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William S. Kiser, *Dragoons in Apacheland: Conquest and Resistance in Southern New Mexico, 1846-1861*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 354. ISBN 978-0-8061-4314-9.

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A central theme of the many influential studies of frontier defense relating to the Plains Indians and the US Army is that the harsh alien environment of the Southwest impeded the development of white civilization for decades. In 1931, historian Walter Prescott Webb wrote that the Great Plains constituted a distinct environmental entity, radically different from the woodlands of the east. Americans in the mid-nineteenth century were unaccustomed to such flat, barren, and dry terrain. Webb maintained that the unfamiliar environment both inhibited white migration and posed formidable problems for the Army as it tried to subjugate the Plains Indians.¹ New Mexico was no exception to this story, yet few scholarly works have addressed its early history.

In *Dragoons in Apacheland*, historian William S. Kiser² describes the beginnings of the Anglo-American incursion into New Mexico and the violent history of the Army's struggle to maintain order following the Mexican-American War (1846-48). In a racially charged atmosphere, Mexicans, Americans, and Apaches vied for survival and scarce resources. Moreover, "as a direct impetus for intercultural clashes and power struggles, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo [1848] became one of the earliest premeditators [*sic*] of conflict between the U.S. government and the various Apache bands" (59).

The book contains ten chapters and a conclusion, enhanced by well chosen maps, photos, and illustrations. Kiser delves deeply into primary sources such as letters and military records to support his conclusions.

The antebellum US Army in New Mexico struggled tactically to arrest Apache depredations. Most of its attempts to chastise the Indians amounted to chasing ghosts in the wilderness. The Army was facing a new style of fighting: its enemies preferred short, small-scale engagements, involving parties of twenty or fewer men,³ and relying on constant offensives through continual maneuvering. A particularly effective tactic was the raid, which comprised a sudden assault followed by a retreat and then an ambush of pursuing forces in punishing terrain. Typically, a raid leader dispatched one group to a location well-suited for an ambush, then sent others to lure the enemy, perhaps by stealing cattle or horses.⁴ Although the Apaches tailored their operations to specific circumstances of battle, tactical constants included ambush, surprise, and exploitation of mobility. Speed of movement conserved manpower in fighting a slower enemy.⁵

The dragoons of Kiser's title were mounted heavy infantrymen who rode to the battlefield and then dismounted to fight. They were effective against comparable opponents but grossly out of place on the New Mexican frontier. Clad in blue jackets, orange forage caps, and white pants, they were poorly armed with single-shot pistols and unreliable Springfield muskets. Heavy in the saddle, they could manage barely twenty-five miles a day in a hot pursuit and often had to walk so as not to exhaust their horses.

1. *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn, 1931) 15; see also Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (NY: Macmillan, 1967) 6.

2. His previous book, *Turmoil on the Rio Grande: History of the Mesilla Valley, 1846-1865* (College Station: Texas A&M Pr, 2011), concerns life around Las Cruces, New Mexico.

3. Marian W. Smith, "The War Complex of the Plains Indians," *The American Indian: Past and Present*, ed. R.L. Nichols and G.R. Adams (Waltham, MA: Xerox College Pub, 1971) 151.

4. Thomas A. Britten, *The Lipan Apaches: People of Wind and Lightning* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico Pr, 2009) 13-19.

5. William E. Dunn, "Apache Relations in Texas, 1718-1750," *Texas State Hist Assoc Quarterly* (14 Jan 1911) 226.

Kiser stresses the link between Washington's lack of strategic vision and the breakdown of tactical execution in the Southwest. In 1849, Secretary of War George W. Crawford ordered Maj. Gen. David E. Twiggs to establish posts in New Mexico after a "full examination of the country," and left "this matter ... exclusively under [his] control,"⁶ a sign of Washington's characteristic apathy. There was a similarly problematic absence of coherent planning on lower levels of government as well, with a consequent pitting of Army commanders and New Mexico governors against each other.

The conflict between Apaches and Anglo-Americans in the pre-Civil War era can be attributed to ... a broad range of difficulties that defined human interactions across much of the interwar western frontier. Cultural misunderstandings, political corruption in Santa Fe and Washington, anti-Indian ideologies, recalcitrant trouble-mongers within the Apache tribe and among the American settlers, irresponsible army officers and troops, unscrupulous American and Mexican traders, and a general inability of civil and military officials to coalesce on a single policy all undermined an everlasting effort to arrive at a mutually acceptable coexistence in the Southwest Borderlands. (5)

In 1851, General Winfield Scott and Quartermaster General Thomas J. Jesup criticized the distribution of company-sized outposts in a defensive cordon and called for offensives by large mounted columns against vulnerable Indian villages. Scott also insisted that the Army should deploy dragoon and mounted rifle companies to police the Plains, in hopes that using mobile columns to track and strike enemy Indians at a moment's notice would force them to respect the law.

At this point, Kiser introduces Col. Edwin Vose Sumner as the embodiment of the chaotic situation in the Southwest (29–30). Heeding General Scott's new directive, Sumner, newly assigned to the 9th Military District in New Mexico, attempted a large excursion to chastise the Apaches. Orders from Secretary of War Charles M. Conrad had instructed him to "whip the Navajos, Apaches, and Utes [and] revise the whole system of defense."⁷ On 17 August 1851, he personally led four mounted companies, one artillery company, and two infantry companies into Navajo country. Eventually, the harsh environment and elusive opponent caused a logistical breakdown and Sumner was forced to withdraw his column in fall 1851, having struck no significant blow against the enemy.⁸ Sumner's failure led him to recommend that the Army be entirely withdrawn from the region, because the New Mexicans were "thoroughly debased and totally incapable of self-government."⁹ In Kiser's view, Sumner's fruitless forays were symptomatic of the area's intractable turmoil.

In this well researched and now indispensable volume, William Kaiser skillfully reveals and clarifies the challenges that confronted US Army commanders in the newly acquired territories of New Mexico between 1846 and 1861. He argues cogently that the ignorance of Army commanders coupled with Washington's unconcern perpetuated for decades a vicious and, sadly, avoidable cycle of violence between Mexicans, Native Americans, and Anglo-Americans. The US Army—hampered by lack of support, official apathy, and outmoded training—was simply left with no practicable strategic guidance.

6. Crawford to George Brooke (4 Jun 1849), Letters by the Secretary of War Relating to Military Affairs 1800–1889, Record Group 107, National Archives, Fort Worth, TX (Microfilm No. 6, Roll 29) 204–5.

7. Conrad to Sumner (1 Apr 1851), in Documents Accompanying the Report of the Secretary of War, Senate Executive Document 1, 32nd Congress, 1st session, 125.

8. Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier* (Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 2001) 20–21.

9. Conrad to Sumner (4 Dec 1852), in Senate Document 1 (note 7 above), 33rd Congress, 1st session, 24.