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American Indian Military Leadership: St. Clair's 1791 Defeat

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Leroy V. Eid

M AJOR General Arthur St. Clair's crushing defeat at the hands of Indians some fifty miles from present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana, on 4 November 1791, remains, in St. Clair's undeniably true words, "as unfortunate an action as almost any that has been fought." His army's losses in a three-hour period "exceeded the total killed in the battles of Long Island and Camden, the two most sanguinary contests of the Revolution." St. Clair lost three times the number of soldiers who died in General George Armstrong Custer's celebrated 1876 defeat. General Edward Braddock lost fewer men than St. Clair in his disastrous meeting with the Indians at the Monongahela in the French and Indian War.

In contrast to the interest shown in Custer's and Braddock's defeats, St. Clair's drubbing has elicited little interest.² Even books which discuss victorious Indian leaders, such as *The Patriot Chiefs* and *American Indian Leaders*, slight the battle.³ The encounter lacks interest for most military historians because (among other reasons) leadership drama is nonexistent. On one side is a commander whose only stroke of brilliance was a cleverly executed bayonet charge to exit the battlefield. On the other side, either a single unidentified Indian or a group of Indian chiefs commanded the Indian forces. The tendency to denigrate Indian leadership in this outstanding Indian victory may be one explan-

- 1. Emory Upton, *The Military Policy of the United States*, 4th ed. (Washington: GPO, 1917), 80.
- $2. \ \ Some studies of the \ U.S. \ military \ establishment \ practically \ ignore \ all \ Northeast \ Woodland \ Indian \ engagements.$
- 3. Alvin Josephy, *Patriot Chiefs*, 6th ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1972); R. David Edmunds, ed., *American Indian Leaders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1980).

ation of St. Clair's slide into historical oblivion, but this tendency has reinforced a major confusion about Indian military sophistication in the Eastern woodlands.

In what follows, it will first be demonstrated that St. Clair was not peculiarly incompetent. Second, it will be shown that he primarily lost the battle because the consensual approach to leadership employed by his opponents, functioned so well on this occasion.

St. Clair was not peculiarly incompetent. The battle in which his army was almost annihilated is unfairly named after him, even though the record reveals widespread errors, cowardice, and incompetence in St. Clair's army before, during, and after its losing performance.⁴ The weakness of his army was known at the very beginning of its march. General Josiah Harmar (himself a soldier twice defeated in battle with the Indians just the year before) forlornly counseled his friend, Major Ebenezer Denny: "You must go on the campaign; some will escape, and you may be among the number." 5 The expedition's supplies were insufficient and shoddy. Officers bickered publicly, sulked in their tents. and an officer (apparently piqued at St. Clair's treatment of him) refused to pass on essential information. Only ineffective attempts were made to gather early intelligence on the strength of the Indian forces. The army, in Denny's words, was "perfectly ignorant" of the number and intentions of the enemy's forces. 6 That Captain Sparks and a party of twenty friendly Chickasaw Indians could leave camp on 29 October, nearly a week before the battle, to gather information and could miss the enemy altogether is almost incredible. 7 St. Clair, in fact, received so little intelligence that historians have failed to follow the common practice of naming the battle after its location because St. Clair didn't know which river he was beaten on. The soldiers were allowed to go to

- 4. This dismissal of St. Clair's army as unbelievably incompetent partly accounts for the fact that an author can list an Indian as the architect of St. Clair's defeat and then turn around and denigrate the achievement. For example, Alvin Josephy holds that Little Turtle led the victorious Indians, but, nevertheless, he later entitles the chapter on Tecumseh as "The Greatest Indian." Instead of celebrating the undoubtedly spectacular military and political achievements of Little Turtle, Josephy sings the praises of a military leader who dies in one defeat, whose greatest victory was supervised by a British officer, and whose contribution to St. Clair's defeat was to fail to interdict with his large and totally fresh military unit (stationed south of the battle) the fleeing remnants of St. Clair's army, many of whom had thrown away their weapons. In short, it has been easy to overlook the fact that the army that defeated St. Clair represented in practice what Tecumseh was never able to achieve.
- 5. Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny (1859; reprint, New York: Arno, 1971), 153.
 - 6. Ibid., 171.
- 7. "Winthrop Sargent's Diary While with General Arthur St. Clair's Expedition against the Indians," Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society 33 (1924): 250.

sleep before fortifying their camp. In combat, the cannons were aimed too high to do any damage. A number of the militia fled at the very start of the battle. They caused confusion among the regular soldiers, spent most of the time milling around the camp or rifling officers' possessions, took the lead in running back to Fort Jefferson at the time of retreat, and in some cases later boasted about impossibly high numbers of Indians they personally shot. The only notable action by the surviving remnants of the army was the marathon distance it covered in reaching the fort by nightfall.⁸ Finally, a special place of Federalist dishonor is reserved for the apparently absurd congressional logic which later found that "the failure of the last expedition can in no respect be imputed to his [St. Clair's] conduct." The defeated general continued for the next ten years to serve as governor of the Northwest Territory.

Emphasizing these numerous group and personal failures leads, however, to the common (but false) conclusion that any group of Indians, no matter how ragtag, could have defeated St. Clair. This line of thought comes easily to those who find hostile Indian activity in the Ohio Valley—indeed, in the entire Northeast woodlands—undeserving of labels such as "soldiers," "officers," and "war."

In order to avoid this all-too-common conclusion, therefore, it might be instructive to see how differently historians might have described the battle if St. Clair had won. They could have quoted the president, who did, in fact, explicitly warn St. Clair of his greatest danger—surprise. ¹⁰ They would have noted how St. Clair followed that advice by his cautious movement into Indian territory, avoiding a rush into the types of ambush so effectively sprung on Harmar's forces. The result, of course, left the Indians no choice but to gamble on taking the initiative or suffering the loss of their territory. Describing a win rather than a loss, historians would have called attention to Washington's instructions, how he carefully pointed out that St. Clair had only to attend to the well-known ways Indians fought. "You know," said Washington, "how the Indians fight us." ¹¹

Had St. Clair won, historians would have noted the skill with which a series of preliminary military excursions into Indian territory had thrown

- 8. Usually the Indians are heavily criticized as unprofessional for not pursuing the army back to Fort Jefferson. However, Wayne's victorious Legion at Fallen Timbers chased the Indians considerably less. See Dwight L. Smith, ed., From Greenville to Fallen Timbers (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1952), 295.
 - 9. Quoted, for example, by Upton, Military Policy of the United States, 79.
- 10. Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny, 19. Denny quotes here the private secretary of George Washington.
- 11. According to Washington's private secretary and quoted, for example, by Wiley Sword, President Washington's Indian War: The Struggle for the Old Northwest, 1790-1795 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 201.

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the Indians off guard. Charles Scott and James Wilkinson had led about 750 mounted Kentuckians (many veterans of Harmar's campaign) against certain Miami towns in Indiana. Wilkinson later led another 500 mounted Kentuckians into the same region. These attacks, combined with Harmar's 1790 destruction of the extensive corn fields of the numerous Miami towns, acaused such severe famine conditions that a warrior of a peace party received no answer to his charge the next summer that "you almost eat your own dung this summer."

If St. Clair had won, historians commenting on a victory could have pointed out the care with which only courageous and proven Revolutionary War officers had been chosen. They would have cited observers who noted General St. Clair's battlefield coolness and self-possession. Having served with distinction at Ticonderoga, Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Yorktown, St. Clair would have seemed an obvious choice as commander and there would have been little reason for surprise that during the battle St. Clair again proved himself "conspicuously courageous." 15 Jackson Johonnet, a soldier who fought in the battle, characterized his superiors: "as gallant commanders as ever died in the defence of America." 16 With a win, historians would have pointed at the officers who had been trained by encounters with Britain's fabled red lines, revolutionary soldiers like Richard Butler (noted for his valor commanding a portion of the Pennsylvania Line), Jonathan Snowden, Thomas Patterson, and William Piatt (all formerly commissioned officers of the New Jersey Continental Line), and Zebulon Pike of the Continental Army. Such seasoned soldiers would obviously see to it that Indian courage and foolhardiness would be destroyed by disciplined valor.

They would have noted how the entire officer corps was versed in

- 12. R. David Edmunds, "Wea Participation in the Northwest Indian Wars, 1790-1795," Filson Club History Quarterly 44 (1972): 247-49. Ultimately, this shotgun approach worked. Constant diplomatic and military initiatives effectively divided Indian resolve. See Sword, President Washington's Indian War.
- 13. For a recent positive review of Harmar, see Alan S. Brown, "The Role of the Army in Western Settlement: Josiah Harmar's Command, 1785–1790," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 93 (1969).
- 14. "Narrative of Hendrick Aupaumut" in Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1827), 2:115.
- 15. Warren W. Hassler, With Shield and Sword (Ames: Iowa State University, 1982), 55. All generals, it seems, have caustic critics on their staffs. If General Wayne had lost at Fallen Timbers, then historians would have emphasized the unknown diarist who claimed before the battle that "we continue perfectly ignorant of the C. in Cs plan for the Campaign and are at a loss for the principles on which he acts—the protection of providence may save him—nothing else can." Smith, From Greenville to Fallen Timbers, 284-85.
- 16. Found, for example, in Samuel L. Metcalf, A Collection of Some of the Most Interesting Narratives (1821; reprint, New York: Garland, 1977), 98.

the lessons learned from Colonel Henry Bouquet's extraordinarily effective destruction of the Indians at Bushy Run in 1763.¹⁷ St. Clair's use of a marching formation reminiscent of the theory expounded in William Smith's popularization of Bouquet's ideas, ¹⁸ allowed him to avoid surprise, traditionally the Indian's most effective weapon.

Also imitating Bouquet, St. Clair placed his forces in command of the high ground. As Denny, St. Clair's aide-de-camp, later wrote: "I was much pleased" with the high, dry ground. 19 A few months after the battle, Winthrop Sargent (a revolutionary soldier who was wounded while serving as St. Clair's Adjutant General in 1791) looked again at the "very handsome piece of rising ground" and again was struck by the idea that it was "so defensible against regular troops that I believe any military man...would have unhesitatingly pitched upon it."20 At the campsite, a large number of sentries were placed well in front of the bivouacking army to prevent a surprise attack. Furthermore, another of Bouquet's principles formed the basis of St. Clair's battlefield tactics drive the Indians before you with the bayonet. St. Clair later testified that "no troop ever behaved with more firmness or charged the enemy with the bayonet with more intrepidity."21 As an unexpected bonus, the gout-stricken commander moved freely around the field, metamorphosed by the battle into a younger, healthier officer seemingly blessed by Mars with personal battlefield immortality.

The skill with which St. Clair used the confined area to handle the problem of undisciplined militia is another example of his good leadership. The frontiersmen were placed in such a position that the regulars could operate even if the frontiersmen fled or ran pell mell around the field following their "treeing" technique.²² To avoid such

- 17. E.g., see Frazer Ells Wilson, Arthur St. Clair (Richmond: Garrett and Masie, 1944), 68. Bouquet's diagrams are found, for example, in Edward G. Williams, ed., The Orderly Book of Colonel Henry Bouquet's Expedition against the Ohio Indians, 1764 (Pittsburgh: Mayer, 1960), 17.
- 18. [William Smith], An Historical Account of the Expedition Against the Ohio Indians, in the Year 1764 (1765; reprint, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), between pages 6 and 7. See, for example, the detailed "Order of March" (1787), "Order of March" "Order of Encampment," and "Order of Battle" (1790) in the Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny.
- 19. From the *Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny*, and also found, for example, in William Henry Smith, *The St. Clair Papers* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke, 1882), 2: 258.
 - 20. "Winthrop Sargent's Diary," 252, 271.
- 21. Quoted, for example, in Wilson, Arthur St. Clair, 96. It was reported of General Anthony Wayne that "his favorite word of command was "charge the dam'ded rascals with the bayonet." "General Wayne's Campaign in 1794 & 1795," American Historical Record 2 (1873): 316. See also "Winthrop Sargent's Diary," 485.

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flight or unexpected formations, St. Clair advanced the frontiersmen into an easily defended position where "for about 400 yards to their front the woods were more or less open, offering little cover for hostile approach." Additionally, army units on both sides strengthened the militia's resolve. Van Cleve's journal makes it clear that frontiersmen like him had high morale and were quite confident that they would easily defeat the assembled Indians. In the main camp, Clarke's unit (made up of many Pennsylvanians who fought Indian style), and Faulkner's militia riflemen not only chased off the Indians but kept Patterson's New Jersey unit, which was between them, from being damaged. S

Finally, the historian might have noted how Congress, in investigating the less successful aspects of the battle, blamed itself (and not the officers or the soldiers) for the failures. In short, if the Indians had lost, the historian would have pictured the U.S. soldiers serving under brave and capable leaders and working for honest politicians.

But although this view of St. Clair's preparations and strategy is amply documented, his army was, nevertheless, utterly destroyed. Why? If nothing else, St. Clair's defeat shows that competence and courage alone do not guarantee victory. Insightful generalship, soldierly qualities, and the resolve of the other side must also be considered. Indian soldiers and their leaders must have performed more correctly. St. Clair realized this because he candidly told his congressional investigators that the absence during the battle of Major Hamtramck and the 300 soldiers of his elite First Regiment army unit (which had been sent to round up deserters) could not explain his defeat. If that group had been present on the battlefield, St. Clair unexpectedly stated, the outcome would have been the same, except there would have been more casualties.

If St. Clair was not incompetent, how can Indian competence be explained? First, who led the attack on St. Clair? This is a question of utmost interest to historians but apparently never was to St. Clair or his officers, who all shared the self-serving misperception that the Indians

^{22. &}quot;Treeing," explained one frontiersman, meant that "I generally put one knee to the ground and with a rest from behind a tree waited the appearance of an Indian." Benjamin Van Cleve, "Memoirs," Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio 17 (1922): 25. That the Kentucky militia fought heroically in Harmar's campaign has been defended recently by Michael S. Warner in "General Josiah Harmar's Campaign Reconsidered: How the Americans Lost the Battle of Kekionga," Indiana Magazine of History 83 (1987): 54.

^{23.} From "Winthrop Sargent's Diary," 258 and quoted by (among others) John R. Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army 1783-1812* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 104.

^{24.} Van Cleve, "Memoirs," 25.

^{25.} Jack J. Gifford, *The Northwest Indian War*, 1789-1795 (1964; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982), 214.

that day greatly outnumbered the U.S. Army. Second, what was the nature of Indian military organization? Three intertwined questions must be explored in answering this question: How could Indians square their commitment to individual freedom with the demands of military obedience? What were the details of the battle plan and why were they so successfully carried out? What gave backbone and staying power to the Indian soldiers over the long period before and during the battle? It would be well to note at the outset that what generally distinguished the victorious Indian large-scale army was an administrative atmosphere which permitted military cooperation between disparate tribes. A large Indian army presupposed a prior successful major political initiative. If an extraordinarily complex intertribal political situation were not first carefully orchestrated, a large-scale battle could not be fought. In short, how was Indian military expertise channeled into a coherent and workable plan by leaders whose mandates flowed from the political will of the peoples they represented?

The least answerable but most intriguing of these questions concerns the identity of the leader who crushed St. Clair. ²⁶ Oral tradition, even in recent wars where historians were in the front lines, results in serious methodological problems. Not surprisingly, participants' memories vary concerning situations when everything around them seems in chaos and when life is tenuous. In such circumstances, the discovery of other first-hand accounts would only complicate the picture. Some writers have theorized, on the basis of reports of a battlefield figure in British uniform, that the commander-in-chief of the Indians was British. But the visual evidence is too flimsy to support such a conclusion. Furthermore, the tendency to look for a British officer (or white Indian like Simon Girty) is predicated on the assumption that: "the Indian had no feeling for grand strategy, was a sketchy tactician, and was nothing more than a primitive warrior." ²⁷

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^{26.} See, particularly, Patrick J. Furlong, "St. Clair's Expedition Re-examined: The Indian View," a richly footnoted paper presented to the Ohio Academy of History on 25 April 1981. See also Harvey Lewis Carter, *The Life and Times of Little Turtle* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987), 108.

^{27.} Jon M. White, Everyday Life of the North American Indian (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 115. For an older and more authoritative statement that Indians were "virtually without discipline" and "did not have the social organization needed to plan and execute operations of a more complicated nature, such as group maneuvers or frontal assault," see John K. Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare, 1676–1794," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 45 (1958–59): 257, 259. H. H. Turney-High, Primitive War: Its Practice and Concepts (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949), also insisted that inchoate levels of social organization prevented American Indians from either comprehending or using organizational principles. William Henry Harrison, who certainly met and fought a large number of Indians, felt that they had no "efficient system of discipline." W. H.

Three major Indian candidates have been suggested for the title of leader. Many assume with good reason that Little Turtle of the Miamis was in command.28 The Miami Indians were unusual because they had a hierarchical tradition of a supreme leader, and Little Turtle had an enviable military record.²⁹ He apparently was not in charge three years later at Fallen Timbers where Indian leadership appeared so pathetic. The authoritarian Miami ways would, however, have been annoying to most Indians bred to an entirely different style of leadership. Blue Jacket of the Shawnees also receives the nod from some authorities.³⁰ That he was born white (if an old tradition is true) would not have been held against him, but that he was Shawnee would have been a problem in 1791. Hendrick Aupaumut's 1791 account of the meeting of the tribes of the Ohio and Great Lakes area makes it abundantly clear that the Shawnees were considered dangerously overanxious for war.³¹ Some of the bitterest exchanges in Aupaumut's account concern the question of the relationship between the war chiefs and the village sachems in the various tribes. The Shawnee and Miami are both accused of letting the war chiefs decide the important national questions. This, the Iroquoian and the Canadian Algonquian war chiefs agreed, violated the ancient ways of operating.³² Some Canadian authors advance, on the

Harrison, A Discourse on the Aborigines of the Valley of the Ohio (1839; Reel 125, American Culture Series, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), 255.

- 28. Based on the statements of Little Turtle's son-in-law found in C. F. Volney, A View of the Soil and Climate of the United States of America (1804; reprint, New York: Hafner, 1968), 2:356-57, and accepted, for example, by Richard Hildreth, The History of the United States of America (New York: Harper, 1851), 4:286. For more recent writers see, Sword, President Washington's Indian War, 175; Helen H. Tanner, ed., Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 73; and Carter, The Life and Times of Little Turtle, 105-6.
- 29. For the contrast between the chiefdom of the Miami and the more informal structure of the Northern tribes, see James A. Clifton, "Potawatomi Leadership Roles," in William Cowan, ed., *Papers of the Sixth Algonquian Conference*, 1974 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), 72.
- 30. George Ash, a white Indian among the Shawnees who took part in the battle, names Blue Jacket; see John Frost, *Thrilling Adventures Among the Indians* (1854; Reel 87, American Culture Series, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), 433. The Shawnee tradition of Thomas J. Larsh agrees: William Galloway, *Old Chillicothe* (Xenia, Ohio: Buckeye Press, 1934), 298. In 1796, Mad Anthony Wayne wrote to the Secretary of War, James McHenry, that while Little Turtle claimed the honor, Blue Jacket was more commonly given the title of having been the principal chief in beating St. Clair. Richard C. Knopf, ed., *Campaign into the Wilderness* (Columbus: Ohio State Museum, 1955), 5:63.
 - 31. "Narrative of Hendrick Aupaumut," 106.
- 32. Of course, a lot more political and personal maneuvering might have taken place in the guise of a debate on traditional practices. See, e.g., P. Richard Metcalf, "Who Should Rule at Home: Native American Politics and Indian-White Relations," *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): 651-65.

other hand, the candidacy of Chief Joseph Brant who certainly was not eager for devastating conflict.³³ Aupaumut's account, reflecting Algonquian displeasure at Iroquoian treaties with Americans, and, more importantly, the Indian experience of the entire historic period, shows why Brant is a doubtful choice for overall commander.

Finally, some minor authors who collected oral Indian tales suggested that one of the Algonquian Indians from Canada, a "Messasago chief," was the architect of victory.³⁴ No modern author, I believe, has championed the cause of this Mississauga as supreme commander, although a certain Wapacomegat was reported as leading the charge against the militia. Since the Mississauga were part of the very large Ojibwa/Chippewa nation, which in turn was allied with the Potawatami (a traditional enemy of the Miamis) and the Ottawa in the Three Fires Confederation, this choice would have been politically astute. Also, since the Chippewa carried the immense prestige of having defeated the Five Nations Iroquois and driven them out of Ontario and were doing the same to the Dakotas/Sioux in Wisconsin and Minnesota, the choice would make sense militarily.

Significantly, the Chippewa generally refused to fight in the later 1794 campaign against Wayne.³⁵ When contrasted to the Indian performance in the defeat of St. Clair, this constitutes as good a reason as any to explain the confused battlefield performance of the Indians at Fallen Timbers. At this date, it may be impossible to know the identity of the supreme Indian authority who defeated St. Clair.

Although it would be useful to know the name of the Indian leader, our second question about the nature of Indian miltary organization is eminently more important, and furthermore, it can be answered with some authority. One question that needs discussion when examining the nature of Indian military organization is: how could Indians square their commitment to tribal goals and individual freedom with the demands of military obedience? Eastern Woodland Indian leaders of

- 33. William L. Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant*, (1838; reprint, St. Clair Shores, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1970), 2:312-13. More recently, Arrell M. Gibson, *The American Indian* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1980), 266, emphasized Joseph Brant as the central figure of Indian resistance to American penetration of the Old Northwest. For a well-known Indian fighter who scoffed at Iroquoian pretensions in general, see Harrison, *A Discourse*, 230-59.
- 34. For example, James B. Finley, *Life Among the Indians* (Cincinnati: Curts and Jennings, n.d.), 62. This missionary claimed seventy years' experience among the Indians and his account of certain Indian traditions has an authentic (Algonquian) ring. Finley, however, argued that the British taught this Mississaugan the arts of war.
- 35. Smith, From Greenville to Fallen Timbers, 296. For one thing, there had been a falling out when quarrels had broken out in the distribution of the spoils in the St. Clair camp. Gifford, Northwest Indian War, 238.

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engagements such as that against St. Clair had to operate in a consensual context, one quite different from the usual European military procedure for reaching such decisions. One reason for arguing the case for some shadowy figure such as the Mississauga would be that a chief from one of the "back nations" would instinctively know about the subtleties of consensual decision-making. Those who lump together the leaders of the victory against St. Clair in a general way are close to the truth.³⁶ For example, Joseph Brant's biographer, William L. Stone, never stated that the Mohawk was in charge. Rather, he claims that while Little Turtle was "nominally the commander-in-chief, he was greatly indebted both to the counsels and the prowess of another and older chief."37 This view clearly represents a more general Indian approach. "A council of officers," reported an ex-Indian captive noted for his Indian-fighting skill, "determines when, and how an attack is to be made" since "no one man should have the absolute command of an army."38 No allpowerful leader stood up before the battle and announced his plan. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to think that leaders of rival tribes and confederations could just get together and somehow hammer out an agreed-upon plan.

Eastern Woodland Indian leadership was generally based on an entirely different set of principles from those of Europe. In 1695, Chingouabe, a chief of the Ojibwa, analyzed for Gov. Frontenac of New France an Indian view of civic obedience: ³⁹ "Father! it is not the same with us, as with you. When you command, all the French obey you and go to war. But I shall not be heeded and obeyed by my nation in like manner." From statements like this many historians have assumed that Indians, in fact, possessed very little sense of obedience and would be undependable in military operations. On the other hand, during the very time Chingouabe described, the Ojibwa were in the process of throwing the Five Nations Iroquois out of Canada after a well-executed, large-scale, extended military campaign. This apparent dichotomy between an Indian rhetoric of total civic freedom and documented

^{36.} E.g., Paul Woehrmann, At the Headwaters of the Maumee (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1971), 37; Milo M. Quaife, ed., The Indian Captivity of O. M. Spenser (1834; reprint, New York: Citadel, 1968), 28. Samuel F. Hunt, "The Defeat of Major General St. Clair," Orations and Historical Addresses (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1908), 271-72. Even John Norton's Iroquoian account of the battle simply talks of "the Chiefs." Carl F. Klinck and James J. Talman, eds., The Journal of Major John Norton (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1970), 177-78.

^{37.} Stone, Life of Joseph Brant, 2:312-13.

^{38.} James Smith, A Treatise on the Mode and Manner of Indian War (1812; reprint, Chicago: Barnard and Miller, 1948), 11.

^{39.} E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1855), 9:612.

military success is one fact that should be kept in mind when looking at the defeat suffered by St. Clair's forces.

How, though, can an action be planned in a "society where, in almost all contexts, any move to direct another, to boss, was considered an aggressive affront?" ⁴⁰ The anthropologist Frederick O. Gearing answers his own question by describing Indian-style leadership for the contemporary Fox Indians at the meetings of the Veterans of Foreign Wars:

The men would gather, most within a half hour of the appointed time, stand about, gradually sit down in twos and threes, chatting or joking. Some time later, Bill would, in a voice almost inaudible, make a casual allusion to the subject matter that had made the meeting necessary.... The matter might be taken up; if not, then after some while an allusion would fall a second time from Bill's lips. Once the matter was taken up, Bill would say no more unless some question of fact were asked of him. Ultimately, a group sentiment would be felt to have crystallized (the cue was when those who had objections ceased to express them) at which point Bill would say: "It's decided then...." And if there were minor loopholes in the judgment, he would mention them, systematically gathering up loose ends so as to make the decided course feasible.⁴¹

The anthropologist Nancy O. Lurie has listed a "preference and relaxed patience for reaching decisions by consensus" as the first of the core of values generally held by contemporary Indians. While often frustrating to a white observer keen upon getting a quick decision, traditional Indian decision making followed a patterned process with mutually understood rules.⁴²

A second question related to Indian military organization concerns the details of the plan and why the Indians so successfully carried out the plan. In 1791, at least two important events occurred when the principal war chiefs campaigned against St. Clair. These two events

- 40. Frederick O. Gearing, The Face of the Fox (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), 56-57. Gearing built on the insights of Walter Miller who had studied how the Fox Indians had been able for seventy-five years to run so effectively a very large yearly four-day public powwow ceremony. "Two Concepts of Authority," American Anthropologist 57 (1955): 271-89. A heavy emphasis on Miller's ideas is found in Raymond E. Hauser, "Warfare and the Illinois Indian Tribe During the Seventeenth Century: an Exercise in Ethnohistory," Old Northwest 10 (1984-85): 373.
- 41. Gearing, Face of the Fox, 57. Seventy years after St. Clair's defeat, a perceptive visitor among the Lake Superior Ojibwa observed of the "great chiefs" that "the right men concealed themselves, and are worse clothed, than the others." J. G. Kohl, Kitchi-Gami (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), 66.
- 42. Nancy Oesterich Lurie, North American Indians in Historical Perspective (New York: Random House, 1971), 444.

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shed light on how the details of battle were formulated, and why they were carried out with such success. Although there seems to be no documentary evidence, native American political and military leaders somehow smoothed over differences that normally separated various parts of the military alliance. The participating tribes voted that the effort to be a tribally mandated one. Consequently, the military effort became a "national war," 43 and there would have been very few if any personal defections. The right of individual Indians to leave military missions they had begun to disagree with, was a custom only applicable to "partisan" types of wars. Moreover, and by comparison with the later Battle of Fallen Timbers, where entire tribal units moved reluctantly,44 Indian tribal segments accepted their roles with enthusiasm. St. Clair, therefore, met a completely, albeit temporarily, united military force. Since factionalism continued to be such an important element in Indian difficulties in adjusting to European and American encroachments, 45 1791 is noteworthy because many Indians must have accepted the same political goals and general military position. Then, just before the battle and after extensive argument about what was to be done, the Great Chief must have risen, and with no voices dissenting, outlined the plan that had evolved in the vigorous give-and-take between the head warriors of the diverse tribes that made up the forces which opposed St. Clair. A third event may have then happened. The great warrior in charge may have left the battlefield performance to other leaders; the Chippewa regularly operated in this fashion. An Ottawa explained that

- 43. For the "national/partisan" war-making distinction, see Robert Rogers, Journals of Robert Rogers (1765; reprint, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 219-29; Norton, Journal, 128-30; Pierre de Charlevoix, Journal of a Voyage to North America (1761; reprint, New York: Readex Microprint, 1966), 1:327-28.
- 44. Norton, Journal, 180, 182. See also Chief Joseph Brant of the Iroquois in a 1793 letter to the agent Alexander McKee in E. A. Cruikshank, ed., The Correspondence of Lieut. Governor John Graves Simcoe (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society), 5: 66-67, and the reports of an officer serving against Gen. Wayne, ibid., 90-94. For the long-term tribal reasons for this split in Indian ranks see the perceptive account by an Indian who attended the 1792 meeting on the Maumee River, Aupaumut, Memoirs, and the summary of that meeting found in the Canadian Archives in Correspondence of Lieut. Governor John Graves Simcoe, 1: 218-29.
- 45. See, for example, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "The Political Context of a New Indian History," *Pacific Historical Review* 40 (1971): 374-80. Why factionalism did not paralyze integral Indian societies is shown in Eleanor Leacock, "Ethnohistorical Investigation of Egalitarian Politics in Eastern North America," in Elizabeth Tooker, ed., *Political Organization in Native North America* (Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1983), 17-31. After saying that leadership positions are "servitudes more than anything else," the Jesuit LeJeune observed in 1636 that "there are, however, some who know well how to secure obedience." Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Jesuit Relations* (1636; reprint, Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1897), 10: 233-35.

"although the leader was foremost in rank, he had but little to do with the arrangements of the camp or their journey during the day, [for] these were under the management of two other warriors of some experience." ⁴⁶ This allowed every subcommander to feel (and say) that his unit's exploits made the most important contribution to the victory.

Certainly, this entire process looks to many like the proverbial committee getting a camel while designing the horse. The final plan, at best, may seem entirely jerry-built. Robert Rogers ironically described this process in the 1760s. Indians go out, he said, to fight under many chiefs, "but all these are subordinate to the commander of the party, who, after all, is a general without any real authority, and governs by advice only, not by orders." Nevertheless, Rogers conceded, "it is very rare that the directions of the general is [sic] disregarded." 47

The final plan would be followed faithfully on the day of the battle because, first of all, the plan was sure to consist of elements that all Indians agreed upon. Against St. Clair, for example, the Indians used such generally accepted techniques as charging frontiersmen, shooting particularly at officers, the crescent-shaped battlefield movement, the general pattern of both deftly avoiding bayonet attacks and surrounding would-be bayoneters, and the "treeing" advance and retreat.⁴⁸

The supreme leader would have chaired the discussions that allowed the blending of all these well-known techniques into an agreed-upon configuration. The battle against St. Clair, for example, started with the totally effective wild rush against the isolated militia that eliminated them from the rest of the battle (#1 on the map). 49 However, this grand rush was preceded by five minutes or so of full-throated Indian cries. The Indians announced their presence for some time and then suddenly charged. One would certainly have to call this a carefully orchestrated "shock" maneuver, although only a few Indians stood up and actually rushed precipitously forward. The prudent Indian commander committed only a few to what could have been a suicidal charge. Other than appearing whenever the army charged, the Indians continued through the battle to stay hidden. Intense political and family pressures dictated

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^{46.} F. Assikinak, "Social and Warlike Customs of the Odahwah Indians," Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art, n.s., 1858, 3 (16): 297-309. See also George Copway, The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation (1850; reprint, Toronto: Coles, 1972), 75, 83; Jonathan Carver, Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768 (1781; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1956), 297-98, 301-2.

^{47.} Robert Rogers, A Concise Account of North America (1765; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint, 1966), 230, 229.

^{48.} See the concise summary of the battle in Norton, Journal, 178.

^{49.} The basic map is from the Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny, between 164-65.

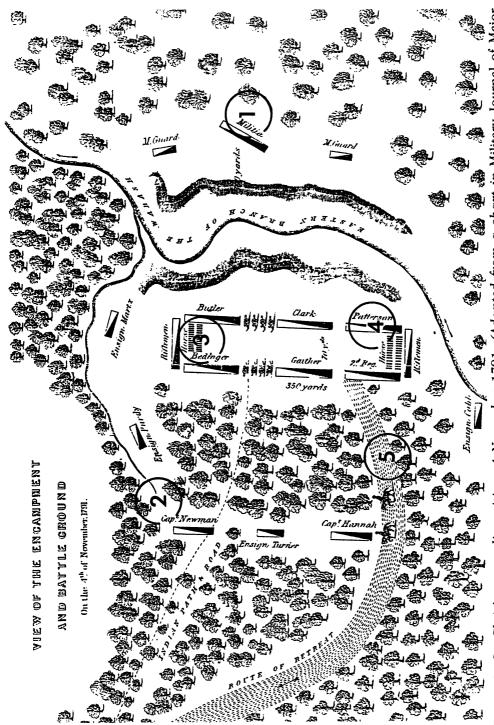


Figure 1. St. Clair's troop disposition, 4 November 1791. (Adapted from a chart in Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny.)

that the foremost duty of the Indian commanders was to protect their individual soldiers. For the rest of the battle, incidently, the Indians proceeded to fight in relative silence. The wild rush against the militia was followed by a larger group who mingled with the fleeing militia and rushed the camp. This technique was used again in 1793 at Fort Recovery. In both cases it failed, but with St. Clair's forces, the Indians followed these first two actions with a third, the total encirclement within a couple of minutes of a camp whose inner core was at least a half mile in circumference. Considering the need to eliminate nearly 200 sentries in six outposts (#2 on the map) stretched out over a mile, and the difficulty of running through the underbrush to surround the camp, the time for encirclement was markedly rapid. St. Clair's remarks before a congressional committee show that he was "...attacked in front and rear, and on both flanks at the same instant, and that attack [was] kept up in every part for four hours without intermission." 50

Bouquet had taught the Indians that they must completely surround the enemy, but the weight of the attack was in a half-moon crescentshaped attack on the left flank which soon gave way (#3 on the map). Moreover, the two tips of the predominant formation ended on the left-center areas where the artillery had been placed. Army units on the right flank (#4 on the map) were engaged only enough to hold them in place. Here the soldiers who were (in Winthrop Sargent's judgment) "advantageously posted and acquainted with this kind of war" 51 were not pressed. Clearly, all key Indians knew the game plan. After the original attack, the battle was put into the hands of the immediate officers of the Indians. The white Indian, Stephen Ruddell, who fought against Harmar, St. Clair, and Wayne, made it clear that Indian warriors performed all these maneuvers under the eyes of superiors. "Amongst the Indians they have Defferent [sic] grades of chiefs," explained Ruddell, "some as captain of 50, some of 100, etc." 52 The traditional military techniques these smaller units used were quite effective.⁵³

In the heat of battle, Indian military commanders, it should be realized, did not rely on the consensual approach generally preferred

- 50. Quoted by Wilson, St. Clair, 94-95.
- 51. "St. Clair's Defeat," American Historical Record 1 (1872): 485.
- 52. C. R. Young, ed., Westward into Kentucky: The Narrative of Daniel Trabue (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1981), 141.
- 53. See the documentation in Leroy V. Eid, "The Cardinal Principle of Northeast Woodland Indian War," in William Cowan, ed., Papers of the Thirteenth Algonquian Conference (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1982), 243-50. Principles of Indian war are best revealed in James Smith, Scoouwa: James Smith's Indian Captivity Narrative (1799; reprint, Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1978) and his A Treatise on the Mode and Manner of Indian War. Other valuable primary sources include Norton, Journal; Rogers, Journals; Copway, Traditional History; Joseph Lafitau, Customs of the American Indians, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth

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by Indians before battle. The pressing exigencies of the battlefield situation called for direct action. In battle there was a coercive relationship in which the lower-ranking Indian soldiers might well fear the wrath of their leader. Military officers were typically forceful in warlike situations. The same man who deferred to his wife in a matrilineal society and to his elders in any Indian society, might order his troops around like a fury uncaged. The order of command in the Indian battlefield hierarchy was never in doubt. The noncoercive village structure became metamorphosed under the life-and-death situation of the battlefield.⁵⁴ Among the Iroquois, if a seventeenth-century French observer is to be believed, "quite often chiefs have been seen, in cold blood and in a matter of fact way, breaking the heads of individuals who have gone to war against their will or deserted en route."55 While this seems to be atypical behavior, war chiefs exercised an "authority that falls little short of absolute."56 While normally this power was used, according to this same 1760s English explorer, in an environment where "no leaders are so indiscreet as to give out any of their orders in a peremptory stile," on battlefields Indians accepted the need for an authoritarian leader.

Clever officers were able to follow traditional techniques successfully because, ultimately, the individual Indian soldier performed exceedingly well on a battlefield. The important frontiersman John Cleves Symmes correctly analyzed both the weakness of many of the soldiers in St. Clair's command and the high quality of many of their adversaries:

Such men [rabble recruits] may do very well in armies and garrisons where their duty is merely mechanical, but it requires another sort of men to contend against Indians with success. It must be considered that every Indian is in fact a general in his way, and must be opposed by a combatant equally skilled in all their cunning and artifice.⁵⁷

When these skillful soldiers were able to fight under a consensually arrived-at plan that brilliantly combined traditional Indian military techniques, then it was true—as Symmes wrote—that "one hundred

86 \star The journal of

Moore, eds. (1724; reprint, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1977); Pierre de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America* (reprint; Readex Microprint Corporation, 1966).

^{54.} See Fred Gearing, "The Cherokee in the Eighteenth Century," in Roger C. Owen et al., eds., *The North American Indian: A Source book*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

^{55.} Lafitau, Customs of the American Indians, 110-11.

^{56.} Carver, Travels through the Interior Parts of North America, 258.

^{57. &}quot;John Cleves Symmes to Elias Boudinot," Quarterly Publications of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio 5 (1910): 96.

Marlboroughs could not fight fifty Indians in the woods with success."58

A third question which sheds light on Indian military organization concerns the backbone and staying power of Indian soldiers both before and during a battle. Indian soldiers accepted the rigors of a long campaign and the terrors of large scale battle because of a complex kinship structure which undergirded all Indian political reality. Aupaumut's account of his trip among the Western Indians with a message from Washington has been ridiculed as being as ineffective as his mission. Nevertheless, his rambling account of meetings piled on top of meetings, all of which start with great emphasis on the putative familial relationships of one tribe to another, freeze for us the world of the Ohio Valley Indians. Before the various tribal war "Heroes" met, the individual tribes met in three councils—the heroes, the sachems, and combined meetings of heroes and sachems. Then the various confederations of Indians met to work out their differences. Indian movement to war in the 1790s was a complex process in which consensus had to be achieved among the individual tribal elements, among traditional confederation members who were sometimes enemies, and even among traditional enemies. Nothing would be more nonsensical than to suppose that such an intricate political process would result in a military foray where every tribal division (if not every individual) would do as they personally thought best. Those proclaimed relationships of brother, younger/older brothers, uncles, grandchildren, grandfather were important in Indian politics. Unfortunately, there were few men with Aupaumut's insight. Indeed, as the years of the eighteenth century rolled on, European and colonial societies came to understand less and less about the internal Indian politics of the Ohio Valley. No Jesuit missionaries reported on their own participation in the complex institutional life of the people they were trying to convert. The Jesuit Relations and individual Jesuit accounts⁵⁹ of Indians they worked with elsewhere show, though, that the diagram in Figure 2, based on one of a very successful African tribe's workable political world, 60 also summarizes the similar mind-set for all Eastern Woodland Indian units. Societies around the world have operated in a militarily effective way in which reciprocal kin relations replace the hierarchical approach of the Western military apparatus.

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^{58.} Ibid.

^{59.} E.g., Antoine Silvy, Letters from North America, Ivy A. Dickson, trans. (Belleville, Ontario: Mika, 1980).

^{60.} M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, African Political Systems (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 277. For an extended discussion of this question of governmental structures paralleling those of kin when large numbers of soldiers were required by a major publicly sanctioned war, see, Leroy V. Eid, "'National' War Among Indians of Northeastern North America," Canadian Review of American Studies 16 (1985): 125-54.

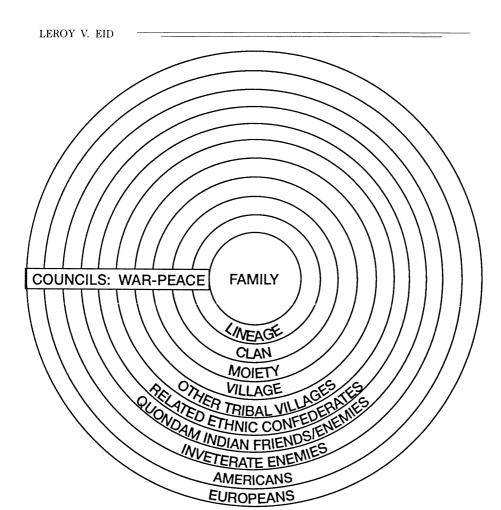


Figure 2. Typical Eastern Woodland Indian political world.

Indians found in interlocking kin relationships the rationale and rules for participating in the most important aspects of the most deadly known activity—going to war.

When the Iroquois from the Five Nations joined with the Canadian and Ohio Valley Algonquians on the morning of 4 November 1791, they were united politically. Militarily, they were following an overall leader who understood that under the Indian view of leadership he was "not properly to command, but to give his opinion and advice." On the battlefield, officers led and lower ranking soldiers executed. Not surprisingly, the confederated Indians won.

61. Rogers, A Concise Account, 229.