New Mexico Historical Review

Volume 62 | Number 1 Article 5

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation
Utley, Robert M.. "Oliver Otis Howard." *New Mexico Historical Review* 62, 1 (1987).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol62/iss1/5

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Oliver Otis Howard

ROBERT M. UTLEY

Among the luminaries of the Indian frontier, Oliver Otis Howard, the one-armed "praying general" of Civil War fame, found himself overshadowed by such bright stars as George Crook, Nelson Miles, Ranald Mackenzie, and George Custer. He achieved a brief and merited prominence in 1872 for making peace with the Apache, Cochise, and an uncomplimentary notoriety in 1877 for his apparently futile pursuit of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perces across Idaho and Montana. Less visible but more creditable was his management of the campaigns against the Bannocks and Paiutes in 1878 and the Sheepeaters in 1879. While not in the front rank of Indian-fighting commanders, however, Howard's place in history does not rest solely on his frontier record. In addition to his Indian service, he was a corps and army commander in the Civil War, head of the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction, educator, humanitarian, churchman, author, and lecturer. He lived a long and richly productive life, one that posterity has ample cause to recall and record.[1]

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1. The standard biography of O. O. Howard is John A. Carpenter, *Sword and Olive Branch: Oliver Otis Howard* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964). See also O. O. Howard, *Autobiography* (2 vols., New York: Baker and Taylor, 1907); and, for the Freedmen's Bureau, William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1968).

The outbreak of the Civil War found Howard, at age thirty, a wholly inconspicuous lieutenant of ordnance in the United States Army. A staff billet in the little prewar army offered few opportunities for distinction, and his seven-year career had not been notable. He had been married for six years and had fathered three children. He had also found Christ, and increasingly the ministry beckoned. But the bombardment of Fort Sumter intervened, directing his destiny permanently, if not unwaveringly, in military pathways.

Two valuable assets spurred Howard's subsequent rise. He was well educated, having attended Bowdoin College as well as the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. But of even greater importance, he was well connected with the political leaders of his home state of Maine—Governor Israel Washburn, U.S. Representative Anson P. Morrill, and, most portentously, the Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives, James G. Blaine. The last, the Republican Party's "Plumed Knight" of the 1870s and 1880s, became Howard's personal friend and official supporter for more than three decades. Nevertheless, in a time when military officers assiduously courted political help in securing promotion, Howard seems not to have deliberately sought the favor he enjoyed. Rather, creditable performance won the backing of state leaders eager to nourish and be nourished by such military talent as Maine could put forth.

As colonel of the Third Maine Volunteers, Howard fought at First Manassas. Elevation to brigadier general followed at once. At Seven Pines, on June 1, 1862, two balls shattered his right arm. A surgeon amputated it at the elbow, and for the rest of his life an empty right sleeve hooked to a button, together with a Bible in his left hand, fixed Howard's image in the public mind. Quickly back in the saddle, he fought at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. Promotion to major general came in November 1862.

A grievous setback at Chancellorsville and a controversial role at Gettysburg damaged Howard in the Army of the Potomac and prompted his transfer to the western theaters. Here he did well, serving William T. Sherman and George Thomas as a quietly competent corps commander in the actions that led to the collapse of Atlanta. When James McPherson fell in front of Atlanta, Sherman named Howard to command the Army of the Tennessee. In the celebrated "March to the Sea" and the Carolina campaign that followed, Howard led his army with an ability that fully met his chief's expectations. For both, the war ended on May 24, 1865, when they rode side by side at the head of

Oliver Otis Howard. Courtesy Oregon Historical Society.

the western armies parading down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.[2]

By the close of the war, Howard's distinguishing traits of character had crystallized and become widely known to the public. The most conspicuous of these, at times even ostentatious, was an all-pervading religious outlook. This gave him courage, compassion, strong resolve, and fixed purpose. Displayed like a conquering banner, however, it also irritated more worldly associates. Sherman is quoted as declaring on one occasion: "Well, that Christian soldier business is all right in its place, but he needn't put on airs when we are among ourselves."[3] Generals Joseph Hooker and George Crook made far less charitable remarks, and a fellow corps commander under Sherman, General Jefferson C. Davis, whose vocabulary was a marvel of the western armies, countered Howard's piety with spectacular exhibitions of profanity. Those who penetrated Howard's reserve discovered that his religion was not excessively prudish or moralistic and that a keen sense of humor lurked within. Few, however, perceived as acutely as he did himself the constant inner struggle between the humility decreed by his religion and the hunger for public approval born in his youth and encouraged by the military milieu.

A second notable characteristic, doubtless spawned by the first, was a well-developed social consciousness that led Howard into a lifelong crusade for the elevation of disadvantaged and minority peoples. He welcomed the assignment to head the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—the instrument fashioned by Congress to care for the recently freed slaves. This work in turn prompted him in 1867 to help establish Howard University in Washington, D.C. He served as its president from 1869 to 1874, while managing the Freedmen's Bureau at the same time. During his frontier service, Howard tried to assume a similar humanitarian stance toward the Indian, but in this he gained less success. The gulf separating his Christianity

2. In the postwar years Sherman and the regular army paid dearly for Howard's elevation to army command. The heir apparent to McPherson's post, the Illinois political general John A. Logan, concluded that he had been deprived of his rightful promotion by the West Point fraternity, which in a sense he had. After the war he founded the Grand Army of the Republic, chaired the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, and devoted his considerable energies to exalting the militia tradition and assailing military professionals and professionalism. His Senate seat afforded a firm platform for punishing the regulars for thwarting his ambitions in 1864. In the final parade down Pennsylvania Avenue, Howard rode next to Sherman in order to let the disgruntled Logan head the Army of the Tennessee.

3. Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman, Fighting Prophet* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company: 1932), 349–50.

from the Indian's spiritual beliefs inhibited genuine communication. Years later, near the end of his life, he labored in behalf of Lincoln Memorial University, an enterprise dedicated to providing educational opportunities for Tennessee's mountain whites.

General Sherman, head of the postwar regular army, in which Howard had been commissioned a brigadier general, frowned on his lieutenant's social work. He believed that the few soldiers permitted the army should stick to soldiering and leave "education, charity and religion" to civilian philanthropists.[4] He accurately forecast the grief that the Freedmen's Bureau would bring to Howard once the politicians got after him. In fact, Howard's loose administration and innocent trust in unworthy subordinates hastened the reckoning. He emerged only slightly tarnished, but happy enough at last to heed Sherman's advice and to accept command of the Department of the Columbia, in 1874, with headquarters in Portland, Oregon.

Howard did not come to his new duties a novice in Indian affairs, for he was already widely known as the general who made peace with Cochise. In 1872 President U.S. Grant had relieved him briefly from his Freedmen's Bureau responsibilities and sent him on a special peace mission to war-torn Arizona. His coming was welcomed neither by a militant populace crying for extermination of the Indians nor by his fellow army officers poised for a vigorous campaign against the hostile Apaches. The department commander, General George Crook, especially resented Howard's interference at a critical juncture in his carefully designed operations. Crook's diary bears witness to the tension between the two. By contrast, Howard's reports and his memoirs testify to cordial relations maintained, with God's help, despite the trouble-making efforts of unnamed parties.[5]

Howard made a second trip to Arizona in 1872 that proved more significant than the first, for then he rode boldly into the Dragoon Mountain stronghold of Cochise in an attempt to bring peace through personal diplomacy. For more than a decade this wily and implacable chieftain, wronged by a blundering young army officer, had waged unrelenting war on Arizonans. When the general rode down from the mountains he brought peace in exchange for a reservation in the Chiricahua Mountains. In his reminiscences Howard credits the crucial role

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4. Sherman to Howard, November 29, 1873, William T. Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

5. Howard's reports and associated correspondence are in the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1872* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 148–78. For Crook's diary, see Martin F. Schmitt, ed., *General George Crook: His Autobiography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), 169–73.

of Tom Jeffords, longtime friend of Cochise, in arranging the parley. Unmentioned, however, were the peace talkers who preceded Howard or the fact that Cochise had spent the previous winter at the Cañada Alamosa Reservation in New Mexico in his own quest for peace. Although the danger to the general may have been exaggerated, the feat was nonetheless significant. For the first time since 1861, Cochise's warriors posed no threat to settlers.[6]

Howard took command in the Pacific Northwest early in the tortured sequence of moves by which the non-treaty Nez Perces were deprived of their lands and driven to armed resistance. Because of his triumph with Cochise and rocklike faith in divine guidance, he looked upon himself as specially qualified to resolve the gathering conflict. Throughout the preliminaries to war, therefore, he played a more active part than required of him. His course turned out to be so basically incompatible with his humanity and sense of justice that he must have suffered great anguish. His writings are labored efforts to justify himself. Alvin Josephy, historian of the Nez Perces, has noted that as history they are not very reliable, but that "as evidence of Howard's personal distress they are more interesting; they reveal points of view whose hollowness Howard himself could not have failed to recognize."[7]

Howard's writings about the Nez Perce War exalt Chief Joseph into a master strategist and tactician, practitioner of "civilized warfare," and chief of all the non-treaty Nez Perces. Joseph was certainly a man of stature and influence among his people and an appealing figure to the whites. But he was neither the chief of all the non-treaties nor a military genius. Indeed, he was not even a war chief. Until recently, however, most histories relied heavily on Howard and thus perpetuated the legend—in the process, incidentally, helping to rationalize the spectacle of eight hundred Indians leading a U.S. Army general a grueling chase across a thousand miles of mountains and plains.

Much has been written of the heroic flight of the Nez Perces across the Bitterroot Mountains and the Montana plains, and of the equally heroic efforts of Howard and his troops to overtake them before they could reach sanctuary in Canada. Howard endured merciless press criticism at the time and has not fared well from history since. In retrospect, he seems to have delayed too long in starting the pursuit

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6. For Howard's recollections see Oliver O. Howard, *My Life and Experiences among Our Hostile Indians* (Hartford, Connecticut: Worthington, 1907), 120–225.

7. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1965), 475n. See Howard, *My Life and Experiences*, 267–300, and O. O. Howard, *Nez Perce Joseph* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1881).

and to have allowed his resolution to waver at critical times. Even so, in spite of enormous logistical obstacles, sheer bad luck, and repeated discouragements, he stayed on the trail to the very end. Colonel Nelson A. Miles' troops intercepted Joseph's people just short of their Canadian destination and gained most of the credit for ending the Nez Perce War. But as General Sherman pointed out, the "long, toilsome pursuit" by Howard and his column "made that success possible." Miles' selfish attempt to exclude Howard from the honors brought rejoinders from Howard and led to a controversy that at length had to be stopped by Sherman himself.[8]

A perceptive estimate of Howard's course in the Nez Perce operations came from his immediate superior, General Irvin McDowell. In a confidential letter to Sherman, written at the height of Howard's pursuit, McDowell wrote:

> I have a deep sympathy for Howard, who whilst doing his best was hounded by the press and had all manner of abuse heaped on him. But his orders seem addressed to another audience as well as to his troops, and he cannot quite confine himself rigidly to his mere soldier work. I think it is to this, in dealing with Joseph's case in the beginning, that largely caused the attack on him in the papers when the effort to put Joseph on the reservation failed! Both your orders and mine required this work to be left absolutely to the Indian Dept., he merely aiding with his military force in case of need. But he could not keep in the background and hence received the stings of the press when the effort failed.[9]

Howard did far better the next year, in the Bannock–Paiute War of 1878. This time he attended more scrupulously to his "mere soldier work." His intelligence sources warned of approaching trouble, and when it came his troops had been on alert for a month. Scarcely had the Bannocks broken from their Idaho reservation and united with Paiutes in southeastern Oregon than Howard was in the field directing the concentration of units. Diplomacy, attempted through the Paiute "princess" Sarah Winnemucca, failed. A vigorous offensive succeeded. Under Howard's eye, it was conducted over difficult terrain by the

8. For the Nez Perce War, see Josephy, *Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest;* Merrill D. Beal, *"I Will Fight No More Forever": Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963); Mark H. Brown, *The Flight of the Nez Percé: A History of the Nez Percé War* (New York: Putnam, 1967); and Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866–1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 296–321.

9. Irwin McDowell to Sherman, July 31, 1877, Sherman Papers.

veteran Captain Reuben F. Bernard, one of the most effective field soldiers produced by the frontier army. At Silver Creek and Birch Creek the pursuing cavalry overtook and whipped the quarry, then chased them to and fro across the Oregon deserts until they scattered and ultimately straggled back to their reservations.

Throughout, Howard performed almost flawlessly. He was lucky to have Bernard as his striking arm (in fact, may have shunted senior officers entitled to the command out of the theater of operations). But Howard alone deserves credit for manipulating many commands over a large and rugged expanse of wilderness in such manner as to leave the enemy no alternative but to fight or scatter. Walled in by these maneuvers, they fought twice, then scattered. The mop-up operation, too, was organized in a comprehensive fashion that led to the prompt surrender of most of the fugitives.

The Sheepeater conflict of 1879 in Idaho's Salmon River Mountains also reflected well on Howard, although it was conducted by subordinates without much oversight from department headquarters. Not many warriors were involved, but the troops proved that they could campaign successfully in some of North America's most tortuous country, and Howard and his superiors could take satisfaction in their record.[10]

Howard commanded the Department of the Columbia from 1874 to 1880. Besides his field service in the Nez Perce, Bannock and Paiute, and Sheepeater operations, he conferred frequently with leaders of all the tribes within his jurisdiction. In Portland as in Washington, he was active in church affairs and YMCA work.

In 1880 Howard again plunged into controversy. Scandal involving a black cadet rocked the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and President Rutherford B. Hayes looked on Howard as equipped by temperament and reputation to limit the damage. Summoned to Washington, D.C., he met with the President and emerged as superintendent of the academy. General Sherman, who had not been consulted, bluntly informed Howard that the assignment was motivated by the race question. "I believe the army and the country construe you to be

10. For Bannock, Paiute, and Sheepeater, see, in addition to Howard's *My Life and Experiences among Our Hostile Indians*, R. Ross Arnold, *The Indian Wars of Idaho* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1932); George F. Brimlow, *The Bannock Indian War of 1878* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1938); Don Russell, *One Hundred and Three Fights and Scrimmages: The Story of General Reuben F. Bernard* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Cavalry Association, 1936); W. C. Brown, *The Sheepeater Campaign* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1926); and Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 322–43.

extreme on this question," he wrote, and therefore he favored another candidate for the post.[11]

The two years at West Point proved quiet, however, and in 1882 Howard returned to the West to command the Department of the Platte, headquartered in Omaha. Promoted to major general in 1886, he moved to San Francisco and assumed command of the Military Division of the Pacific. He arrived just as General Nelson A. Miles was ending the Geronimo outbreak in Arizona, but he exerted little influence on the conduct of operations. Two years later, in 1888, Howard took command of the Military Division of the Atlantic and settled his family on Governors Island in New York Harbor. In November 1894, retirement ended his forty-four years of active service in the Army.

Settling in Burlington, Vermont, Howard continued to live an energetic and productive life. He wrote extensively, publishing magazine articles and books—juveniles, biography, history, and reminiscence. He lectured widely on the Civil War and on religious topics. And he campaigned vigorously for the Republican Party in the national elections of 1896 and 1900. Church, YMCA, and educational work occupied him to the end. Death came on October 26, 1909, two weeks before his seventy-ninth birthday.

If General Crook can be credited, Howard believed himself divinely commissioned to uplift the Indian. "I was very amused at the General's opinion of himself," Crook wrote of Howard's visit to Arizona in 1872. "He told me that he thought the Creator had placed him on earth to be the Moses of the Negro. Having accomplished that mission, he felt satisfied his next mission was with the Indian."[12] Howard did not lead the Indian to the promised land. Indeed, his religion and his ethnocentrism gave him a vision of the promised land quite at variance with the Indian's. But in him the Indians found a kindly, sympathetic man who usually treated them decently and who labored for their best interests as he conceived them. It is for this, rather than for his failure to develop insights that were also beyond his contemporaries, that he should be judged. He was truly one of the frontier army's "humanitarian generals."

11. Sherman to Howard, December 7, 1880, Sherman Papers.
12. Schmitt, ed., *General George Crook*, 169.

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