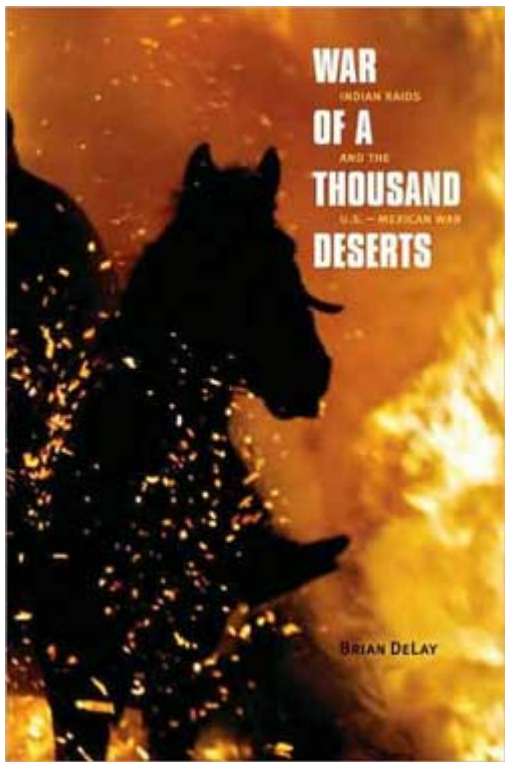


Local Politics, Far-Reaching Consequences



In the early 1830s, Comanches and their allies went to war with their Mexican neighbors. Over the next fifteen years, southern plains Indians launched a series of organized and coordinated attacks on Mexican communities below the Rio Grande. Ranging as far south as San Luis Potosí, Indian warriors—often in parties of several hundred—killed and captured livestock, burned homes, destroyed food stores, took a few Mexicans captive, and killed thousands more. Brian DeLay argues that these actions taken by Comanches and their allies initiated a vicious cycle of Indian raids and Mexican reprisals that profoundly shaped the process, outcome, and consequences of the U.S.-Mexican War. Thus, *War of a Thousand Deserts* does much more than simply restore Native Americans to the historical narrative. In this provocative and ambitious book, DeLay situates southern plains peoples at the very center of the geopolitical transformation of North America in the mid-nineteenth century.

He does so by turning the common plot line of native response, resistance, and adaptation to Europeans on its head by “exploring the efforts of Mexicans and Americans to resist, cope with, and sometimes profit from the activities of Indians” (xviii). DeLay’s primary goal, however, is to explain how and why Indians pursued the course of action they did. He convincingly demonstrates that despite the assumptions of Mexican officials that their activities determined how Indians behaved, internal politics and relations with other native peoples dictated Comanche policy.

Comanches and their Kiowa and Kiowa Apache allies maintained a tenuous peace with northern Mexicans in the early nineteenth century because the residents of *la comanchería* faced a “defensive crisis” (79). What had made them wealthy—access to vast herds of bison and horses—also made them targets. As a result, Comanches and their allies battled constantly with Cheyennes and Arapahos in the north, and Osages and more recent arrivals like Cherokees, Shawnees, and Delawares in the east. Mexico directly benefited from this state of affairs. Besieged by Indian enemies and cut off from alternative markets, Comanches relied on northern Mexicans for reliable access to manufactured goods and stable markets for their hides and furs. More significantly, DeLay contends, endemic warfare with other native groups left Comanches and their allies with few resources and less inclination to wage war on Mexicans simultaneously.

Everything changed once Comanches secured peace with their Indian enemies. Between 1834 and 1847, southern plains Indians attacked Mexican communities with remarkable violence, destruction, and coordination. Other scholars have attributed the striking escalation of Comanche raiding during this period as a collection of discrete acts by individuals bent on acquiring wealth and status. DeLay is unconvinced.

Neither economic imperatives nor individual acquisitiveness, he persuasively argues, explain why “Comanches spent nearly as much energy punishing Mexicans as they did stealing from them” (104). In DeLay’s telling, the answer lies in an erosion of the traditional distinction between “raiding for plunder” and “waging war for revenge” (123). The two coalesced in the nineteenth century, plunging the borderlands into a reinforcing cycle of raiding and revenge. In essence, when native warriors were killed during a raid on a Mexican settlement, Comanche and Kiowa notions of honor demanded their deaths be avenged. War leaders used appeals to vengeance to galvanize communal support for another campaign and recruit additional fighting men from members of different communities, bands, and allied groups. With armies of several hundred warriors, Comanches could safely travel farther into the Mexican interior, where raiding opportunities were grander and more lucrative. There, more men were killed and the cycle continued with disastrous consequences for Mexico.

The intensification of Indian raids in the 1830s and 1840s devastated the economy in northern Mexico and depopulated the countryside. Nevertheless, Mexican officials did not envision the Indian threat in the north as a threat to the nation. Racked with political instability and fiscal crisis, they chose to devote their limited resources elsewhere. Northern Mexicans were left to fend for themselves as their pleas for help from the newly empowered central government went unfulfilled. As DeLay demonstrates, the actions of Comanches and their allies thus distanced frontier residents from their leaders in Mexico City who were unresponsive to their needs, exacerbating tensions between centralists and federalists in the first decades of Mexican independence.

The Comanche war in northern Mexico was significant for the United States as

well. In the inability of the Mexican government to halt the raids and force Indians into submission, many Americans saw further proof of Mexican inferiority and yet another indication of American destiny to take Mexican territory as its own. Anglo-Americans, many believed, would triumph where Mexicans had failed, and they cast themselves as saviors of the Mexican North. But the "War of a Thousand Deserts" between Comanches and Mexicans did more than help justify the American conquest; it also helped facilitate it. The enemy U.S. soldiers encountered in northern Mexico was too demoralized, divided, and diminished in resources to launch a coherent defense against the American occupation.

Notions of their own racial superiority prevented Anglo-Americans from understanding the role Indian raids played in Mexico's defeat. Americans were so confident in their own ability to pacify the Comanches and their allies that they pledged in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to return Mexicans held in captivity by those tribes and promised to prevent Indians from launching further raids across the border. Like their Mexican counterparts, however, U.S. officials were unable to prevent Indians from raiding Mexican settlements—above or below the new international border. An inadequate military presence and more pressing distractions far from the frontier stymied American efforts, and Indian raids intensified in the years following the war. When Mexicans demanded that the Americans live up to their treaty obligations and threatened to sue for damages, tensions between Mexico and the United States mounted. American policymakers relieved themselves of the troublesome responsibility of preventing Indian raids when they negotiated the Gadsden Purchase five years later.

DeLay begins and ends his book with a discussion of this provision in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo because it reminds us that "indigenous politics continued to shape the international contest for North America even into the mid-nineteenth century" (303). While *War of a Thousand Deserts* offers important new insights into the history of native politics, the borderlands, and violence in the American West, and will likely occupy a prominent place in our discussions of the U.S.-Mexico War for years to come, DeLay's greatest contribution may be the mounds of data published in the appendix. There he has catalogued more than 500 episodes of Comanche-Mexican violence between 1831 and 1848. Offering dates, locations, and demographic data on participants and victims that he culled from Mexican sources, it is a veritable treasure trove for future scholars.



Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 496 pp., cloth, \$35.00.