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SITTING BULL: GREAT COMMANDER AND STRATEGIST—OR SAVAGE? A VIEW THROUGH THE CLAUSEWITZIAN PRISM

CORE COURSE 2 ESSAY

LTC MICHAEL J LAVINE/CLASS OF '96

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SEMINAR L

FACULTY SEMINAR LEADERS. CAPT BILL TYSON (USN)/COL LEE BLANK (USAF)

FACULTY ADVISOR. COL HARRY ROTHMANN

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"On the other hand, you will never find a savage who is a truly great commander, and very rarely one who would be considered a military genius, since this requires a degree of intellectual powers beyond anything that a primitive people can develop "

Carl von Clausewitz[1]

Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th century German military theorist, was most likely uninformed about the American Indians and their struggle to retain their independence and he was definitely not familiar with Sitting Bull as this Indian chief had not yet been born Clausewitz would have considered these Indians–and Sitting Bull–savages, and, based on the above excerpted quotation from On War, incapable of producing a great commander Although not explicitly stated, Clausewitz would also conclude that savages, given their lack of necessary intellectual powers were also incapable of producing a military strategist

This analytical essay will clearly show that Clausewitz was incorrect in his views by demonstrating that Sitting Bull. the leader of the Hunkpapa Sioux and later the leader of the greater Teton Indian Nation, was both a great commander and strategist and was the pre-eminent Sioux Indian commander and strategist in the period 1840-1876, this time in American history can be categorized as "The Warriors Last Stand "[2] This essay will also show that Sitting Bull possessed the intellectual acumen to understand the theoretical underpinnings of war even though he had never been formally schooled in warfare or strategy

To prove this thesis, this essay will examine the origin, development, and application of Sitting Bull's concept of warfare within Clausewitz's framework for war Sitting Bull's practical views on the nature, purpose, and conduct of war will be examined in the context of his leadership during two northern plains Indian campaigns conducted between 1866 through 1876 These views will then be analyzed based on Clausewitz's theory on war This essay will conclude that Sitting Bull derived and executed a consistent application of warfare, possessed the necessary intellect, and was a great commander and strategist In many cases there is clear congruence between Sitting Bull's application and Clausewitz's theory The point as to whether Sitting Bull was a military genius will not be debated since Clausewitz left maneuvering room that a savage could be a military genius, albeit rarely

BACKGROUND

Sitting Bull did not have the benefit of reading Clausewitz for although he was an eloquent orator.[3] there is no record that he could read or write He is usually remembered for his role in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, this battle resulted in the annihilation of the United States Seventh Cavalry led by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer Lesser known, but more important, is Sitting Bull's role in leading the Sioux Indians initially and later the Greater Teton Nation in resisting the encroaching American frontiersmen and in resisting the harsh federal Indian policies imposed during the latter half of the nineteenth century

Born in 1834 into the tribal traditions of the nomadic northern plains Indians. Sitting Bull began participating as a warrior when he was fourteen. During his youth he demonstrated prowess as a hunter and began preparing for spiritual leadership of the Hunkpapa Sioux, a role he would inherit from his father, a mystic and Sioux war chief Approaching adulthood, Sitting Bull became a member of the Strong Heart Warrior Society in his tribe, an honor bestowed on the bravest warriors as demonstrated by performance in battle By the mid 1850's he began to assert political influence on his tribe by taking charge of the Strong Hearts [4]

As he was maturing, several events contributed to Sitting Bull's development as a militant and his distrust of the white man Sitting Bull knew about the forcible relocation of the conquered eastern American Indian tribes to the American west, since he and the Sioux people fought these immigrant Indians as they resettled in traditional Sioux hunting areas These relocated Indian tribes brought with them information concerning the total subjugation of their tribes by the white man, a history of broken promises by the white man and tales of Indian populations ravaged by the white man's diseases, smallpox and cholera Sitting Bull also had random encounters with non-Indian settlers and he determined that these settlers intended to settle the western lands and displace the native Indian inhabitants

Sitting Bull was never an elected chief in his tribe, but his prestige and influence was greater than other high-ranking political leaders in his tribe Much influence was derived from Sitting Bull's focus and protracted efforts to protect his tribes hunting areas and culture from outside influences [5] Initially, this challenge consisted of incursions by other Indian tribes, but by the 1860s the majority of these incursions came from non-Indians During the incursions by other Indian tribes, Sitting Bull recognized there was no united Indian nation among the western and northern plains Indians This factionalism was a weakness among the Indians and Sitting Bull was astute enough to realize this shortcoming–particularly given the foreboding encroachment of whites into the traditional hunting and sacred areas of the Sioux

By the mid-1860s, Sitting Bull was firmly established as the leader of the Hunkpapa Sioux and was clearly a leader among the northern plains Indians Sitting Bull's actions, both political and military conducted from 1860 through 1876 will illustrate Sitting Bull's concepts and application of warfare

NATURE OF WAR

Throughout his life, Sitting Bull held the consistent aim to retain the Sioux way of life as nomadic hunters living on their own hunting and gathering lands He also wanted the Indians to retain their culture and heritage Freedom for Sitting Bull represented the open plains full of buffalo, these plains would ideally be occupied by other Sioux tribes With this as a background, Sitting Bull considered war as a tool to realize this aim

Prior to 1860, the major challenge to the Hunkpapa Sioux was from other Indian tribes as the northern plains tribes roamed the vast great plains in search of buffalo Wars were fought by the Sioux on a *limited* basis to retain traditional hunting and gathering areas Many of these "wars" actually consisted of skirmishes with the weaker side fighting, then yielding and moving on War was conducted on a *limited scale* without the intent of total disarmament of the enemy These wars were necessary for Sitting Bull to have his enemy, other Indian tribes initially, yield to his will and prohibit encroachment on traditional Sioux hunting grounds

Sitting Bull's view on the nature of war changed once large U S Cavalry formations were introduced to the northern great plains After the American Civil War, the U S Cavalry moved westward to protect settlers and aid in the settlement of the western territories War now became a fight for survival of the Indian peoples, war now became a *total phenomenon* The white man wanted nothing less than the total subjugation of the Indians and their removal to reservations where the Indians could become acculturated in Anglo-American heritage and culture [6] Sitting Bull steadfastly abhorred this treatment toward the Indians and although his aim to retain traditional hunting and gathering grounds remained constant, he realized the white man, as represented by the U S Cavalry, represented a direct threat to the continued existence of Indian freedom and culture This evolving view on Sitting Bull's nature of war, from initially a limited war to ultimately a total war, is best reflected in his conduct of war and will be discussed later in this essay

Clausewitz described the nature of war as a remarkable trinity composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, the play of chance and probability, and wars subordination to policy This trinity coincides with Sitting Bull's view on the nature of war First, there was the element of extreme hatred of the white man and the white man's way of life This hatred of the white man permeated Indian society, particularly once Sitting Bull and his

followers realized the endgame was survival of their traditional way of life As a mystic, Sitting Bull believed in chance and the Indians attributed chance to their gods, they prayed and danced to their gods to give them good fortune and ' good medicine" they considered necessary to win in battle Although outnumbered many times, Sitting Bull believed that good luck and moral righteousness would allow the Indians to triumph As will be shown in the next section on the purpose of war, Sitting Bull believed that war was an instrument of policy

War was viewed by Sitting Bull as combat–pure and simple This combat could be symbolic as it was many times when fighting other Indian tribes, or could be focused on the annihilation of the enemy as demonstrated in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Sitting Bull was in total agreement with Clausewitz that there was only one means in war and that was combat Sitting Bull realized that wars are fought in the atmosphere of danger, physical exertion, and friction as demonstrated by his bravery in battle

PURPOSE OF WAR

Sitting Bull was both the political and military leader of initially the Hunkpapa Sioux and finally the coalition of the Sioux. Cheyenne, and Arapaho–the greater Teton Indian nation [7] In his role as both a political and military leader. he recognized that war was not just an act of policy but a continuation of politics by other means This was demonstrated in his dealings with the white man as early as the mid 1860s

During the period 1866-1868, Sitting Bull was selected as the principal defender of Sioux nationalism and became the leader of approximately 20,000 northern plains Indians who resisted the attempts of the white man to forcibly relocate them to reservations Sitting Bull firmly resisted the acculturation process whereby Indians could be assimilated into the Anglo-American society and he wanted to retain his own territory to keep the Indian culture intact This principle of maintaining Indian lands and culture is consistent throughout Sitting Bull's life However, he was willing to negotiate prior to going to war, as long as his political aim to maintain Indian lands and culture could be accommodated

When his political aim to retain the Sioux ancestral hunting and gathering grounds against further encroachment by both non-Indian settlers and the U S Army failed during negotiations with the white man, Sitting Bull led his warriors on raids from 1866 through 1868 against both settlers and the U S Army In these battles near the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. Sitting Bull and his followers were able to disrupt the Army and communications to the extent that the government was willing to settle for a negotiated peace [8] The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty forbade whites to enter specific tracts of land which was Indian territory and gave the

Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes a spacious reservation encompassing the entire western half of present day South Dakota In addition, unceded lands to the west through the Powder River country to the Big Horn Mountains was totally reserved for Indian use [9] This settlement satisfied some of Sitting Bull's war aims by retaining ancestral land solely for Indian use, but, although the terms were generous to the Indians, they were not acceptable to Sitting Bull Sitting Bull did not accept the peace treaty because the treaty considerably diminished the vast ancestral range of the Sioux However, other Indian leaders, to include Red Cloud, accepted the treaty and retired to the reservation.

The period 1870 through 1876 represented another challenge to the Sioux leader's political aims of retaining their ancestral hunting and sacred territories During this time, gold seekers entered the Black Hills disregarding the Fort Laramie treaty When it became apparent that the Grant administration was not going to enforce this political treaty, Sitting Bull began to assemble his followers [10] Again, military force was necessary as a continuation of political activity by other means This military action culminated in the battle of the Little Big Horn The purpose of Sitting Bull's campaign was again to retain ancestral Indian lands, but the results of this battle served to galvanize the U S government and Army into action Aroused and humiliated by these and other defeats, the Army was now unwilling to negotiate and concentrated on a relentless pursuit of the Sioux Sitting Bull was never again able to put together a coherent fighting force that could challenge the U S Cavalry and he recognized that his military power was ineffective as a political instrument Sitting Bull and many of his followers escaped into Canada in late 1876 but surrendered to U S authorities in 1881, he was then imprisoned for two years Sitting Bull died in 1890 at the hands of the Indian Police

Analyzing Clausewitz reveals congruence between Sitting Bull's application and Clausewitz's theory on the purpose of war Clausewitz stated that war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument–a continuation of political activity by other means This is entirely consistent with Sitting Bull's actions and his goal to maintain Indian ancestral lands and culture Sitting Bull would negotiate prior to going to war and would remain at peace if the political outcome was consistent with his goals When negotiations failed or were unfavorable, he would lead his followers to war in order to achieve their goals Additionally, Sitting Bull had the advantage of being both a political and military leader, thereby allowing him to be consistent in the use of war as a political instrument–a fact Clausewitz would have appreciated

CONDUCT OF WAR

There are few, if any, written Indian records dealing with their conduct of military campaigns The Indian culture depended on elders verbally relating the tribe's history in order to preserve history from one generation to the next The Indian conduct of warfare, primarily told by the white man, is often biased This fact is shown in a book on George Custer where Custer's leaders attempted to recompose the Battle of the Little Big Horn to deflect any culpability from themselves [11] There is however, sufficient documentation to determine the conduct of war used by Sitting Bull during his tenure as the leader of the Sioux and ultimately leader of the Greater Teton Nation

Sitting Bull's views and application for the conduct of war changed during his lifetime In Sitting Bull's early years, war was primarily waged against other Indians tribes as the nomadic, northern great plains Indian tribes competed for food and hunting sources War was necessary to have the enemy do your will, but was conducted on a limited basis to protect your hunting and sacred areas It was akin to a romantic type of war where, although warriors were killed and their camps burned and wives and children taken prisoner, there was much tradition and bravery was revered An example is the Indian concept of the "coup " Most plains Indians carried a coup stick, a long slender rod of wood, which was used to touch an opposing warrior in a fight You brought honor to yourself when you could conduct a 'coup" of an armed enemy and then escape [12] Although this type of conduct was admired by the Indians, it did not inspire any admiration or sympathy in the white man The conduct of this style of war did not lead to many large engagements but rather to limited skirmishes with small groups of warriors fighting other small groups of opposing warriors

Sitting Bull's conduct of war changed when he progressed from the limited warfare of fighting primarily Indians in the 1850s to total warfare fighting the spreading encroachment of the white settlers and their armies in the 1860s Given the limited resources that Sitting Bull had and his employment of these resources, we can describe his evolving conduct of war against the white man as a large engagement, or possibly more than one engagement, followed by long periods of *unconventional* warfare until the necessity or opportunity for another large engagement arose An example is in 1874-1876 when two years of small engagements and raids culminated in two successive large engagements, one at the Rosebud and the other at the Little Big Horn The battle of the Rosebud represented a departure from previous Indian tactics in that the Indians attacked first and in overwhelming force [13]

It is interesting to note that Sitting Bull's conduct of total war envisioned more than only decisive battles Decisive battles were only a part of his strategy, in reality the Indians were fighting a guerrilla style war against a conventional Army The Indians would continually strike at the U S Cavalry using small raids and skirmishes

Sitting Bull determined that the U S Cavalry was the enemy center of gravity and was the focus of the majority of his attacks, but he would also conduct small raids against settlers to serve as an irritant to the U S Cavalry and to weaken the will of the settlers

The use of unconventional warfare, usually utilizing small raiding parties by Sitting Bull and his followers was based on the culture and traditions of the plains Indians but was also ideally suited to counter the tactics of the U S Cavalry The Cavalry in many cases was doomed to fight the Indians with techniques of conventional warfare For a century the Army fought the Indians as if they were British, Mexicans, or Confederates Each Indian war was expected to be the last so the General's never developed a doctrine or organization adapted to the special problems posed by the Indian style of fighting Indian warfare was usually unconventional warfare but the Army's answer was no more innovative than the ' total war" concepts of Sheridan and Sherman which were imported from the Shenandoah and the March to the Sea right onto the great plains [14]

Engagements in the Indian wars were not of the magnitude experienced in Napoleonic warfare or envisioned by Clausewitz In a theater of operations with only several thousand soldiers, any engagement using over one half of these soldiers is a large engagement Similarly, in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, over three thousand Indian warriors were available and this represented the majority of the northern plains Indian males of fighting age that were not on the reservations

From the Indian perspective war was a brave and moral act and these qualities were no better exhibited than by their chiefs with Sitting Bull representative of all great Indian chiefs The Indian's revered bravery, experience, and boldness An example of Sitting Bull's boldness was demonstrated during a brisk firefight with the U S Cavalry, when Sitting Bull dismounted between the two forces, seated himself on the ground, filled his pipe, set it alight with flint and stone, and sat there smoking while the bullets zipped past him He did not budge until the pipe was finished and the bowl scraped clean.[15] Although this was an act of boldness at the individual level it inspired much courage and confidence in his abilities as leader of the large Sioux nation

The goals set by Sitting Bull were almost always defensive He wanted to retain his tribal lands and did not want to proceed farther than removing the enemy from his hunting and gathering lands This enemy could be hostile Indian tribes, white settlers, or the U S Cavalry Sitting Bull believed in fighting a defensive war but he retained the ability to go on the offense if necessary–this capability was demonstrated at the battle of the Rosebud

Analyzing Sitting Bull's conduct of war against Clausewitz's theory yields mainly convergence but there are several distinct differences Sitting Bull is not in total accord with Clausewitz's premise that strategy is the use

of engagements to achieve the object of the war Although there were several major engagements by Sitting Bull's forces, there were far more incidents of unconventional warfare This unconventional form of warfare may not have been envisioned by Clausewitz as he was trapped in a continental European model of warfare based on large engagements and decisive battles Sitting Bull believed in engagements and decisive battles but had a flexible strategy on how to achieve his goal of territorial integrity Sitting Bull was also practical in his adaptation of strategy and tactics based on his limited means In many cases he was able to maximize his results (ends) using minimum means

The moral elements defined by Clausewitz match the moral qualities demonstrated by Sitting Bull Even Clausewitz would agree that Sitting Bull possessed great moral characteristics as a commander based on Sitting Bull's experience and courageous followers coupled with Sitting Bull's traits of boldness and perseverance

Clausewitz had a much broader concept of victory than Sitting Bull, but Sitting Bull had more modest means than Clausewitz had previously studied Sitting Bull's goal was to retain traditional hunting and gathering grounds and retain sacred territory He would accomplish this through defeating the U S Cavalry, but he did not see that he had to occupy Washington D C or capture additional territory to his east Acting with utmost concentration and speed was a principle practiced by Sitting Bull, these were two principles that Clausewitz stated underlined all strategic planning Based on his conduct of warfare, there is sufficient proof that Sitting Bull, although ignorant of Clausewitz's theory of war, applied a very similar theory as demonstrated through Sitting Bull's practical application and execution of warfare on the northern great plains Sitting Bull was possibly more flexible and visionary than Clausewitz since Sitting Bull realized the effectiveness of unconventional warfare as an integral component of total war

CONCLUSIONS

Sitting Bull was a great leader in both the political and military arenas As the uniting force for the Sioux Indians and later the greater Teton Nation, Sitting Bull demonstrated the political and military astuteness to forge an alliance which could meet the Indian aims to forcibly remove the white man from Indian ancestral hunting and gathering lands He was a tough negotiator as shown by his response to the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty As a military leader, Sitting Bull was the principal developer and executor of the Indian strategy to remove the white man from Indian territory in the present day northern plains states of South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana From the period 1860 through 1876, Sitting Bull served as the principal Indian leader in the northern plains and led his

coalition of tribes on several successful campaigns, reaching a military zenith in 1876 at the Battle of the Little Big Horn As seen through Sitting Bull's views on the nature, purpose, and conduct of war, uneducated or primitive does not infer the lack of intellectual capacity to understand and conduct warfare or to be a great military leader

Additionally, based on his grasp of warfare and the strategy he developed, Sitting Bull could be described as a military strategist. Flexible strategies that evolved when the enemy changed from other Indian tribes to ultimately the U S Cavalry, show a keen acumen for the conduct of war The strategy and tactics Sitting Bull developed and employed resemble in many ways unconventional warfare tactics seen today

Although he received no formal education and his experience in warfare was on-the-job training, Sitting Bull developed a remarkably consistent and effective application of warfare that would have made Clausewitz proud Sitting Bull does not have a recorded autobiography and there is very little written by the Indians concerning their military study and history, however, dissecting Sitting Bull's political and military actions during the period 1860-1876 reveals that Sitting Bull did have a realistic and rational view of the nature, purpose, and conduct of war and his views and applications of warfare are in most aspects consistent with Clausewitzian theory

Sitting Bull's intransigence in the face of White aggression, his courage in defending his people, and his refusal to step aside in a remarkable struggle have marked Sitting Bull as a truly great commander and leader It would be interesting to see how Clausewitz would have analyzed the American northern plains Indian campaigns–from the Indian perspective Given the above essay, even Clausewitz would conclude that Sitting Bull was both a great leader and a strategist–and he should revise his quote listed at the beginning of this essay The following quote by Clausewitz, again excepted from On War, provides additional proof of Sitting Bull's stature as a truly great commander and strategist in accordance with Clausewitz's own writings coupled with the contents of this essay

> *The first, the most supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive*
>
> Carl von Clausewitz[10]

Notes

[1] von Clausewitz, Carl, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1976) 100

[2] Hagan, William, American Indians (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 1961) 92

[3] Capps, Benjamin, The Great Chiefs (Chicago Time-Life Books, 1975) 209

[4] Dockstader, Frederick, Great North American Indians (New York Litton Educational Publishing, Inc , 1977) 267

[5] Spiller, Roger and Dawson, Joseph, Dictionary of American Military Biography (Westport Greenwood Press 1984) 1007

[6] Hagan, William, American Indians (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 1961) 121-150

[7] Spiller, Roger and Dawson, Joseph, Dictionary of American Military Biography (Westport Greenwood Press, 1984) 1007

[8] Capps, Benjamin, The Great Chiefs (Chicago Time-Life Books, 1975) 196

[9] Capps, Benjamin, The Great Chiefs (Chicago Time-Life Books, 1975) 197

[10] Spiller, Roger and Dawson, Joseph, Dictionary of American Military Biography (Westport Greenwood Press, 1984) 1007

[11] Utley Robert, Cavalier in Buckskin (Norman University of Oklahoma Press 1988) 194-195

[12] Hagan, William, American Indians (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 1961) 106

[13] Capps, Benjamin, The Great Chiefs (Chicago Time-Life Books, 1975) 206

[14] Utley, Robert, Cavalier in Buckskin (Norman University of Oklahoma Press, 1988) 206

[15] Capps, Benjamin, The Great Chiefs (Chicago Time-Life Books, 1975) 199

[16] von Clausewitz, Carl, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1976) 88-89