



Depredation and Deceit: The Making of the Jicarilla and Ute Wars in New Mexico by Gregory F. Michno.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. x, 326. ISBN 978-0-8061-5769-6.

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War, despite its cost in human life and property, can yield real profits in the right circumstances. In *Depredation and Deceit*, independent historian Gregory Michno¹ offers a study of greed, conflict, and the despoliation of the Jicarilla Apaches and Southern Utes in New Mexico in 1846–55. He shows that federal legislation meant to reduce friction between Native Americans, Hispanic, and Anglo settlers instead caused even more lying, cheating, and wars-for-profit.

The author's thesis is that the

[six] Trade and Intercourse Acts [1790–1834], passed to facilitate peaceful resolution to conflicts between the whites and Indians, were a dismal failure. The acts that sanctioned a depredation claim system were a windfall for dishonest people. Swindling the government by accusing Indians of robbery and murder, and profiting from it, was a key cause of the Indian wars in New Mexico Territory and may very well be established as a key cause of most Indian wars of the nineteenth century. A quotation attributed to Ben Franklin is apt: “There is no kind of dishonesty into which otherwise good people more easily and frequently fall than that of defrauding the government.” (249)

The Mexican War (1846–48) made the United States heir to Spanish and Mexican problems, including poor relations with Native Americans. The US military now had to ensure peace, settle claims, and support the new territorial government. A review of the many diverse factions that fell under its purview shows why progress was so difficult. New Mexico was home to many Native American tribes, including some two dozen Pueblo groups, the Navajo, southern Apache bands, the Jicarilla Apache to the north and east, and three southern Ute groups. In addition, a large Mexican population was constantly looking for new lands to settle and grazing areas for sheep and cattle. The Anglo-American newcomers brought their own prejudices to the governing of these recently acquired lands: in a word, Indians and Hispanics were considered undesirable. The governors of New Mexico were political appointees with little knowledge of or sympathy for the people they governed. Moreover, the three cultural groups had a history of strife not only against each other but internally. This was the environment in which the American military was charged with maintaining law and order.

Michno helpfully places these disparate groups in a mosaic of events that transpired over about a decade. Besides relevant secondary literature,² he draws on military reports and territorial papers to detail occurrences, sometimes week-by-week. While names like Christopher H. “Kit” Carson, John Fremont, Stephen Kearny, and Lucien Maxwell are well known, many more obscure

1. His many other publications include *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula, MT: Mtn Pr, 1997) and *Battle at Sand Creek: The Military Perspective* (El Segundo, CA: Upton and Sons, 2004).

2. E.g., Veronica E. Velarde Tiller, *The Jicarilla Apache Tribe: A History, 1846–1970*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1983), and Virginia McConnell Simmons, *The Ute Indians of Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico* (Boulder: U Pr of Colorado, 2000).

individuals and events surface only briefly in this fine-grained narrative. The book's pages are filled with (often falsely reported) thefts, personal conflicts, false accusations, armed confrontations, and the occasional larger fight between Indians and US cavalry. But for the most part, the author tells an absorbing story of everyday life on the frontier and the conniving people who sought to profit at the expense of others.

The completed narrative mosaic makes a strong impression of rampant corruption. Well-intended legislation was subverted by remorseless crooks happy to deceive the government. Livestock owners claimed Indians were stealing cattle in reports citing grossly exaggerated or bogus figures, often submitted long after the supposed crimes, when memories were foggy and putative witnesses unavailable. The government might deny a claim, but there was no punishment for falsifications.

There were other ways to profit from conflict, real or imagined. Since the military was obliged to investigate and resolve reported disturbances, it was often summoned to protect settlers from Indians. The cavalry's presence increased the local cash flow through opportunities to sell it needed goods and services. Governors often begged the Army to establish forts and other facilities near towns to boost local economies. That is why the penny-pinching Colonel Edwin V. Sumner became so unpopular. He actually moved some garrisons away from towns where alcohol and prostitutes were available for soldiers, dependency on civilian markets made provisioning more expensive, and local politics could affect military duty. To the chagrin of his troops and territorial governments, Sumner made his men build their own facilities and grow their own food. Though this enforced Spartan lifestyle in both the field and at home bases cut expenses out of the military's budget, few bemoaned the colonel's departure.

Most commanders, however, were content to stimulate local economies as they bustled about the countryside trying to distinguish real from falsified claims made by citizens. Paradoxically, the arrival of troops at a given location often had a destabilizing effect:

Increased troop strength was also linked with more depredation claims. The civilians seemed to be testing the army, making allegations, having soldiers chase marauders who may or may not have existed, but all the while hoping that the soldiers would run into Indians and start a fight. That would then become an "I told you so" and justify the army's presence.... Thus the army may have had a destabilizing influence on the frontier as often as it had a pacifying effect. (252)

The author provides a statistical summary showing the scale of such chicanery. The military investigated reports of 52 clashes with the Jicarilla and Utes in a ten-year period that proved to be baseless. Of 43 incidents that actually occurred, about half were perpetrated by Mexicans or American outlaws and criminals. Only 37 percent of a total 325 depredation claims filed were actually approved.

Despite an awareness that most claims against Indians were false, two wars erupted—one against the Jicarilla and the other against the Utes—in 1854–55. These involved mostly small-scale skirmishes by cavalry penetrating into the mountain ranges of New Mexico and Colorado in hopes of bringing the Indians to the bargaining table. Michno carefully elucidates the problems of sustaining military forces in field operations over rugged terrain. There was a reason that the Utes were known as "mountain Indians." The Army had trouble supplying its forces and keeping its horses and men combat capable in thickly forested areas. Both the Jicarilla and the Utes, perhaps placing too much trust in their mountain sanctuaries, were sometimes surprised by invading forces. Even then, they were able to fight their way out of entrapments and disappear into the wilder-

ness. Lack of food, shelter, clothing, and equipment played as big a role as losses in battle in defeating them.

Depredation and Deceit is a well written and researched account of the sad history of the Jicarilla and Ute Wars. Gregory Michno has shown how a potential bright spot in relations between the US government and Native American tribes was darkened by avarice and pernicious cultural biases.