

# Nelson A. Miles The Man Who Ended the Plains Indian Wars

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Nelson Appleton Miles, a captain during the Civil War, was later promoted to Major General and led troops in action on the frontier against Geronimo's forces.

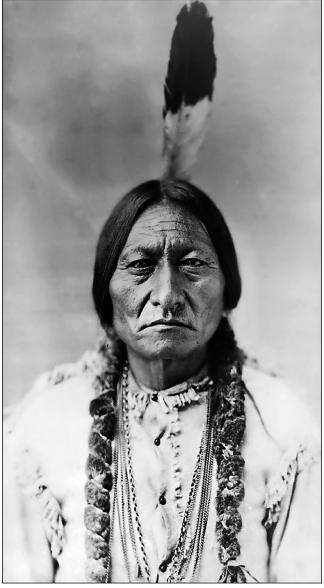
ENERAL Nelson A. Miles is considered to be the most successful Indian fighter of the Plains Indian Wars. His major campaigns against the Sioux, the Nez Perces, and the Apache and their subsequent treatment showed that Miles not only lived to fight Indians but also learned to respect them. Nelson A. Miles is characterized by Robert Utley as a man with a powerful ambition that led to his successes as an Indian fighter. Yet, his ambition also led him to demean his rivals, capitalize on others' achievements for his own personal benefits, and exploit many influences for self-promotion.1 Miles's ambition to succeed is a common denominator among many historians of the American West. Louise Barnett claimed that "Nelson Miles struck Sherman as more insufferably ambitious than all other officers put together."2 Barnett also said that Miles probably boasted the best record as Indian fighter, which is another attribution to Miles's ambitious attitude.3 However, as ambitious as he was, Robert Wooster claims, Miles's appetite for power was never satisfied.4 Charles Robinson also shows that "Miles carried self-aggrandizement to near absurdity." Yet, many historians agree that these character flaws do not deviate from his success in the Plains Indian Wars.

Several trends are common within historians' perception of Miles's conduct and his performance: he was ambitious, he was determined to succeed, he never missed an opportunity of self-promotion over his rivals, and he is the best Indian fighter of the Plains Indian Wars. To understand Miles's success as an Indian fight-

er it is imperative to understand his life and achievements prior to the Plains Indian Wars.

Nelson Appleton Miles was born on August 8, 1839, on a small farm near Massachusetts. After attending local schools, he moved to Boston at the age of seventeen to work in a crockery shop. In Boston, Miles continued night school and informally learned about the military through a former French officer. Although Miles had meager military education and experience, he assembled a volunteer company of seventy men after the American Civil War broke out in 1861. Miles's initial commission was as first lieutenant in the 22nd Massachusetts Infantry. In 1862, as newly commissioned lieutenant colonel, Miles led the 61st New York Infantry against the Confederates at Fair Oaks, Virginia. Miles's performance at Fair Oaks and Antietam led to his appointment as a colonel, and his valiant efforts at Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg led to his commission as a brevet brigadier general of volunteers and later the Medal of Honor. By 1864, Miles advanced to a brigadier general of volunteers, and led campaigns all the way up to Appomattox.

In 1865, at the age of twenty-six, Miles was promoted to major general of volunteers in charge of 26,000 men and officers. After the American Civil War, Miles supervised the confinement of Jefferson Davis at Fort Monroe, Virginia. With the downsizing of the postwar army, Miles left the volunteers. In 1868, he married the niece of Senator John Sherman of Ohio and Lieutenant General William T. Sherman, Mary Hoyt Sherman. In 1869, Miles reported to the frontier to command the 5th



Sitting Bull.

Infantry; Miles's career as an Indian fighter began in the Red River War of 1874-1875.<sup>6</sup> Miles's experiences during the American Civil War would prove invaluable in the wars against the Plains Indian.

Miles's first Indian fighting experience came in the Red River War of 1874-1875 which took place throughout the Staked Plains of the Texas Panhandle. Miles replaced General John Pope during the Red River War. Robert Utley characterizes Miles as temperamental, but his ambition "destined him to become one of a small handful of successful Indian-fighting generals." The Staked Plains of Texas were considered only habitable by Indians, but as Miles would show time and time again," wherever and whenever Indians could fight, so could soldiers, regardless of terrain or weather." Miles later proved this in the freezing weather of Montana and the smoldering heat of Texas and Arizona.

Miles's march across the Staked Plains punished his soldiers, but this experience impressed on Miles the need for equipment and supplies to fight in rugged terrain. Miles's leadership in the Red River War contributed to the end of all hostilities on the southern plains for all time. For Greene portrayed Miles as, "Often abrupt and demanding in his relations with others, he nonetheless possessed leadership instincts that brought out the best qualities in his troops." Miles's first great test to his leadership would come directly after the devastating defeat of George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

In 1874, miners discovered gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The Black Hills were located on the Great Sioux reservation which was guaranteed to the Sioux by the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. Custer began to lead "scientific expeditions" into the territory, and behind him came hordes of gold-seekers. In June of 1876, Sioux leaders Crazy Horse, Two Moon, and Sitting Bull attacked and defeated a column of soldiers led by George Crook (a future rival of Nelson A. Miles). After this fight many of the Sioux tribes gathered at the valley of the Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn).<sup>11</sup>

After Crook's defeat, Custer began scouting the area for the massive congregation of Sioux Indians. At the end of the battle, 264 officers lay dead along with Custer. Miles now led the fight against the Sioux, and in Personal Recollections he recalled, "I had a well-drilled and splendidly-disciplined regiment, experienced in Indian campaigning — a command in which I placed a confidence which was reciprocated by officers and the soldiers — I did not feel the least hesitancy in taking it up in to that country.12 Based on his enthusiasm and past record, Miles's superiors' confidence could only be reinforced by his performance in the Great Sioux War."13 With this confident attitude and experienced column of soldiers, Miles chased Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, the two Sioux Indians responsible for orchestrating the Indian victory at Little Bighorn.

Even though Miles proved himself as a successful Indian fighter during the Red River War, this was a side note to Miles's major fights against the Sioux, Nez Perces, and Apache. It is imperative to include what historians have said about Miles and his attitude toward Indians before explaining his roles in his major fights. In his book Comanches, T. H. Feherenbach declares, "Personally, he (Miles) was one of the best friends the Plains tribes ever had; but he tried to impress upon the chiefs that unless they stopped killing and came in, there would be no mercy for them.<sup>14</sup> Fehrenbach also claims that Miles did not concern himself with Indian extermination; the major issue was ending the conflict quickly to begin the process of readjustment of assimilation. Miles never showed mercy with the Indians he fought, but as soon as they laid down their weapons they were treated fairly.<sup>15</sup> It is important to understand that Miles never intended to exterminate or destroy the Indians as a people; his only concern was to end the conflict in the least brutal way possible.

As Miles proved in the Staked Plains of Texas, anywhere an Indian could fight so too could the army. He chased Sitting Bull during the arctic Montana winter, and his previous experiences of logistics and the need for equipment served him well in the fight against Sitting Bull. Miles stated: "The only way to make the country tenable for us was to render it untenable for the Indians."16 In his war against the Sioux and their allies, Miles's soldiers occupied the hunting grounds of the Sioux and kept them in a constant state of fear that the troops would burst into their village at any time. 17 As Miles and his men began to patrol the Yellowstone for Sitting Bull, they discovered a note from Sitting Bull that asked why the men were in the land, and that he wanted them to leave because they had scared away the buffalo. He asked them to turn back and leave or else he would fight.<sup>18</sup> Miles, of course, chose the latter.

In 1876, Miles held a rare parley with Sitting Bull (Miles believed talk was useless and preferred action). Robert Utley refers to Miles as Sitting Bull's special nemesis, and stated that "no colonel surpassed him (Miles) in ambition or vanity, nor in energy or ability. He hungered obsessively for distinction and promotion."19 The first meeting proved unsuccessful because Miles demanded an unconditional surrender, and the second meeting failed when neither party budged. Miles then gave Sitting Bull an ultimatum: Surrender or be declared a hostile and attacked.<sup>20</sup> The conferences resulted with several other Sioux chiefs submitting to Miles, but Sitting Bull left to join his tribesman.21 With little progress made, Miles prepared his troops for battle. Sitting Bull planned to fire the prairies to stall the soldiers long enough for him to flee to Canada. But Miles closed in on Sitting Bull, and the Battles of Cedar Creek and Ash Creek would result in a victory for Miles, and as historian Jerome Greene states, "Miles's vigorous movement North of the Yellowstone displayed both his propensity to go after the Indians on their own terrain and his willingness to act diplomatically."22

Another harsh blow to Sitting Bull and his Sioux alliance came when their Cheyenne allies lost their village to Ranald Mackenzie.<sup>23</sup> Lame Deer of the Minneconjoux Sioux vowed to never surrender, yet Miles's tactics worked, and Lame Deer surrendered under the expectation that he would forfeit his ponies and ammunition. Amazingly, Miles sold the ponies and ammunition to purchase livestock for some of the Indian families.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, Sitting Bull found temporary asylum in Canada; on the other hand, Crazy Horse continued his fight against Miles and the army.

With Sitting Bull in Canada and the Sioux allies defeated, Crazy Horse remained as the last Sioux warrior left to carry on the Great Sioux War. But, Miles wanted to end the Great Sioux War that winter. After Crazy Horse witnessed the condition of Indian refugees

flooding into his camps, he decided that peace talks might serve his people better. Under a flag of truce, five Indians rode out to lobby for peace, but they were met by Miles's Crow scouts, lifelong enemies of the Sioux. The Crow scouts pulled the unarmed delegates from their horses and killed them.<sup>25</sup> Angered over the bungled peace attempts, Miles took the Crow's horses and sent them to the Sioux as an apology. However, with diplomacy discredited, the subsequent Battle of Wolf Mountain became the last major engagement of the Great Sioux War.

Crazy Horse sought to trap Miles and his men in the winter snow at Battle Butte. However, Miles, as he has proven before, fought the Indians on their own terrain. The fighting raged on for hours with neither side making any headway. Eventually, a snowstorm halted the battle with no clear victory declared at the time.26 Miles's persistence to fight Crazy Horse in the winter paid off. Miles's logistical experience led to a "tactical victory for the army and an unrecoverable military defeat for the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes."27 Miles boasted of his victory against Crazy Horse because he "had taught the destroyers of Custer that there was one small command that could whip them as long as they dared face it."28 Ironically, Crazy Horse met his fate at the hands of a fellow Indian. Little Bigman, who fought with Crazy Horse at Wolf Mountain, betrayed Crazy Horse. With the death of Crazy Horse, the only major chief still defiant of the United States was Sitting Bull, but he was still in Canada.

Sitting Bull felt rather safe in Canada, but scarce food and harsh winters decimated his people. Steadily, his own people began to sneak back into the United States to surrender because at least they would be given rations and clothing. As famine and war with Canadian tribes threatened his people, Sitting Bull finally surrendered at Fort Buford, Dakota Territory on July 19, 1881.<sup>29</sup> The Great Sioux War ended, but Sitting Bull's role as leader of his people remained dormant until the Ghost Dance movement.

Sitting Bull spent nine years at Standing Rock Reservation under the watchful eye of Indian agent James McLaughlin. In 1890, a Pauite Indian named Wavoka began to preach the Ghost Dance religion. The religion centered on Christian messages in which Indians danced a prescribed message that brought deceased Indians back to "a land bounteous in game and all the other riches of the natural world, a land free of sickness and want, a land where all tribes dwelt in peace."<sup>30</sup> Sitting Bull endorsed this religion, and the Indian agent at Standing Rock, James McLaughlin, became suspicious that Sitting Bull might instigate a rebellion amongst the Standing Rock Indians. Miles also recognized the threat of Sitting Bull and authorized his arrest. Miles employed Wild Bill Cody to arrest Sitting Bull because they shared a mutual respect for each other from their Wild West Shows. "For Miles," Charles Phillips states, "the arrest



Miles and Buffalo Bill Cody view a "hostile" Indian camp near Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota, January 16, 1891.

\*\*Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration\*\*

of Sitting Bull would be a momentous act in great drama. It should not be left to the Indians, and it should not be done secretively; if anything, it called for showmanship."<sup>31</sup> However, McLaughlin undermined Miles request and had Cody distracted while he sent other Indians to arrest Sitting Bull. In the chaos that ensued, Red Tomahawk, an Indian policeman, shot Sitting Bull in the back of the head.<sup>32</sup> With the death of Sitting Bull, the last of the Great Sioux leaders was gone, but Miles engaged in the earlier pursuit and capture of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces.

The Nez Perces Indians made their home in Northeastern Oregon, and they established early relations with the Lewis and Clark expeditions. For the most part, they managed to avoid a role in the Pacific Northwest Wars. In the early 1860s, many of the Nez Perces agreed to live on reservations rather than fight over the land. However, once miners discovered gold on Nez Perces' land in 1863, the whites flooded into Nez Perces' lands. The gold rush led to the removal of the land on the reservation where the mineral deposits were located thus shrinking the reservation even more.33 A new division within the Nez Perces emerged with Chief Joseph as their leader; they were the "nontreaties." In 1877, not long after the end of the Great Sioux War, the pursuit of the Nez Perces by Nelson Miles proved to be one of the most epic struggles in Anglo-Indian history.

As mentioned before, Miles did not endorse the concept of Indian extermination. His sympathy toward the Nez Perces is evident in his autobiography, *Serving the Republic*:

Another Indian war, or, more strictly speaking, another cruel injustice, was to be enacted. It would require a volume to record the history of the Nez Perces Indians; their loyalty to the government;

their hospitality and kindness to the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804; the excellent care of property and animals of the expedition while the explorers went down the Columbus to the Pacific coast; their truthful boast that in nearly a hundred years of intercourse with a superior race no white man had ever been killed by a Nez Perces.<sup>35</sup>

It is apparent that Miles regarded his task of subduing the Nez Perces as difficult because of the fact that the Nez Perces never looked for war, but like many other Indian tribes war came to them. Prior to Miles's fight against Nez Perces, former Union General Oliver O. Howard fought the Nez Perces with little success. Howard had one chance for victory after he routed the Indians at the Battle of Clearwater, but his caution led to the epic race of the Nez Perces to rendezvous with Sitting Bull in Canada.<sup>36</sup> Miles closely watched the Nez Perces' flight, but his soldiers were busy patrolling the Canadian border waiting for their opportunity to seize Sitting Bull or any of his Sioux followers.<sup>37</sup> After several failed and costly attempts to capture the Nez Perces camps, Miles decided to lay siege to the camp.<sup>38</sup> This setback worried Miles because he feared that if General Howard arrived soon, he might try to share victory with

Miles and his troops were in an advantageous position overlooking the Nez Perces camps. They continued a constant bombardment of the camps, and the Indian marksmen returned a constant barrage of bullets.<sup>39</sup> However, Miles had no intention of annihilating the Indians; it was merely an attempt to break the will of the Indians. Miles sent a messenger to demand the surrender of Chief Joseph, but Chief Joseph did not respond right away. He told the messenger he would let Miles know his decision soon. The following day, some of Miles's

Sioux scouts rode out under a flag of truce to meet Chief Joseph. 40 These Sioux scouts were formerly his enemies, but Miles enlisted hostile Indians immediately upon their surrender to keep the government from shipping them off to reservations. 41 The Sioux scouts told Chief Joseph they believed that General Miles was sincere and truly wanted peace. 42 Miles actually violated the flag of truce and held the chief prisoner for two days. After the Nez Perces captured one of Miles's subordinates, Miles irritably traded captives. 43 However, during his captivity Chief Joseph stated "he (Miles) wished me to consider the situation that he did not want to kill my people unnecessarily."44

After Chief Joseph returned to his camp, he decided that surrender would be best for his people; the Battle of Bear Paw Mountains was over. Some Nez Perces did not agree with Chief Joseph's decision, and they slipped away and eventually found Sitting Bull's camp. Miles promised the Nez Perces that he would keep them at the Yellowstone until winter ended, and afterward they

could return to the Lapwai Reservation in Idaho.<sup>45</sup> After all, Miles kept his word to some of the Sioux in Montana, but the government overruled Miles's promises in this case.<sup>46</sup> Chief Joseph's surrender is forever immortalized as he spoke, "Hear me my chiefs, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."<sup>47</sup> Miles referred to Chief Joseph as the "highest type of Indian I have ever known."<sup>48</sup> Chief Joseph ultimately surrendered to Miles and the army, yet once again, Miles did not miss the opportunity for self-aggrandizement over Howard.

For three months, 800 Nez Perces trekked through 1,700 miles of the roughest terrain in North America; all the while eluding the army and killing more than they lost. Even General Sherman admired the humanity and proficiency of the Nez Perces as they fled. He admired the fact that they refrained from scalping, allowed captive women to go free, and did not murder indiscriminately.<sup>49</sup> However, in the end, Miles took full credit for the capture of Chief Joseph. Even though Miles



In addition to his exploits in the American West, Miles served in the Spanish American War, here pictured in Puerto Rico in 1898.

Courtesy Library of Congress

came to Howard's aid, and ultimately ended the fighting, he accepted full credit. Howard and his men were bitter toward Miles, as Robert Utley shows, because "His arrogant assumption of full credit ignored three months of exhausting and frustrating campaigning." Regardless of Miles's arrogance toward Howard, the fact that the government rejected his peace proposal to Chief Joseph angered Miles.

Disgracefully, the government did not return the Nez Perces to the Lapwai Reservation. Instead, they were shipped in cattle cars to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where many died of malaria and heartbreak.<sup>51</sup> During his exile, Chief Joseph never gave up the fight for his people. They were taken from Fort Leavenworth and sent to the Indian Territory, where the conditions were no better. Malaria and faulty shelters killed many of the remaining Nez Perces. Finally in 1878, Chief Joseph spoke with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, E. A. Hayt. When Chief Joseph told Hayt of Miles's promise, Hayt urged the secretary of the interior to investigate whether or not the promise was broken. Howard said that the Nez Perces under Looking Glass violated the agreement, but Miles disagreed and said he would have started them west sooner except that winter kept them from travelling.<sup>52</sup> As Miles proclaims in Serving the Republic, he wanted to send the Indians back to Idaho, but they were sent to Fort Leavenworth where they died from malaria. Miles lobbied for the return of the Nez Perces until 1884 when they were finally able to return to Idaho.53 It was common for Miles to treat Indians who surrendered with fairness, and his arrogance would not allow his promises to be totally undermined. On the other hand, Miles now faced another challenge: the subjugation of Geronimo and his Chiricahua Apaches in the Southwest.

The Apache Indians were life-long enemies of the Mexican settlers, but when America acquired the Mexican Cession in 1848, it inherited the Apache Indians. General George Crook was able to temporarily subdue many of the Apaches in the mid 1870s, and many of the Apaches agreed to live on reservations. However, the Chiricahuas and Warm Springs Apaches remained fiercely resistant.<sup>54</sup> Two leaders of the Apache emerged and they were both descendants of the Apache warriors Mangas Colorado and Cochise: Victorio and Geronimo.<sup>55</sup> Once Victorio died, Geronimo became the last of the Apache chiefs.

George Crook originally pursued Geronimo as he fled from the U.S. Army. In 1886, Geronimo agreed to surrender to Crook, and many hoped for the end of the Apache Wars. Crook even sent a telegram to Washington boasting of the good news. <sup>56</sup> However, the celebration was premature. Geronimo and his counterparts acquired alcohol from a bootlegger. As the Apaches began to march to Fort Bowie, Geronimo and around twenty other Apaches slipped away (the numbers range from eighteen to twenty-four). <sup>57</sup> Crook's reputation was tar-

nished, and his attempt to make a conditional surrender was disapproved in Washington; therefore, he asked to be relieved of his command. Miles once again answered the call to end another major Indian conflict. Miles decided to use more troops instead of relying on Indian scouts. He also attempted to set up heliographs to aid communication, but they were never put into full use.<sup>58</sup>

Geronimo wasted little time welcoming Miles to Apache warfare. He struck across the United States-Mexico border and attacked the Peck ranch.59 Miles selected two men, Henry Lawton and Leonard Wood (future organizer of the Rough Riders), to assist him because "they believed, with him (Miles), that white troops could prevail over Apaches."60 For four months, Miles and his men chased Geronimo over 2,000 miles. Miles also used the U.S. 4th Cavalry as a weapon in his seek and destroy missions against the Apaches.<sup>61</sup> Miles took precautionary measures and removed all Chiricahua and Warm Springs Apaches from Arizona, many of whom had already been shipped to Florida. 62 This proved useful when Lieutenant Gatewood told Geronimo of the fate of his comrades and family. Miles's strategies ultimately paid off, and Geronimo finally surrendered to him.

At Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, on September 4, 1886, Geronimo surrendered to Miles. President Cleveland wanted Miles to turn over the Apaches for immediate criminal trial, but Miles promised Geronimo he would be held in Florida until the president made a decision on their future. 63 Perhaps it was out of respect for Geronimo, or the fact that Miles's arrogance would not allow him to renege on surrender terms again, but somehow Miles kept his terms with Geronimo when he convinced the president to let the Apaches remain in Florida.<sup>64</sup> Similar to the outcome of the Nez Perces War, Miles claimed that he was the only one responsible for wrangling Geronimo. After the surrender of Geronimo, Robert Utley claims, "Miles's ego was bigger than ever and he still disdained Crook as much as ever."65 Regardless of Miles's motives, the Apache threat to Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico was eliminated. But regardless of Miles's success against Sioux, Nez Perces, and Apaches, his final test came with the Ghost Dance movement and the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890.

As mentioned before, the Ghost Dance movement swept throughout the frontier reservations like wild fire. Sitting Bull's arrest occurred because of his involvement with the Ghost Dance, which also cost him his life. However, "one other chief who worried General Miles was Big Foot." Miles called for Big Foot's arrest because Red Cloud, another important Sioux leader, invited Big Foot to join him at Pine Ridge for peacekeeping purposes. Miles automatically assumed that Big Foot left to join hostile Indians at a gathering known as the Stronghold. Miles directed Major Samuel Whitside to intercept Big Foot and redirect them to Wounded Knee until further arrangements could be

made. Whitside allowed the Sioux to keep their weapons until they made camp, which proved to be a fatal mistake. 68 In Serving the Republic, Miles recalls how the Indians were asked to disarm themselves, and in the process a misunderstanding occurred and a shot went off. In the confusion, the Indians ran for their remaining weapons, and the soldiers (under the command of Colonel James Forsyth) opened fire on the warriors. In the chaos, many of the bullets hit women and children.<sup>69</sup> The Indians suffered losses of around 150, mostly women and children, and the army lost 25 men. 70 Miles said of the massacre, "It was a fatality, however, that Indian hostilities, uprisings, and wars should finally close in a deplorable tragedy."71 In the end, Miles relieved Forsyth of his command for the indiscriminate killing of women and children.72 Yet, the courts exonerated and later reinstated Forsyth against Miles's wishes.

Nelson A. Miles was the best Indian fighter of the Plains Indian Wars. Although Miles's lived to fight the Indians, he ultimately learned to respect their ability to fight and their will to survive. He ultimately ended the wars with three major tribes of the American frontier: the Sioux, the Nez Perces, and the Apache. Although Miles was known to accept full credit while only being present for half of the battle, the Indians were better off being defeated by Miles than any other army official. Miles constantly treated the Indians fairly so long as they surrendered. He denounced the merciless killing of Indians, and only killed to bring the wars to an end. His fellow officers loathed his arrogant attitude and his constant self aggrandizement. In the end, Miles came to respect those he learned to defeat, and despite his methods of success, his contributions led to the end of the Plains Indian Wars. Historians portray him as arrogant, ambitious, self-promoting, and pompous. However, they all come to the same conclusion in the end: Miles was the best Indian fighter that ever lived.

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