations that fought the U.S. government.

Fast forward to the 21st century. Again the United States finds itself involved in a fight against lightly yet lethally armed asymmetric fighters who are elusive, possess superior knowledge of the battlefield, and quite creative when it comes to thinking of ways to kill American soldiers. The United States Armed Forces are utilizing a number of ways to combat unconventional foes such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda, utilizing many of the same means and tactics used by the horse soldiers of the nineteenth century. So, the tactics and lessons learned by the U.S. military in the 1870s were either put to good use, or as I suspect, relearned, by the U.S. military of the 21st century. To me, the frontier wars are as clear an example out there that history is always a relevant discipline.

Students should also know that the frontier wars remain America's longest wars. If one includes the period of colonization between the founding of Jamestown in the east and Santa Fe in the west to the American Revolution and goes to what is considered the last frontier battle in 1890, which was not really a battle, the frontier wars were continuously fought for almost four hundred years. The first century of the United States' history was one of continuous warfare on the growing nation's frontier. In one of its first engagements after the end of the Revolution, the American Army suffered what would be its worst defeat until the Civil War when the Miami Indians under the leadership of Michikinikwa, or Little Turtle, destroyed a force of 1,400 militia and regulars killing over 600 officers and men.

To help students understand so much history in a few lessons, I portray the frontier wars in three phases.

The first phase began with the settlements in the first decade of the seventeenth century on the east coast. During this phase the Europeans sought to establish a viable economic support system on the North American continent. Not only was their savage fighting between colonists and Indians; French, English and Spanish Colonists waged bitter wars amongst themselves. This phase came to an end with the American Revolution that ended in 1783.

The second phase involved pushing the Indians west across the Mississippi River. This phase ended in the late 1840s with the Blackhawk War and the pursuit of the Seminoles into the Everglades, where they still live today.

The final phase, which is the shortest phase but took place in the largest theater of all the phases, were the campaigns west of the Mississippi against the Sioux, Cheyenne, Apache, Comanche, Modoc, Nez Pierce and other tribes. This phase ended with the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, though there were recorded instances of Indian resistance as late as 1911. It's a good idea to break these phases down by significant wars and relate the important political and military events of each.

This different kind of fighting and Indians' skill are some of the important reasons for the length of these wars. There was also the sheer size of the North American continent. These wars were fought in New England, the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast, the Mississippi River Valley, Texas, the Midwest, the Pacific Coast, the Rocky Mountains; virtually every corner of the present-day continental United States saw combat between the Indians and the Europeans and Americans. Thomas Jefferson estimated that it would take 100 generations to settle America. It actually took five, but as the United States expanded westward by building communities, railroads and communications, it also had to pacify the diverse and rugged group of societies that were all very adept at warfare; from the Powhatan Indians of Virginia that almost destroyed Jamestown on more than one occasion to the Nomadic Sioux nation that for a century controlled the upper Great Plains from Minnesota to Wyoming and as far south as the Missouri River, to the Modoc Indians of California who with 51 fighters held off over 1000 U.S. Army cavalry and inflicted over 150 casualties while only losing five of their own in the combat.

When Europeans first arrived and the inevitable conflicts with the Indians began, the Europeans were surprised and shocked by the Indian way of making war. Instead of the lines of infantry on open battlefields the Europeans were used to, the Indians used stealth, camouflage, surprise, deception, and other small-unit tactics that utilized the terrain as cover and confused their conventional European opponents. The European colonists quickly adapted and became every bit as skilled and savage as the Indians in waging frontier war and began using Indian tactics when they fought each other. In short, the Indians were good because their environment and culture promoted armed combat as a necessary skill. From having to survive by matching wits against nature and wild game, to having to defend themselves against rival tribes, the North American Indians were some of the finest soldiers in the world by the time Columbus arrived. Those societies mentioned earlier that had perished by the fifteenth century did not seem to value warfare according to what archaeologists tell us. That may be a major reason they weren't there.

Evidence of the Indians' influence on the American military still is evident at Fort Benning, Georgia, where the United States Army Ranger School posts the standing orders of Robert Rogers. Rogers was a colonial militiaman who admired the Indian way of combat and built a unit that modeled itself after the Indians' tactics. They traveled off-road, learned ambush and tracking tactics, and traveled light while garnishing their food from nature as them rapidly moved overland. They proved extremely effective against the French in the French-Indian War and subsequent units that fought for both British and American colonists also utilized tactics learned from the Indians by Rogers' Rangers.

However, despite their skill as warriors and ability to survive in harsh environments, their culture and experience proved no match for the arrival of Western civilization. There were few battles with decisive winners and losers, and the supposed advantages in technology did not provide that big of an advantage to the Euro-Americans. In fact, not until the campaigns of Nelson Miles in the 1870s and 1880s did technology come into play and cause concern for the Indians. Students should know that the Indian defeat was not due to Euro-American military prowess, but the final destruction of the environment needed for Indians to maintain their culture. The biggest pure killer of Indians was not American or European arms but disease. Within fifty years of Columbus's arrival, the Arawaks that first greeted him became extinct. Epidemics of typhus, smallpox and cholera devastated numerous Indian populations. It is estimated that one epidemic along the Missouri River in 1837 reduced the Plains Indian population by 50 percent. As far as casualties of war, the 100 years after the American Revolution saw just over 12,000 Indians and whites killed as a

result of battle and/or raids.

Instead of military pressure, the Indians succumbed to economic and political pressure. The economic pressure was the loss of their environment. With the establishment of the railroad, transcontinental communication, technological developments in agriculture including barbed wire, and an ever-growing population of Euro-Americans, the Indians slowly ran out of territory for sanctuary. The great buffalo slaughter after the Civil War took the buffalo herd of the Plains from an estimated 12 million to fewer than 700 by 1889. This proved a devastating blow to the dominant tribes of the Plains as the buffalo was the central pillar of their economy. In short the Indians could not survive against the Western culture and economy of development and consumption.

Politically, the Indians suffered because they themselves could not unite. Many of the thousands of tribes were nursing centuries-old rivalries and hatred against other tribes when the Europeans arrived. In almost four hundred years, they could not set aside differences enough to unite against the greater threat. American Indian history has many farsighted individuals who realized this but none who succeeded.

Beginning with one of the first major wars between Indians and whites, King Phillip's War in 1675, the Wampanoag Chief, Metacomet, sought to unite the various tribes of the region against the growing English settlements. For two years he was effective and almost destroyed major settlements at Deerfield, Medfield, Northfield, and Brookfield in what is now Massachusetts. However, Metacomet was assassinated by another Indian at the behest of the British in 1676 and King Phillip's war ended in defeat for the Indians. Subsequent efforts by Indians to unite also failed. Pontiac of the Ottowas was murdered by another Indian near Cahokia after he had almost forced white settlers out of the Ohio Valley. This situation convinced King George to issue the proclamation of 1763 prohibiting colonists from settling in large numbers west of the Appalachians. Tecumseh had to ally with the British and even accepted a commission as a Brigadier in the British Army, but his failure to convince the Creeks to join his confederation led to his defeat and death at the Battle of the Thames in 1814. Osceola was tricked by English and rival Seminoles into surrendering and this led to his death in an English prison. Captain Jack, leader of the Modocs was betrayed by a tribal rival to the Americans and subsequently hung. The list goes on and on regarding great Indian leaders either totally or partially being undone by their fellow Indians. This inability to unite created tremendous opportunities for the dividing part of the divide-and-conquer strategies employed by the Euro-Americans against the Indians. Most of the intelligence and scouting used by the Europeans and Americans were provided by tribes that rivaled those the Euro Americans were pursuing. Modern Sioux and Blackfeet still despise each other for the role each other played in the Black Hills campaigns of 1874-76.

This failure to unite was probably the major reason the Indians lost. On the battlefield itself the Americans seldom enjoyed a numerical or technological advantage and one of the reasons for Custer's disaster at Little Bighorn, was that the Indians were actually technically advantaged. Custer's practice was to move light and fast, like Indians, and surprise small groups of Indians while they camped. This worked well for him until he surprised a large group of Indians camping along the Greasy Grass of the Little Bighorn River.

The Indians also proved very adept at adapting Western technology and tactics themselves, and that adaptation is another military lesson learned from the Indian Wars. North American Indians showed tremendous adaptability and their martial heritage came through in some of the absolutely brilliant leaders and tacticians they produced. Without a West Point or even formal education as the Euro-Americans knew, Indian leaders such as Chief Joseph of the Nez Pierce, Osceola of the Seminoles, and Red Cloud of the Sioux proved more than a match against their West Point counterparts. They are a critically important part of the American military heritage, though it would make great chiefs like Opechecanenough, Tecumseh, and Gall turn in their graves to hear that being said about them.

American military commanders also learned the importance of critical thinking. In the wilderness against a foe that possessed superior knowledge of the terrain and cut off from the major supply and logistics support networks, Army commanders had to devise tactics and methods for pursuing, isolating, and surprising fast moving and unpredictable groups of Indians. In the wars against the Sioux, Cheyenne, Apache and Comanche, the Army learned to conduct operations at night and in bad weather as this proved most effective. Unfortunately, this led to Indian women and children being killed, since these attacks at places like the Washita River and Sand Creek led to attacks on tribal units and not just war parties. Even today, military commanders agree that much of their success in the field is due to the fact that experience and technology has enabled the U.S. Army to "own the night."

Another important lesson learned from the frontier wars has to do with peacekeeping. Pacifying and keeping Indians under control is probably the first example of postwar peacekeeping done by the U.S. government. It's not a great story, with corruption at one end of the policy and the deaths of innocents at the other. The greatest injustices to the American Indians usually came after Indians succumbed to American and European demands. The Trail of Tears, the squalid conditions at the Bosque Redondo Reservation, the Long Walk of the Navajos, and many other tragic stories relate that no matter how well-intentioned U.S. government policies such as President Ulysses Grant's "Peace Policy," a lack of dedicated and trustworthy officers in the field can lead to disaster.

American students need to know that there is much more to this conflict than popular culture has shown. They need to know of the American Indians themselves and what varied, rich, and accomplished cultures they possessed. They need to know that they put up one heck of a fight and did so because their various cultures emphasized combat skills, sacrifice, and discipline. They need to know that failure to unify beyond family or tribal limits provided a key element to their ultimate defeat as well as the loss of their environment and way of life. They need to know the lasting impact the frontier wars had on American history and culture. As Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out in his landmark work *The Frontier in American History*, pushing west forced settlers to change away from the European-like practices of the eastern city; support a communal society where participation and support of community decisions, elected leaders and plans meant survival; and to exercise the creative thinking and ingenuity needed to bring the wilderness under control. To me, this sounds very much like the American Indian way of doing things. From the Massasoit Indians who welcomed the Pilgrims to the Nez Pierce Indians who befriended the whites right up until they were forced to fight for their survival, they set the example in living as well as fighting and dying.