

**Chief Joseph's greatest gift as a leader of
the Nez Perces was his ability to get inside
the heads of his enemies** By Elliott West

DREAMWEAVER

He was called the Red Napoleon, a military genius who outwitted and outfought several army commands while being chased across nearly a quarter of the nation. He appeared too as an ideal of native nobility who, when finally run to ground, gave up the fight so his people would not suffer further. His dignity at that surrender and the eloquence of his hundred words, ending with "From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever," secured his fame and his position as a worthy, even beloved opponent.

He was Joseph, a chief of the Nez Perce Indians of the Columbia Plateau. When the Nez Perces went to war with the United States in June 1877, Joseph was pictured as a treacherous, irredeemably depraved savage. By the war's end he had emerged, improbably, as a hero, in particular as a model of leadership—cagey and dogged, courageous, brilliant in a fight yet humane toward innocents in harm's way, a great warrior who balanced determination with integrity.

Of all American Indian leaders during the torturous four centuries after Columbus, Joseph was among the most gifted. He was also among the most misunderstood. He was not the brilliant war leader immortalized in popular

press accounts. Instead, his true gifts were as a diplomat skilled in the subtle game of reading the mood, values and fantasies of his victorious enemies, then playing them to his people's advantage. Like most Indian leaders, he learned that native understandings of society and authority—of who was in charge and what being in charge meant—were profoundly different from and opposed to those of the

Chief Joseph and the Nez Perces outfoxed the U.S. Army on a 1,500-mile retreat to Canada in 1877.



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"Good words
will not give my
people a home,"
Chief Joseph
told U.S. officials
in 1879.

American nation. Unlike most, he took what he learned and applied it, turning it back on the government that had pressed its ideas of power on him and his people, challenging the republic's leaders on their own terms.

He was born in 1840, with two names. His father, Tuekakas, was headman of the largest Nez Perce band that lived in a valley called the Wallowa, meaning "Land of the Winding Waters." The Wallowa, in today's far eastern Oregon, west of the Snake River, was isolated but spectacularly beautiful, with lakes, streams and lush summer pastures. Tuekakas was baptized in 1839 by the Presbyterian missionary Henry H. Spalding and chose the Christian name Joseph. He in turn christened his new son Ephraim but gave him as well a Nez Perce name, Heinmot Tooyalakekt, which roughly translated as "Thunder Rising to Loftier Mountain Heights." "Ephraim" never took hold, but whites later called the maturing son Young Joseph.

In 1860 as Young Joseph was entering full manhood, the Nez Percés felt a shock of the sort that, more than any other, shattered the well-being of western Indians: a gold rush. News of strikes in their homelands brought thousands of gold seekers and with

them the usual problems. Into the raw town of Lewiston came not only miners but what a visitor called "the last scrapings of the earth," thieves and cutpurses, sharpers, whores and whoremongers, who found prime targets in local Indians. Farmers grabbed land along the rivers, and ranchers pastured cattle on Nez Perce horse pastures and their vital camas fields. An 1855 treaty with the Territory of Washington had left Nez Perce country largely intact, but little was done to stop the rush, and by the time the strikes played out after a couple of years, whites were well entrenched in Lewiston and among the northern bands. Washington's response was not to enforce the old treaty but to demand a new one. The resulting council at Lapwai in June 1863 was a turning point in Nez Perce history and in the nature of their leadership.

Nez Perce leadership varied with place and circumstance. Day-to-day leadership was by band headmen, sometimes called chiefs, recognized for skills at dealing with other bands and for being modest, generous, fair and always ready with kind words. When bands came together in a joined effort, they chose as a leader someone with

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special gifts in the task at hand: a fine strategist and warrior to lead them on a raid, a coolheaded bargainer to negotiate with others. His leadership was conditional and temporary.

Beginning in 1840, however, the government had insisted that one man, a "head chief," speak for all the Nez Perce bands, and since then some English-speaking Nez Perce had acted as their spokesman. In 1863 that man was Lawyer, a Christian friendly to assimilation and pliant to Washington's wishes. Calvin Hale, who as the Washington Territory's Indian superintendent was the government's agent at the council, would claim that Lawyer held full power to act on all the bands' behalf.

At an all-night meeting during the council, however, whatever gauzy unity existed among the bands ended. After hours of argument over the new treaty, those for and against it shook hands and, "with a warm and emotional manner," wrote an army officer who was there, "declared the Nez Perce nation *dissolved*." Now leaders of fully independent bands would speak for their people alone. A few hours later the bands opposed to a treaty left for home. That same day Lawyer and

WILY RETREAT

Hoping in vain to escape confinement on a reservation, the Nez Percés made a bold run for Canada between June and September 1877.

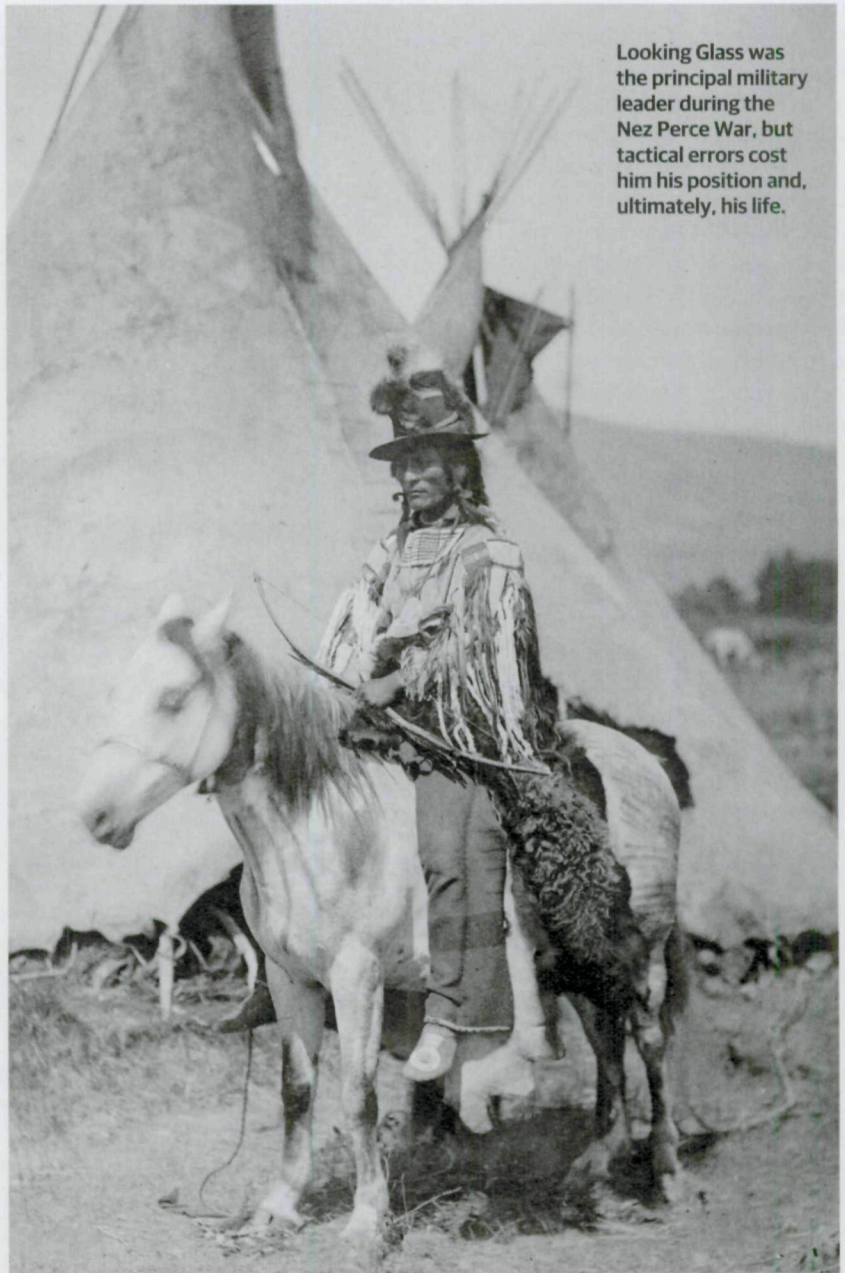


cooperating band chiefs signed what Washington was to claim was a treaty governing all Nez Percés. All the bands that signed the treaty would keep their lands. All that had refused and gone home would lose theirs. A pleased Calvin Hale wrote that for about 8 cents an acre, the government would gain just under 7 million acres of valuable mining, farming and grazing lands, 90 percent of what had been guaranteed the Nez Percés eight years earlier.

Many Nez Percés today still call this the steal treaty. Years later Joseph, who at 23 was almost certainly with his father at the council, explained in simple marketplace terms what had happened: "Suppose a white man should come to me and say, 'Joseph, I like your horses, and I want to buy them.' I say to him, 'No, my horses suit me, I will not sell them.' Then a neighbor tells the hopeful buyer: 'Pay me the money, and I will sell you Joseph's horses.'" The deal completed, the white man then demands "his" animals. "If we sold our lands to the government," Joseph explained, "this is the way they were bought."

For several years the isolated Wallowa drew only slight attention from settlers. Old Joseph sensed what was coming, however, and as he was dying in 1871, his words were of vigilance. "You are the chief of these people. They look to you to guide them," his son recalled his father saying. "Always remember that your father never sold his country....A few years more and white men will be all around you....This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother." Young Joseph, now Chief Joseph, took the words to heart and never sold the Wallowa. Keeping it, however, was another matter.

A confrontation finally came, in June 1876, when a rancher in the Wallowa killed a Nez Perce man. Tensions heightened over the next weeks, and Washington used the crisis to press its hardest case for the lands. When Joseph met that fall with a special presidential commission led by the uncompromising Oliver Otis



Looking Glass was the principal military leader during the Nez Perce War, but tactical errors cost him his position and, ultimately, his life.

Howard, it was his first significant test as a leader. Riding into the Lapwai agency at the head of 60 followers, he was physically impressive, well over 6 feet tall, with a powerful chest, broad shoulders and a wide face with large dark eyes and a high forehead. As he sat down with the commissioners, his expression was unthreatening but unrevealing: a diplomat's face. He wore his hair in twin braids and in an upward sweep in front—a sign of another resistance to the new order. Joseph followed a native religious movement that had arisen in the late 1850s that promised the banishment

of white invaders and the return of golden times if converts shunned farming and lived by what the land and rivers gave naturally. Followers were called Dreamers, from the belief that God spoke to them especially in visions while asleep, and wore their hair in a rearing pompadour.

The commissioners were struck by Joseph's "alertness and dexterity in intellectual fencing" and even more by his "serious and feeling manner" in expressing his people's fundamental beliefs. Calmly he explained that the Wallowa was "sacred to his affections." He was a child to it, and so to leave

“would be to part with himself.” As for his people’s turning to agriculture, the “Creative Power” had meant for people to live on the earth as they had found it and to feed themselves with what it freely gave. (How could I take up the plow, asked the founding prophet of the Dreamers, and “take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.”) Blunted again and again, the commissioners finally told Joseph that he faced a government now ruling from ocean to ocean. Surrender your homeland, they said, or face its full force. Joseph answered that he would not—could not—give up the Wallowa.

Over the next several months Joseph and his brother Ollokut (“Frog”) tried to dance away from a showdown, but in mid-May 1877 they agreed to another council at Lapwai, this one for all bands rejecting the treaty. To speak for them, the band chiefs chose an older warrior and holy man among the Dreamers, Toohoolhoolzote (“Noise” or “Growler”), the leader of a band even more isolated than Joseph’s. He was as confrontational and abrupt as Joseph was cool, and the more Howard pressed him, the harder he pushed back, sneering at the claim that his people were under Washington’s authority. “So long as the earth keeps me, I want to be left alone,” the old Dreamer answered. “I am NOT going on the reservation.” With that Howard and another officer grabbed Toohoolhoolzote by the arms and walked him to the nearby guardhouse. Apparently cowed, the other leaders submitted. At a final meeting a week later Howard issued another, especially shocking order. The bands had one month to gather all belongings, round up their herds and report to the reservation.

The Lapwai council was as stark a confrontation of native and national cultures as the 19th century offers. The steal treaty was almost incidental. The true clash was between different ways of addressing the world, two drastically different social orders, perceptions of identity and relations

'I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. The children are freezing to death. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever'

with the divine. For 72 years after pledging their alliance as equals to the United States, Nez Perce leaders had kept their promise while maneuvering within the reality of an expanding nation. Now, as the resisting bands dismantled their lives and prepared to uproot, it appeared they would be one more people, like dozens across the West, giving in to the power they had so misjudged. In fact they were about to take a course unique among Indian peoples. It made them famous, even as it led them into their darkest time, and as it played out, Joseph found himself pressed into roles that none before him had faced and leading his people in ways he could not have imagined.

Leaving behind hundreds of cattle, the resisting bands, led by Joseph, Toohoolhoolzote and White Bird, leader of another resisting band, packed up all they could and by June 14 had assembled at a traditional camping spot just south of the reservation. The next day they were to cross into new, constricted lives. Early that morning, however, three young men rode down to the Salmon River

and shot and killed four white settlers and wounded another, and when they returned to boast in the camp, more warriors set off for killing of their own. Over the next two days, 14 more settlers were killed. Meanwhile a stunned Howard wired for several hundred reinforcements and sent what troops he had, a hundred green cavalymen under Captain David Perry, to protect settlers crowding into the towns of Grangeville and Mount Idaho. When Perry learned the bands were camped at nearby White Bird Creek, he chose instead to ride against them. His attack at dawn on June 17 quickly reversed into a rout. In less than an hour the Nez Perces killed 34 soldiers while suffering only two wounded.

So began the Nez Perce War, during which some 800 Nez Perces outwitted the U.S. Army over a 1,500-mile retreat. It lasted 15 weeks. The bands in the fight—the majority of Nez Perces by then were on the reservation and remained at peace—first led the army on a chase around their home country’s rugged mountains and wide prairies. In several clashes they at least held their own, but they could maneuver for only so long. A month into the war they made a choice no other western Indians ever had. They would run for it. In mid-July they crossed the Bitterroot Mountains eastward to Montana over Lolo Pass. Their hope was to find temporary refuge among their Crow allies on the Montana plains and to return after passions had cooled, a hope based on the belief that by passing over the mountains, away from their immediate enemy, they would be out of harm’s way.

They soon learned differently. A command under Colonel John Gibbon was dispatched in pursuit, and at dawn on August 9 at Big Hole, a traditional camping spot in western Montana, Gibbon launched a surprise attack. Although they took heavy casualties, the Nez Perces once again turned back their attackers and nearly annihilated them. From August 26 to September 5, the Indians passed through the newly created Yellowstone National Park, killing a few tourists before breaking

free of what had seemed an inescapable trap as they left. After their friends the Crows turned them away, they fought and bested their pursuers one more time and broke northward across the Montana plains. The bands' goal now was to reach Canada and live among the several hundred Sioux under Sitting Bull, who had fled there the year before. They nearly made it. Just 40 miles shy of the international border, at the base of the Bears Paw Mountains on the last day of September, a command under Colonel Nelson Miles caught them, drove off their horses, and laid siege to their camp. Joseph's famous surrender came a week later.

The words Joseph ostensibly said on the snowy afternoon of October 5 would come to be indelibly set in the public mind:

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before, I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohoolhoolzote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes and no. He who

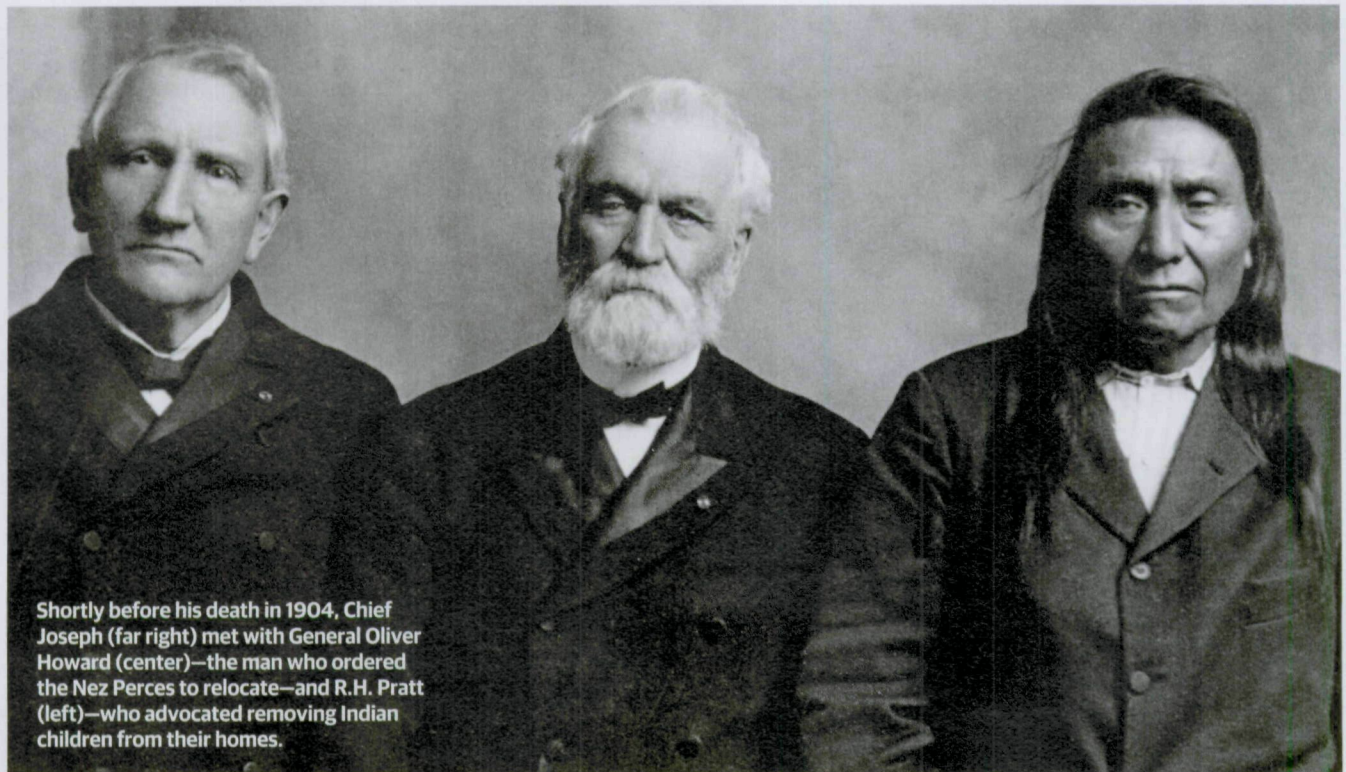
led on the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.

Exaggerated press accounts saluted Joseph as a leader with skills “as if they had been acquired at West Point,” and the *New York Tribune* ranked him and his warriors above the “cavalry men of the Don and Volga.” His compassion was said to match his generalship. Under his orders, readers learned, the Nez Percés had forgone scalping, spared women, children and the wounded, and treated captives kindly. This is the Joseph who has survived in the popular perception, the master strategist formidable in a fight and, once a victor, as a western editor concluded, “almost too humane for belief.”

Joseph's near veneration is another of the war's revelations, but not because its picture is true. Its lessons are in what the public needed to see and believe and in how a gifted leader learned those lessons and used them to find a way out of his people's dark time.

In fact Joseph never devised military strategy or led anyone in battle. If he had a role in the fray, it apparently was to watch over the camp and horse herd, and his greatest contribution was to save the animals at the start of the Big Hole fight. War was one of those unusual occurrences when men with skills for the moment were pulled into temporary service. In 1877 those leaders were Looking Glass, Toohoolhoolzote, Joseph's brother Ollokut, Rainbow and others. Joseph's gifts were in diplomacy, and even so, he was one among several in that role. When the war was over, it was time for a bargainer. Besides, as he said in his supposed surrender speech, just about everybody else in authority was dead.

The surrender speech solidified the public perception of Joseph the commander. But he spoke virtually no English, and whatever he said was



Shortly before his death in 1904, Chief Joseph (far right) met with General Oliver Howard (center)—the man who ordered the Nez Percés to relocate—and R.H. Pratt (left)—who advocated removing Indian children from their homes.

'Let me be a free man—free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law'

conveyed through two couriers and a translator. The famous words were written down by Howard's aide-de-camp, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, who in the decades ahead became a prolific poet, a successful attorney and defender of radical causes, and a bitter critic of the government, especially of its treatment of Indians. After the surrender he and Joseph quickly took to each other, and years later Wood sent his son to spend two summers with the Nez Perce chief. Whether the writerly Wood composed or shaped the speech to cultivate sympathy for a man and a people he admired cannot be known, but it's a valid question.

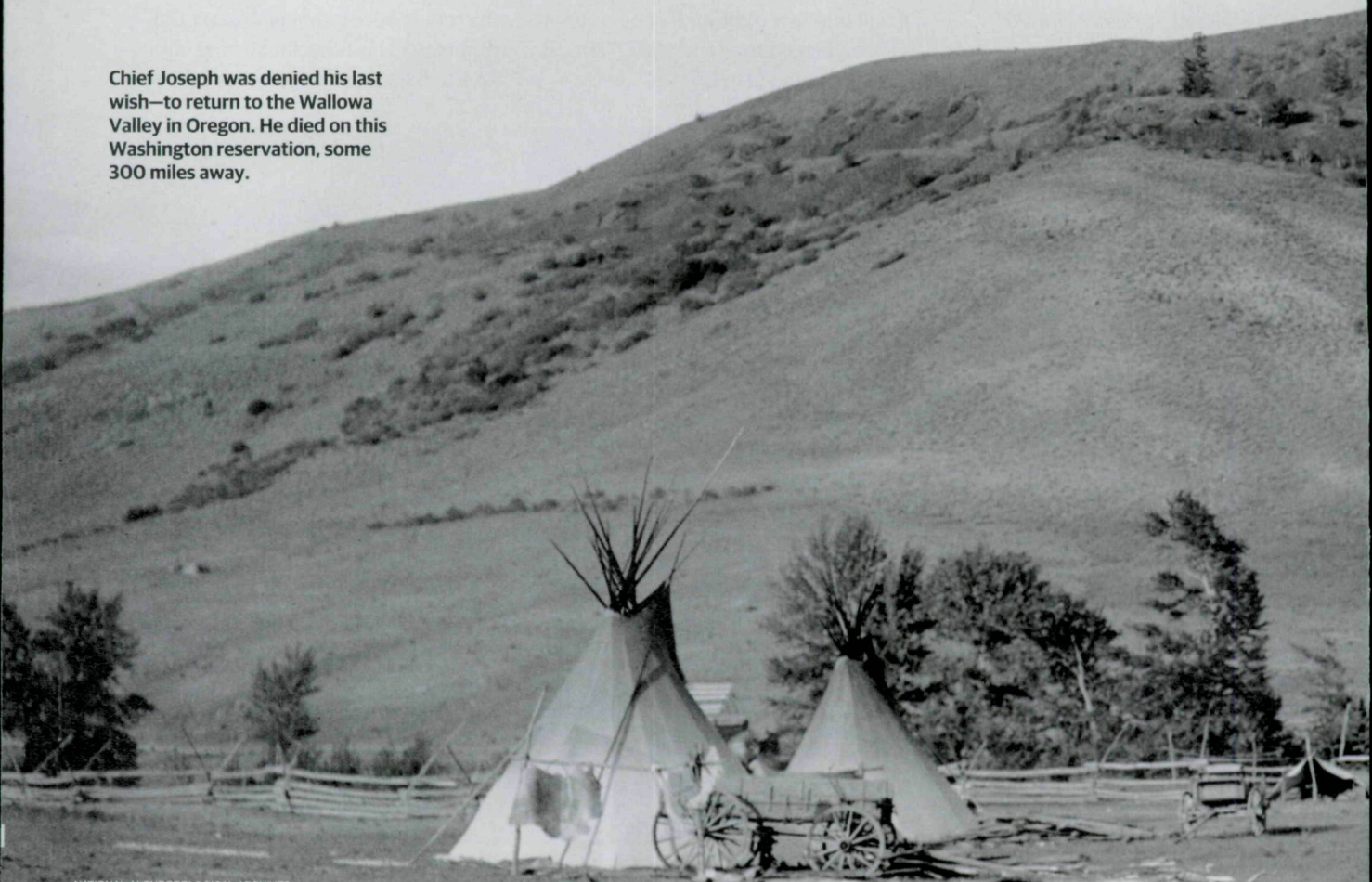
Joseph was no historical fraud, however. Behind the misperceptions is another story of heroism and masterful leadership. It does not end with the surrender but begins with it.

Joseph and his people were first marched to Bismarck, Dakota Territory, then taken by train to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where after a

miserable winter and sweltering summer they were exiled to the Indian Territory (today's Oklahoma). They spent nearly seven years in what they called Eeikish Pah (the Hot Place, or the Heat). Nearly half of them died there, including most young children and many elderly.

From the outset Joseph gauged what advantage whites offered, and he leveraged it as best he could. As he led the bands into Bismarck, protected by troopers, locals broke through the lines in a frenzy of admiring generosity, thrusting pies, boiled hams and other eatables on people that, the last Joseph knew, had been condemned as rabid, degenerate savages. As for Joseph himself, a reporter who interviewed him wrote that this "ideal Indian," a "prince of misfortune," was "just the character to live in romance and poetry....A more noble captive has never graced our land." Later, as up to 5,000 locals in a day came to see the Nez Percés camped in a malarial

Chief Joseph was denied his last wish—to return to the Wallowa Valley in Oregon. He died on this Washington reservation, some 300 miles away.



bottom at Fort Leavenworth, Joseph sat stoically in public view and granted interviews to fawning journalists. "I expect what I speak will be said throughout the land," he said at one point, "and I only want to speak good."

During the next months and years he directed that good speech, always through a translator, at those with power to help. In January 1879, he was permitted to travel to the national capital and meet with high officials, including President Rutherford Hayes. He spoke at Lincoln Hall to members of Congress, Cabinet members and diplomats, and his dictated account of the war was published the following April in the *North American Review*. He waded into the social swirl. At a White House reception, a "model of courtly grace" in blankets and shell earrings, he bowed to the first lady and chatted with General William Sherman as the

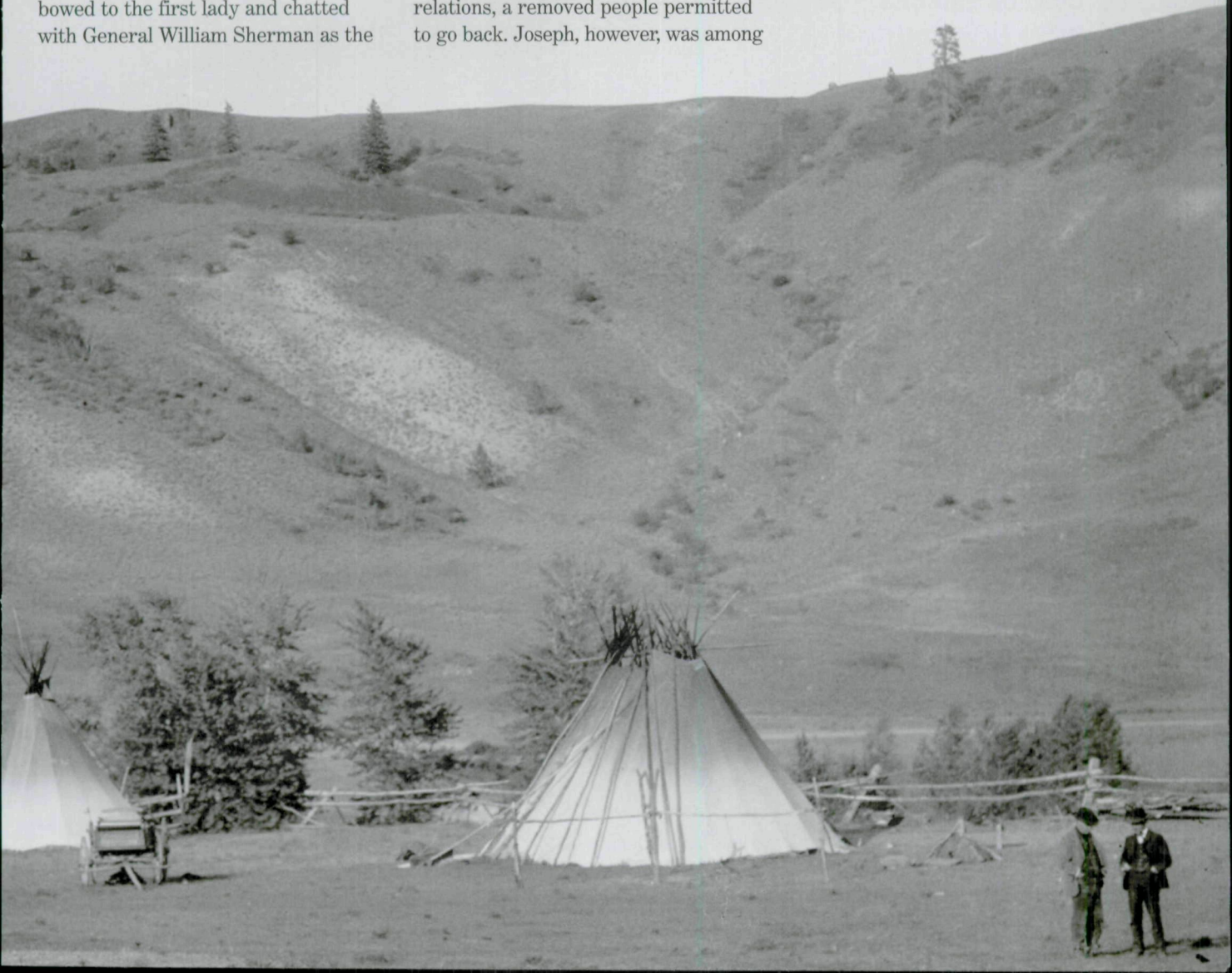
social elite "pressed up to shake the savage hand." Reporters found him a living exhibit of the *beau sauvage*, dignified and regal, wearing "that melancholy air that makes him so interesting to the people who have abused him so." When he spoke publicly, it was of that abuse, but his message was subtler than that.

He now knew his people must change and be part of this nation, he said, but the nation's leaders ought to change, too. If all were to live under one law, as the Nez Perces had been told for so long, then all should be treated alike: "Let me be a free man—free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade...free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law."

In 1885 the artful efforts of Joseph and others paid off, and the Nez Perces became the rarest of rarities in Indian relations, a removed people permitted to go back. Joseph, however, was among

a group of Nez Perces sent to live in northern Washington State. The Wallowa still remained off limits to them. Joseph subsequently shed white trappings, refusing a cabin and living in his lodge, and he continued to try to bring his band fully home. He went east again in 1897, met with several officials, rode in the parade dedicating Ulysses S. Grant's tomb and attended Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show in Madison Square Garden. He was permitted two brief trips to his home country to plead his case to locals and to visit his father's grave, but ultimately failed in his quest to bring his people back to the Land of Winding Waters. He died in 1904, probably from a heart attack, while sitting by a fire in his lodge. ■

Elliott West is the author of The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story.



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