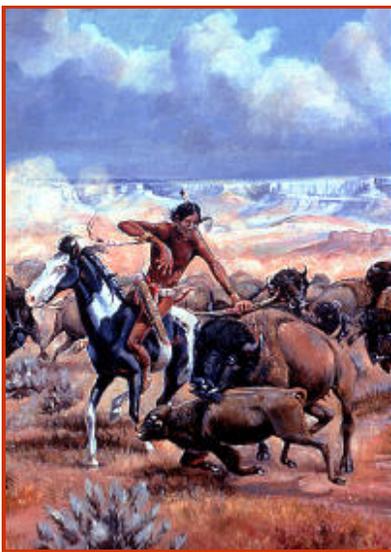




A Kiowa ledger drawing possibly depicting the Buffalo Wallow battle in 1874, one of several clashes between Southern Plains Indians and the U.S. Army during the Red River War. Image from TARL Collections (TMM-1988-21 Reverse).

## The Red River War of 1874



*Kiowa Buffalo Hunt by Otho Stubbs.  
Courtesy of Otho Stubbs.*

During the summer of 1874, the U. S. Army launched a campaign to remove the Comanche, Kiowa, Southern Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indian tribes from the Southern Plains and enforce their relocation to reservations in Indian Territory. The actions of 1874 were unlike any prior attempts by the Army to pacify this area of the western frontier. The Red River War led to the end of an entire way of life for the Southern Plains tribes and brought about a new chapter in Texas history.

A number of factors led to the military's campaign against the Indians. Westward-bound settlers came into conflict with the nomadic tribes that claimed the buffalo plains as their homeland during the nineteenth century. To provide a measure of protection for these settlers, the Army established a series of frontier forts. The outbreak of the Civil War resulted in a withdrawal of the



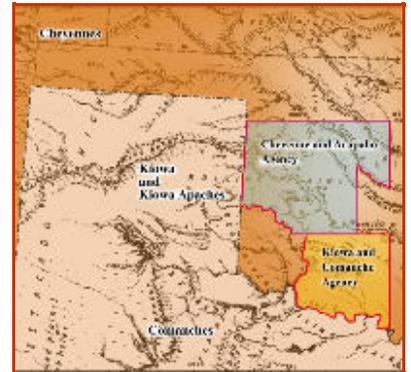
*Comanche Chief Quanah Parker. With Indian prophet Isa-tai, he led some 300 Indians in an attack on buffalo hunters in the Adobe Walls post.*

**[Click images to enlarge](#)**

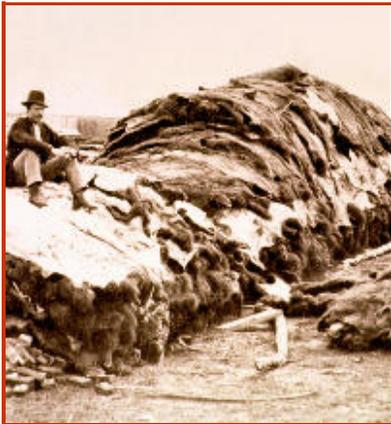
military from the western frontier. The Indians took advantage of the situation and aggressively exerted control over the Southern Plains. There was an outcry for the government to take action.

***The disappearance of the buffalo impoverished the tribes and forced them to depend on reservation rations... Among the Indians there was talk of war and killing, and of driving the white man from the land.***

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 called for two reservations to be set aside in Indian Territory—one for the Comanche and Kiowa and another for the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho. According to the treaty, the government would provide the tribes with a variety of basic services and training, housing, food and supplies, including guns and ammunition for hunting. The goods would be allotted to the tribes each year for a thirty-year period and the Indian tribes would be allowed to continue to "hunt on any lands south of the Arkansas River so long as the buffalo may range thereon." In exchange, the Indians agreed to stop their attacks and raids. Ten chiefs endorsed the treaty and many tribal members moved voluntarily to the reservations.



*Southern Plains Indian tribes during the Red River War and location of reservations. Map courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.*



*A stack of buffalo hides at a Dodge City hide yard. Commercial buffalo hunters slaughtered the animals by the thousands and left their carcasses to rot on the Plains. Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.*

But the treaty was destined for failure. Commercial buffalo hunters essentially ignored the terms of the treaty as they moved into the area promised to the Southern Plains Indians. The great southern herd of American bison, lifeblood of the Southern Plains tribes, was all but exterminated in just four years—from 1874 to 1878. The hunters slaughtered the animals by the thousands, sending the hides back East and leaving the carcasses to rot on the plains—and the U.S. government did nothing to stop them. The disappearance of the buffalo impoverished the tribes and forced them to depend on reservation rations.

The promises made by the U.S. government proved largely empty. Food was inadequate and of poor quality, while reservation restrictions were all but impossible for the Indians, who were used to roaming over the plains at will, to understand or accept. By late spring of 1874, discontent lay heavy on the reservations. As conditions continued to worsen many of the Indians who were still there now left to join with the renegade bands who had returned to the Texas plains. Among the Indians there was talk of war and killing, and of driving the white man from the land.

During the spring of 1874 a leader and prophet for the Indians emerged in the person of Isa-tai of the Quahadi Band of Comanches. Isa-tai's medicine was viewed as being very strong and he was doing his best to incite a war against the whites. Because the majority of Indians now saw



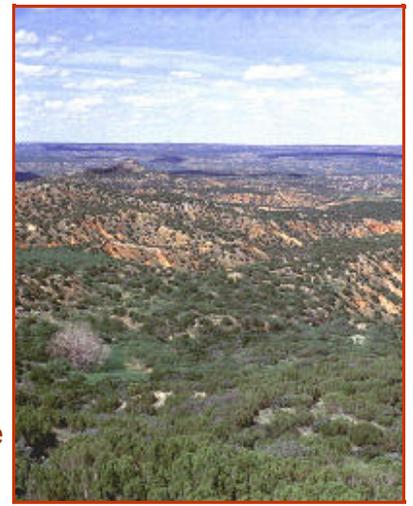
*Metal fleshers made by the Indians and used to scrape hides. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.*



Col. Nelson A. Miles was the commander of one of the army columns in the first battle of the Red River campaign.

themselves as being in a desperate situation with the only alternative to starvation being war, it took little persuasion by Isa-tai to convince the Indian leaders they must strike back at the whites. Thus, a plan was formed that the Indians would attack and destroy the new settlement of buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls.

In the early-morning hours of June 27, 1874 some 300 Indians, led by Isa-tai and famed Comanche chief Quanah Parker, attacked the Adobe Walls post. The Indians planned to catch the whites by surprise and simply overpower them. Although the 28 hunters who occupied the post were vastly outnumbered, they were well armed with long-range rifles and were able to hold off the Indians. With their failure at Adobe Walls, many of the Indians began to spread out over the plains of Texas for one final grasp at the old ways of life. The increasing realization that their access to ancestral lands was diminishing encouraged many of the Indians to strike at the encroaching whites. The realization that the buffalo, their main source for survival, was quickly disappearing forced them to fight. For the Indians, this brought retaliation by the U.S. Army, defeat, and confinement to the hated reservations.



U.S. Army soldiers and Indian warriors engaged in running battles through rugged terrain such as this near Palo Duro Canyon during the Red River War. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.



Model 1873 Springfield .45-70 carbine, the weapon adopted by the U.S. Army for cavalry use on the Plains.

**The well-equipped Army kept the Indians on the run until eventually they could not run or fight any longer... The Indians were defeated and would never again freely roam the buffalo plains.**



U.S. Army columns of the Red River War. Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.

The attack on Adobe Walls by the Indians served as a catalyst for the U.S. Army to make plans to subdue the Southern Plains tribes once and for all. The new policy called for enrollment and protection of innocent and friendly Indians at their reservations, and pursuit and destruction of hostile Indians without regard for reservation or departmental boundaries. The primary objective of the military campaign of 1874 was the removal of the Indian groups from this area of Texas and the opening of the region to Anglo-American settlement. General Philip Sheridan later characterized the military operations as "not only comprehensive, but...the most successful of any Indian Campaign in this country since its settlement by the whites."

The offensive utilized five columns converging on the general area of the Texas Panhandle and specifically upon the upper tributaries of the Red

River where the Indians were believed to be. The strategy aimed at full encirclement of the region, thereby eliminating virtually all gaps through which the Indians might escape. Colonel Nelson A. Miles moved southward from Fort Dodge; Lieutenant Colonel John W. Davidson marched westward from Fort Sill; Lieutenant Colonel George P. Buell moved northwest from Fort Griffin; Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie came northward from Fort Concho; and Major William R. Price marched eastward across the Panhandle from Fort Union. The plan called for the converging columns to maintain a continuous offensive until a decisive defeat had been inflicted on the Indians.

During the Red River War of 1874, as many as 20 engagements between the U.S. Army and the Southern Plains Indians may have taken place across the Texas Panhandle region. The well-equipped Army kept the Indians on the run until eventually they could not run or fight any longer. The Red River War officially ended in June 1875 when Quanah Parker and his band of Quahadi Comanche entered Fort Sill and surrendered. The Indians were defeated and would never again freely roam the buffalo plains.



*Monument at the Adobe Walls battle site dedicated to the Indians who were killed at the battle. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.*