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Beyond a Border Conflict: Indigenous Involvement in the Mexican-American War

RILEY BOWERS*

Settled squarely in the heartlands of many Indigenous Americans' ancestral territories, the disputed area between the United States and Mexico fought over during the Mexican-American War is often solely conceptualized as the latter definition. The Indigenous peoples of these lands themselves are often just as ignored in the historical narrative of this period as are their ties to the lands. The research presented in this article aims to bring to light this often understudied part of the Mexican-American War, being Indigenous involvement in the war itself and the lasting effects that it had upon Indigenous groups. This article focuses on Apache, Comanche, and Navajo perspectives leading up to, during, and following the war. By centering these groups in the narrative, it is clear they were not sidelined or forgotten during the conflict, but rather were active players in the overall struggle for power in the region, engaging in both warfare and diplomacy. As such, equal attention should be given to these Indigenous participants in the war in further studies of the conflict.

The Mexican-American War is often studied as a border conflict between Mexico and the United States of America. Following the United States' annexation of Texas, the dispute over the border of Mexico and the United States' newly acquired territory resulted in the declaration of war between the two nations. What is often understudied, or completely overlooked, however, are the Indigenous peoples of what became this disputed border region and the roles that they played in this conflict. Indigenous peoples had been living in this region since time immemorial, and the incursion of colonial powers meant that this war was not only a border dispute for the Apache, the Comanche, the Navajo, and many other Indigenous groups, as it was for the United States and Mexico, but also a war to preserve their way of life against American and Mexican governmental persecution.

In this paper, I will analyze the roles that Indigenous groups played in the Mexican-American War as well as their political, personal, and material motivations for participating. By placing their experiences at the center of the conflict, as opposed to the sidelines, I argue that Indigenous groups that participated in the war should not be considered inconsequential agitators, but rather active combatants and political players. The motivations, engagements, and diplomatic pursuits of these Indigenous groups, as well as the lasting effects that the war had upon them, should be given equal attention in studies as is given to the United States and Mexico, respectively.

Whereas the United States and Mexico were concerned with disputed territory, the Indigenous populations had much more at stake. With the incursion of settlers and soldiers from both the United States and Mexico, Indigenous groups faced loss of land, detrimental threats to their population through warfare, potential destabilization of their way of life, and the loss of culture. The outcome of the war between the United States and Mexico would determine the future of

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the border region, and Indigenous peoples planned accordingly. Some took advantage of the opportunity of war by engaging in raids to increase wealth or even to bolster dwindling numbers. Others, such as Mangas Coloradas of the Apache, sought to secure peace and the survival of his people's way of life through diplomacy with the United States.¹ Regardless of how individuals or groups felt the future was going to pan out, what was certain was that this was a time of action and that it was upon these actions that the future depended.

During the period leading up to and throughout the Mexican-American War, both American and Mexican politicians held negative attitudes toward the Indigenous populations. The United States was well into the Indian Removal Era by the start of the war, and the rhetoric among American politicians toward Indigenous peoples had long been that they were "uncivilized." Many American politicians of this era forced treaties through various means on Indigenous groups of what became the American Southeast under the notion that their peoples and the white American population could never coexist so close to one another. "These untutored sons of the forest, cannot exist in a state of Independence, in the vicinity of the white man. If they will persist in remaining where they are, they may begin to dig their graves and prepare to die."² This letter, written to President Andrew Jackson by a friend of his at the beginning of the Indian Removal Era, exemplifies the European-American attitude of superiority and willingness to resort to violence to achieve political goals present throughout this era, including the Mexican-American War.

This American rhetoric, which painted all Indigenous groups as primitive and lesser peoples, had further implications beyond the already damaging dehumanization. It provided justification for American expansionism into Indigenous lands. President Andrew Jackson argued this position in his message to Congress on Indian Removal: "And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian? Is it more afflicting to him to leave the graves of his fathers than it is to our brothers and children?"³ Jackson's point was simple: Indigenous peoples could hold no legitimate claim to land, and therefore Christians (Americans) could freely annex lands occupied by the "wandering savages." This outlook remained prominent through the Mexican-American War, as American forces laid claim to lands within *la Apachería* or *la Comanchería*, disregarding Indigenous sovereignty.

Whereas American politicians had for some time viewed the Indigenous population as a temporary concern whose resistance to American expansionism would eventually fizzle out, Mexican politicians such as Mariano Otero viewed the Indigenous population as a serious hinderance to the advancement of Mexico as a nation. Otero, a liberal politician of his era, concerned himself with how the people of Mexico affected the prosperity of the nation. Indigenous groups were no exception to this critique. Otero described the Indigenous way of life as "brutalized" and "differ[ing] little or not at all from what it was when they were subjects of the great emperor Montezuma."⁴ Indigenous groups like the Apache also made it difficult for settlers to populate the border region with their "devastating efficiency" in warfare, thus rendering a great deal of northern Mexico out of the control of the Mexican government.⁵ These negative effects, from the

¹John Upton Terrell, *Apache Chronicle* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), 177-180.

²Alfred Balch to Andrew Jackson, January 8, 1830, <https://www.loc.gov/item/maj011860/>.

³Andrew Jackson, "On Indian Removal," December 6, 1830, Record Group 46, Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990, National Archive, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=25>.

⁴Mariano Otero, "Considerations Relating to the Political and Social Situation of the Mexican Republic in the Year 1847," in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 227.

⁵Luis González y González, "Liberals and the Land," in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 242.

perspective of Mexican politicians like Otero, extended to Mexico's struggles in the war with the United States.

By the start of the Mexican-American War, the Indigenous groups of the Great Plains region grew accustomed to raiding as a commonplace means of obtaining essential resources as well as making a profit. Such was the case that raiding had come to produce more lucrative results than if their attention was focused solely on hunting buffalo.⁶ This proved to be of significant concern to the US government, especially regarding its control of the border region. "The mischievous habits of these Indians. . . as well as a proper regard for the security of our own citizens, who have already suffered so much from their predatory and marauding excursions, will commend this subject to the attention and early consideration of Congress," reads a report from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated November 30, 1846.⁷

The incursion of settlers into Indigenous lands was not the sole motivation for an increase in raiding on behalf of the Indigenous population. Indigenous soldiers who volunteered to serve in the Mexican army were often treated poorly by commanding officers who would "abandon [Indigenous volunteers] at the moment of danger."⁸ Following their service, which had taken from them a harvest season and livestock, many Indigenous volunteers for the American army were improperly compensated. A spike in raiding resulted from this, as many Indigenous volunteer soldiers sought payment through other means.⁹

Population loss among tribes such as the Comanche was also a factor in the increasing number of raids. Following a severe decline in population beginning with an epidemic in 1780, the Comanche diversified their tribe and bolstered their numbers by taking captives and assimilating them into the tribe.¹⁰ Having faced this population decline for decades by the middle of the 19th century, the Comanche adopted a systematic form of captive indoctrination, allowing for the supplementation of their population to the best of their ability. The Mexican-American War provided further opportunity for captive-taking, and the captive experience of Macario Leal, which will be analyzed later in this work, demonstrates the process of assimilation that the Comanche employed and how captives participated within Comanche society, including during warfare.¹¹

Traditional rivalries and grudges also contributed to the bloodshed between Indigenous groups and colonial forces, particularly Mexican soldiers. In the case of the Luiseño, who lived predominantly near San Diego, tension had long existed between the group and Spaniards, and this tension was inherited by Mexicans. Missionaries were known for committing acts of violence like whipping in their conversion attempts, and Mexican soldiers regularly took supplies and livestock from the Luiseño as they traveled through Luiseño territory. These tensions came to a boiling point in December of 1846, after United States General Kearney routed Mexican forces who were laying siege to San Diego. Mexican rangers dispersed the siege, and eleven of them were attacked and killed by the Luiseño, who recognized them as Mexicans as they traveled through Luiseño land. The Luiseño, who had long feuded with Mexican soldiers, felt encouraged

⁶Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 356-357, Apple Books.

⁷W. L. Marcy and W. Medill, "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs," *Daily Union* (Washington, DC), December 28, 1846, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress*, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82003410/1846-12-28/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁸Otero, "Political and Social Situation," 228.

⁹Albert L. Hurtado, "'Conciliate the Inhabitants': Federal Indian Administration during the Mexican War," in *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 86.

¹⁰DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 146.

¹¹Joaquín Rivaya-Martínez et al., "The Captivity of Macario Leal: A Tejano among the Comanches, 1847-1854," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 117 no. 4 (2014): 372-402, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24388624>.

by the advance of American soldiers against Mexico and were likely further motivated by this to engage the group of eleven Mexican rangers.¹² This incident, which became known as the Pauma Massacre, named after the Pauma *ranchería* of the Luiseño, demonstrates Indigenous military engagement against colonial powers despite not having the capacity to field large armies in battle.

Lastly, Indigenous groups of the borderlands stood to benefit from engagements and raids in the Mexican-American War simply due to the fact that it promised the accumulation of wealth, often through livestock. Indigenous groups of the Southern Plains, such as the Comanche, the Kiowa, and the Kiowa Apache, highly valued horses, as the animals granted wider access to buffalo, further range to trade and raid, and many other benefits. While horses could be acquired through breeding or the capture of wild horses, the preferred method of many Southern Plains Indigenous groups was to obtain horses through raiding.¹³ Comanche raids and the acquisition of goods from them allowed the tribe to profit significantly off of trade with other groups, including Indigenous groups from the East who had been moved to Indian Territory, such as the Choctaw and the Cherokee. This trade could be facilitated between the tribes face-to-face or through Comanche allies such as the Wichita or the Caddo.¹⁴ While one could argue in favor of the positives achieved through the increased profitability of raiding and hunting that was granted by the acquisition of horses and livestock, this ultimately created a cycle of violence that devolved into further reliance on raiding to obtain resources. Increased numbers of livestock gained through raiding competed with buffalo for grazing land, and the numbers of buffalo steadily decreased at the hands of capable hunters with access to horses.¹⁵

Despite sharing some similar motivations and concerns, Indigenous groups of the border region did not act homogeneously. Differing opinions regarding how to act in this tumultuous period existed within and across these Southern Plains societies. Some groups were motivated to raid by the potential for economic gain or perhaps even for the sake of revenge.¹⁶ Others sought peace with one side or another, recognizing the strategic value of creating an alliance to face a common enemy.

The invasion of American soldiers into New Mexico, and thus *la Apachería*, was of natural concern to the Apache as much as it was to Mexico. The aim of the United States was to acquire much of the border territory shared by the United States and Mexico, which included *la Apachería*. General Stephen Kearney had promised New Mexicans on behalf of the United States to “forthwith halt all Indian depredations,” referencing Indigenous raids.¹⁷ The Apache recognized that this policy posed an imminent threat to their existence, as they often relied on their ability to acquire resources and goods through raiding in this vast territory. In accordance with their concerns about a future under American rule, some Apache sought to make peace with the invading Americans.

An Apache group under the leadership of Mangas Coloradas exemplified an attempt at diplomacy with the United States. In October of 1846, Mangas Coloradas led a delegation to speak with General Kearney. During this conference of leaders, Mangas Coloradas made his case to General Kearny that the Apache and the Americans should become allies and combine their military efforts against a common enemy: Mexico. In this conference, the Apache leader’s primary objective was to ensure that the United States would not interfere with the Apache’s

¹²Millard F. Hudson, “The Pauma Massacre,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 7, no. 1 (1906): 13-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41168601>.

¹³DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 148-149.

¹⁴DeLay, 338-340.

¹⁵DeLay, 647-648.

¹⁶DeLay, 386-387.

¹⁷Terrell, *Apache Chronicle*, 174-175.

practice of raiding Mexican settlements, while establishing peaceful relations with Americans. The American general would not budge on his position that any individual living within United States' territory must abide by the laws of the land. This included Mexicans who lived in the newly acquired territory, who were then to be considered Americans, as well as Indigenous peoples like the Apache. This meant the Apache must cease their raiding.¹⁸ Although the leaders could not reach an agreement, this demonstrates the active role that Indigenous groups such as the Apache played in the war, participating in negotiations as independent sovereignties with their own political motivations.

Despite the breakdown of negotiations between Mangas Coloradas and General Kearney, the Apache and the Americans remained on relatively peaceful terms throughout the course of the war. Recognizing that American forces were focusing their primary attention toward their Mexican adversaries, the Apache in large part avoided altercation with the Americans as they passed through *la Apachería*. However, some Apache did take advantage of their position as Americans passed through, avoiding large-scale engagements but raiding supplies and livestock when the moment was right. That is not to say that Apache involvement and implications regarding the Mexican-American War were insignificant by any means, however, as the disputed border region to which both Mexico and the United States staked claim laid across *la Apachería*, the homeland of the Apache, the outcome of the war would determine in large part the fate of the Apache.¹⁹ As the leader Mangas Coloradas had come to understand, American policy and relations with the Indigenous population of the border region was to differ quite significantly from those of the Mexican government.

This significant difference was highlighted as the United States began to adopt the role of “savior” to the northern Mexicans. This meant that they intended to put a stop to raiding on behalf of the Indigenous population and defend against it whenever possible, something the government of Mexico had not been able to effectively accomplish. Some Apache, while largely avoiding raids against Americans, continued their campaign against Mexican settlements. American forces, then viewing the occupied border region as American soil and subsequently viewing the Mexican inhabitants as American citizens (though excluding the Indigenous population from this rule), sought to repel the Apache attacks. One such situation occurred in May of 1847 in Coahuila, where Apaches inflicted a number of raids against the Mexican population within. United States' forces under the leadership of Captain John Reid intercepted the group of supposedly Lipan Apaches. A battle ensued, and in the aftermath thereof captives and livestock were recovered.²⁰

Diplomatic negotiations between the Navajo and the Americans came about a bit differently in comparison to the delegation led by Mangas Coloradas of the Apache. Whereas Mangas Coloradas sought out the Americans to negotiate, it was the Americans who called upon the Navajo to meet in response to the large number of Navajo raids in the region of New Mexico. Zarcillos Largos, a young Navajo headman, expressed at this delegation the sentiments of the Navajo:

Americans! you [sic] have a strange cause of war against the Navajos. We have waged war against the New Mexicans for several years. . . . *You* have lately commenced a war against the same people. . . . This is *our war*. We have more right to complain of you for interfering in our war, than you have to quarrel with us for continuing a war

¹⁸Terrell, 178-180.

¹⁹Terrell, 180-181.

²⁰DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 788-789.

we had begun long before you got here. If you will act justly, you will allow us to settle our own differences.²¹

This perspective of the Navajo gives a larger insight into the other perspectives of the Indigenous participants in the war. Not only did the Navajo see themselves as active participants in the war, but also that Americans interrupted the Navajo's war with New Mexicans. The American response to this was ever consistent, stating that the Americans had defeated the New Mexicans, and in accordance with treating them kindly, these New Mexicans were now Americans and thus were to be protected as Americans from raiding parties. This group of Navajo resolved to make peace with the Americans and the New Mexicans following the discussion, thus exemplifying successful peace talks during the Mexican-American War between an Indigenous nation and a colonial power.²²

A Comanche delegation under the leadership of Pia Kusa made a similar attempt to the Apache at a cooperative peace with the United States in September of 1846. Pia Kusa encountered US General John Wool in Texas and seized the opportunity to seek council with him. Pia Kusa, seeing Mexico as a potential common enemy with the United States, aimed to negotiate a deal with General Wool. Pia Kusa's proposal was that, in exchange for weapons and ammunition, the Comanche would kill many Mexicans. The Comanche leader, however, was not only met with a denial from the general, but also the promise of corporal punishment to anyone caught attacking Mexicans unprovoked.²³ Although unsuccessful in their attempt at an agreement with the United States, the Comanche clearly viewed themselves as active participants in the war and, despite American forewarning, acted as such.

Captive-taking remained an integral aspect of the warfare that the Comanche waged against the Mexican settlements. The account of Macario Leal, a young farmhand at the time of his capture by the Comanche in 1847, details a story shared by many captives of his time. The Comanche attacked his family's settlement, killed some of his relatives, and took Macario back to a *rancheria*. Not long after his capture, he and his captors encountered American smugglers, whom the Comanche then killed. After a year of serving the Comanche by tending to a herd of horses, he had learned the language. They subsequently brought him on a raid against American forces in which the Comanche were successful in killing their enemy and seizing goods.²⁴ This account from the captive himself details the captive-taking process that the Comanche utilized, with which they attempted to assimilate their captives and make them into functioning members within Comanche society, including participating in war campaigns against Mexicans and Americans alike.

Raiding continued in the border region, specifically targeting Mexican settlements. United States' forces made efforts to defend these Mexican populations, seemingly acting in accordance with the statements from Generals Kearney and Wool, adopting the position of "savior" to the northern Mexicans. As it was paramount to incorporate into the United States the northern territories of Mexico, such as New Mexico, US forces felt obligated to ensure the safety of soon-to-be citizens, as the Mexican government's ineptitude in defending the citizens of its northern territories was one of the justifications for war that the US listed. With the assumption of the role of protector of this newly acquired territory came the further incrimination of the

²¹John Taylor Hughes et al., *Doniphan's Expedition and the Conquest of New Mexico and California* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1906), 306, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Doniphan_s_Expedition_and_the_Conquest_o/4Ztz5znHbVAC?hl=en&gbpv=1.

²²Hughes et al., *Doniphan's Expedition*, 306-308.

²³DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 769-770.

²⁴Rivaya-Martínez et al., "Captivity of Macario Leal," 394-397.

Indigenous populations as enemies that needed to be subdued.²⁵ The citizens of the newly acquired territories came to be viewed as Americans, no longer as Mexicans, and thus the common enemy referenced by Indigenous leaders and diplomats such as Pia Kusa, Zarcillos Largos, and Mangas Coloradas ceased to exist. In other words, American forces in the region now had their sights trained on Indigenous groups such as the Comanche, the Navajo, and the Apache.

Warfare and raiding, which affected all peoples of the border region regardless of allegiance or origin, did much to shape the public opinion of Indigenous populations. Many citizens of Mexico and the United States shared similar but distinct prejudices and dispositions toward the Indigenous population, particularly regarding the peoples of the border region. The rhetoric employed varied in its method of depicting these peoples, but what can be derived is that many feared Indigenous groups as legitimate threats and forces to be reckoned with.

In Mexico, where a large portion of the population was of Indigenous or of mixed-Indigenous descent, efforts were made to differentiate between sedentary and nomadic peoples, or, more specifically, civilized *indios* and *los bárbaros*. Much of the general population of Mexico, especially those in close contact with Indigenous groups considered *los bárbaros*, viewed these peoples as mindless killers whose only purpose was to spill blood and to steal.²⁶ Although the raiding committed by these peoples was largely the result of generations of warfare between them and colonial entities and the processes of colonialism, which depleted resources to the Indigenous population, their motivations were veiled by the lack of formal declarations. Thus, to their enemies, *los bárbaros* acted without purpose, and had therefore earned their epithet.²⁷

In the case of the American public, race was often at the center of the discussion regarding the differences between themselves, being European-Americans, and the Indigenous populations. By viewing Indigenous groups of the border region unanimously as other than themselves yet indistinct from each other, European-Americans successfully portrayed these Indigenous groups as a dangerous and otherworldly enemy whose retaliation to their own acts of violence served as further incrimination of their people.²⁸ American frontiersmen were celebrated for their exploits and heroism against Indigenous peoples. “An incarnate devil in Indian fight. . . had raised more hair from heads of Redskins than any two men in the Western country,” reads the description of Lieutenant Kit Carson that appeared in a Maryland newspaper in 1848.²⁹ The American public had made an enemy of the Indigenous population of the Americas and, in the course of the Mexican-American War, needed no further justification to wage war against this enemy.

The Mexican-American War concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. With the signing of this treaty, Mexico ceded over half of its territory to the United States. In doing this, the United States received large parts of what would become the American Southwest. The ramifications of this treaty regarding the Indigenous groups of the border region were monumental. This is particularly true for Article XI of the treaty, which outlines how the US government will proceed in relations concerning the “savage tribes.”³⁰

Article XI outlines four principal provisions agreed upon by the governments of the United States and Mexico, each of which significantly impacted the future of the region that became

²⁵DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 779-782.

²⁶DeLay, 639.

²⁷DeLay, 639-640.

²⁸DeLay, 616-617.

²⁹“Kit Carson in Europe,” *Cecil Whig* (Elkins, MD), October 28, 1848, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016348/1848-10-28/ed-1/seq-2/>.

³⁰“Article XI,” *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, February 2, 1848, Perfected Treaties, 1778-1945, Record Group 11, General Records of the United States Government, 1778-1992, National Archives, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=26&page=transcript>.

the American Southwest and the lives of Indigenous peoples who lived there. The first and second of these provisions committed the United States government to the prevention of and the punishment for Indigenous incursions and raiding across the border into Mexico. In situations when punishment for raiding across the border was required, the United States would do so “with equal diligence and energy, as if the same incursions were meditated or committed within its own territory, against its own citizens.”³¹ Whereas prior to the war and the signing of this treaty, the government of Mexico was largely responsible for this duty and largely ineffective in enforcing it, the end of the war meant that this responsibility transferred to the US.

The third and fourth provisions prohibited American citizens from purchasing captives or any stolen goods from Mexico and ensured that the United States would work to “rescue and return” any captives. This meant that Indigenous groups who profited from their ability to acquire goods, captives, and livestock through raiding Mexican settlements and selling them elsewhere would have greater difficulty in finding someone willing to purchase from them. This also guaranteed that the United States would be the primary enforcement for the rescue of captives. Economically, this was a significant obstacle that stood in the way of these groups, as it significantly decreased resource pools.³² These developments led some Indigenous groups to search for new methods to preserve their system of resource acquisition.

American settlers were encouraged to migrate westward with the expansion of territory claimed by the United States and the discovery of gold in California in 1849. This resulted in increased conflict in the American Southwest between Indigenous groups, such as the Apache, and the Americans. Some of the Apache, who had long been accustomed to raiding Mexican settlements and as a result of the treaty between the United States and Mexico had greater difficulty doing so, turned their attention to the American settlers and prospectors who were passing through *la Apachería*. Throughout the years immediately following the end of the war, Apache raids often targeted American travelers who passed through the region. Mangas Coloradas explained the situation accordingly, “You tell us we must not rob the Mexicans south of the border. If we cannot do that, we must steal from the Americans.”³³

Conflict with the Apache continued for many decades following the war, as multiple Apache groups continued to sustain themselves off of raiding both Americans and Mexicans. Many Apache groups came to resist the Peace Policy of President Ulysses S. Grant’s administration, of which one of the objectives was to require “roving” Indigenous groups, such as the Apache, to relocate to a reservation, where they must remain. This further exacerbated the period of violence between Apache groups that resisted forced relocation and continued to live nomadically and the United States and Mexico.³⁴ Apache leaders, such as Geronimo, and their followers became skilled at evading capture for many years, only surrendering for the final time in 1886.³⁵ Though these conflicts extended beyond the timeline of the Mexican-American War, they came about in many ways as a direct result of the war, stemming from American incursion into *la Apachería* and federal policy toward the Indigenous population.

The Comanche, too, faced a similar period of violence with the United States. Following the end of the Mexican-American War, Comanche groups continued to raid in Texas and in Indian Territory and hunt on the Great Plains during the warmer months, returning to reservation grounds when the weather turned cold. The increase in commercial buffalo hunting further

³¹“Article XI,” *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*.

³²“Article XI.”

³³Terrell, *Apache Chronicle*, 180-185.

³⁴Terrell, 289-292.

³⁵Edward K. Faison, “Lieutenant Faison’s Account of the Geronimo Campaign,” *Journal of the Southwest* 54, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 537-538, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24394880>.

thinned the buffalo population, as Comanche groups struggled to acquire resources necessary to continue living as they had. This resulted in the outbreak of war between the United States and the Comanche, who had attacked a group of buffalo hunters at an outpost known as Adobe Walls in June of 1874. This open warfare came to an end in 1875, as many of the remaining groups of Comanche resolved to stay on the reservation, thus forfeiting their ability to continue living openly on the Great Plains.³⁶

Navajos were no exception to the pattern. Warfare and raiding between Navajos and Americans became commonplace after the Mexican-American War, referred to as the Navajo Wars. The ultimate goal of the United States was to acquire much of the territory upon which the Navajo (and other groups) dwelled and confine them to smaller reservations where they would refrain from older traditions of raiding and focus primarily on agricultural means of sustenance.³⁷ Beginning in 1864, American forces under the command of Kit Carson attacked Navajos and their resources with the intent of forcing them into compliance and to have them relocate to a reservation that had been assigned to them. This forceful relocation became known as the Long Walk, when the Navajo were taken to the Bosque Redondo Reservation, an undesirable piece of land that could not properly support the growth of crops due to poor soil and insufficient water. Navajos and their livestock suffered a great deal in this land, and it was not until 1868 that a treaty was agreed upon in which the Navajo were assigned new reservation grounds that contained some of the lands that the Navajo recognized as their ancestral homes.³⁸

The implications of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo combined with the influx of American traffic through the new American Southwest, and thus Indigenous lands, set into motion the series of events that ended with numerous Indigenous groups surrendering on the Great Plains. This surrender would be accompanied with one-sided agreements in which Indigenous groups were often required to give up their practices of living mobile and open in the region. In the case of the Apache, the Comanche, and the Navajo, periods of violence stemming from the Mexican-American War that depleted the natural resources available to the Indigenous groups ultimately resulted in lopsided treaties with the United States in which traditional homelands and practices were often stripped away in favor of sedentary lifestyles limited to reservation grounds.

The lasting effects of the war and the conflicts that arose from it seeped into media portrayal of Indigenous groups, as western films soared in popularity in the 20th century. The formula to the creation of these films often situated Indigenous groups, like the Apache, as standing in the way of American expansionism or as “obstacles to civilization.” Popular films, such as the movie *Stagecoach* (1939), neglected to portray Apache culture or political motivations, instead using the Indigenous group as a violent force that exists simply to oppose American newcomers to the region. This perception of the Apache is rooted in the period following the Mexican-American War, when Apache groups clashed with American settlers and soldiers who participated in the incursion into *la Apachería*.³⁹ This 20th-century American perception of the Apache is similar to the northern Mexican perception of *los bárbaros* throughout the period leading up to and during the Mexican-American War, in that they were viewed as bloodthirsty killers standing in the way of progress. While an indirect consequence of the Mexican-American War, portrayals such as

³⁶Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 337-341, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n1n13>.

³⁷John L. Kessell, “General Sherman and the Navajo Treaty of 1868: A Basic and Expedient Misunderstanding,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (July 1981): 253-254, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3556587>.

³⁸Traci Brynn Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 33-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt155jmrg.5>.

³⁹Janne Lahti, “Silver Screen Savages: Images of Apaches in Motion Pictures,” *Journal of Arizona History* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24459198>.

these continue to contribute to negative stereotypes of savagery, ignoring the political motivations of the complex societies Indigenous to what became the American Southwest.

In researching this subject, as is often the case when studying the history of Indigenous American populations, many of the accessible primary sources came from non-Native sources. There are numerous reasons as to why this is the case. Lack of written language is one of the most prominent factors in this drawback. Nomadic groups, like the Comanche, did not make formal declarations of war in the same style that Mexican and American citizens alike were most accustomed to.⁴⁰ Because of this lack of penned intentions, much of what can be understood and studied about these groups during this period comes from the observations of outsiders who had often not grown up within the culture or society that they observed.

Biases must be considered when reading primary sources, especially if they fall under the aforementioned category, in which they are written by outside observers. In the case of the Mexican-American War, many of the primary sources are written by Mexican or American soldiers and politicians who had many reasons to consider Indigenous groups as enemies or inherently other from the observers. American reports from the BIA praise Indigenous groups and peoples that are taking steps toward “civilization” in the same document that denounces “roving and unstable” Indigenous groups within Texas as “the most barbarous and least civilized portions of the Indian race.”⁴¹ This separation of Indigenous groups into categories of “civilized” and “barbarous” was commonplace in both the United States and Mexico. In the United States, this rhetoric was an integral aspect of the Indian Removal Era, during which Indigenous groups were not only encouraged through various means, e.g., through violence or coercion, to live on reservations, but also to conform to the American concept of civilization and society.

This negative descriptive language toward the Indigenous population is prevalent in primary sources and can even be found in secondary sources written much later. In the Mexican historian Luis González y González’s writing about liberal Mexican politicians and their difficulties governing during the period of the Mexican-American War, descriptors such as “superstitions” and “incompatible with scientific progress” are used when glossing over religions of Indigenous groups and why said Indigenous groups were a prime concern for liberal politicians of the period.⁴² This language fails to pay respect to Indigenous civilizations, cultures, and belief systems, and must be analyzed and utilized with caution so as not to make similar prejudiced claims.

To truly encompass a proper study of the Mexican-American War, including its catalysts, happenings, and its results, one must analyze each of the groups that participated and were affected by the war. Without proper consideration of the relationship between Indigenous groups and the government of Mexico and the northern settlements of Mexico, one cannot truly understand the struggles that Mexican politicians, like Mariano Otero, placed at the center of their grievances. These same struggles of maintaining order across the nation of Mexico provided the United States with justification to position itself as the savior of Mexico’s northern frontier, doing the settler inhabitants a great service in defending them from the Indigenous population. In order to comprehend the wars in this region that occurred between the United States and Indigenous groups like the Apache, Comanche, and the Navajo, one must look to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the end of the Mexican-American War when the United States acquired the vast territory that became the American Southwest, leading to a large influx of American settlers through the region.

⁴⁰DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 639.

⁴¹Marcy and Medill, “Report of the Commissioner.”

⁴²González y González, “Liberals and the Land,” 245.

Indigenous groups are situated in both the causal and geographic heart of the Mexican-American War, yet in spite of this receive little to no attention in academic discussion of the war. Indigenous groups played active roles in the fighting of the war as well as participating as political actors in negotiations and were viewed by Americans and Mexicans as belligerents. The region ceded to the United States by Mexico, and upon which much of the early fighting of the war took place, was the homeland of the Apache, the Comanche, and the Navajo, as well as many other Indigenous groups. The invasion of American and Mexican soldiers into the region, however, is not often portrayed as an invasion of Indigenous lands rather than Mexican or American lands. The notion that Indigenous groups had no legitimate claims to land, as American politicians like President Andrew Jackson would have one believe, is rooted in prejudice and ignorance. When scholars perpetuate this mindset without paying respect to Indigenous inhabitants of the region, they do a disservice not only to the Indigenous groups that they are actively ignoring, but also to the historical record. Much like the United States and Mexico, whose results by the end of the war consisted of substantial geographic and political gains and losses, respectively, so too do the Indigenous groups today exist under the conditions that came about as a direct result of the war. Further studies of the Mexican-American War must pay closer consideration to the roles that Indigenous groups played in the war, so as to understand the whole picture of such a monumental historical event and the outcomes that it produced.

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