

BORDERLANDS OF BRUTALITY

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Brian DeLay. *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.–Mexican War.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xxi + 473 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

This is a book about non-state actors shaping the outcome of a conflict between nation-states. Long before the U.S. declared war on Mexico, indigenous powers waged their own wars on Mexicans. Brian DeLay explains how native warriors—Navajos, Apaches, and especially Comanches and their Kiowa allies—unwittingly prepared northern Mexico for American conquest. By turning Mexican villages, farms, and ranches into a thousand man-made “deserts,” Comanche raiders left the provinces below the Rio Grande depopulated, destitute, and divided. All but defeated by Indians, *norteños* lacked the means, or the inclination, to resist U.S. incursion. Mexican state officials failed to appreciate the magnitude of native power. Stateless peoples were “incomprehensible” to the “logic of national and international politics” (p. 30). Using a transnational approach, DeLay succeeds in making indigenous groups comprehensible as shapers of binational history. Yet his narrative success—a model of the new borderlands history—may discomfort some readers, for it requires a renewed emphasis on Indian violence.

DeLay restricts his purview to “independent Indians”—native groups in northernmost Mexico and the Louisiana Purchase who possessed autonomy as of the mid-nineteenth century. He excludes semi-autonomous groups such as the Yaqui, who repeatedly rebelled against the Mexican state. Rebellions are domestic affairs. DeLay is interested in foreign interventions, especially those that had lasting consequences. The interventions of Comanches, the dominant power on the southern plains, best match DeLay’s interests, and he focuses his investigation there. He cannot ignore independent Navajos and Apaches, but he gives them less attention, for their conflicts with Mexicans had a less significant effect on the U.S.–Mexican War. In essence, his narrative contains three main players: Mexicans, Anglo-Americans, and Comanches.

War of a Thousand Deserts begins in the 1830s, the decade when the relationship between Mexico and Comanchería changed radically. Part one describes this change. Upon independence in 1821, Mexico inherited from Spain a shaky

peace with the great indigenous power to the north. The maintenance of good relations required perennial gift giving. But Mexico City proved financially unable and politically incapable of maintaining this or any other coherent Indian policy. Nuevo México, a relatively prosperous department, ended up purchasing its own peace and following its own foreign policy, effectively becoming a semi-autonomous state. Thanks to Comanche influence, Nuevo México began to lean more toward the United States than Mexico. Commercial traffic on the Santa Fe Trail increased after 1834 when Comanches made peace with their eastern neighbors, the Osage, who controlled the gateway to St. Louis. American power expanded even as Comanche influence spread. Half of the Mexican province of Coahuila y Tejas became the breakaway Republic of Texas in 1836. After Sam Houston was elected to a second term as president in 1841, Comanches accepted a *détente* with the Texans. Only the year before, Comanches inaugurated the Great Peace with their northern neighbors, the Cheyenne and the Arapaho. As a result of these diplomatic developments to the west, east, and north, Comanchería became more peaceful than it had been in decades. But violence didn't vanish. It was displaced: Comanches shifted their raiding southward to the interior of Mexico.

Raiding south of the Rio Grande was hardly new for Comanches, but the scale and duration of their operations in the 1830s and 1840s was unprecedented and astonishing. In coordinated campaigns, hundreds of native men set out on horseback each fall. Over time, their realm of extraction extended beyond the border states of Chihuahua and Coahuila, as far as San Luis Potosí and southern Durango. Comanches and allied Kiowas took captives, animals, and miscellaneous valuables such as food, textiles, and metal. Interior Mexico became a "plunderer's bazaar" (p. 109). Comanche society, simultaneously hierarchical and flexible, provided strong incentives for raiding: high-ranking older men wanted to maintain their status through wealth redistribution while low-ranking younger men wanted opportunities for social and economic advancement. Upon their return, warriors released their booty into a far-reaching trade network. Many captives were absorbed into Comanche society; others were traded away. Stolen horses often ended their journey on the northern plains, where harsh winters forced the western Sioux to replenish their herds annually. For guns and other supplies, Comanches traded with *norteamericanos* and also *nuevomexicanos*. In other words, Mexican citizens indirectly supported the ruin of other Mexicans. With so many trading partners, Comanches turned pillaging into an economic activity that rivaled horse herding and bison-hide processing.

Large-scale raiding may have begun with visions of wealth, honor, and status, but it ended with vengeance. DeLay shows that Indian raiders often went out of their way to inflict maximum damage and pain. They took the time to destroy property, slaughter animals, and torture people. The puzzle is that

the victimized Mexican herders and villagers did little or nothing to provoke such malice. They had not invaded Comanchería. Even the Mexican army could rarely muster the resources to attack Comanches. So what explains the “breathtaking, systematic carnage” (p. 118)? Like many honor-based warrior societies, Comanches required the murder of kinsfolk to be avenged. In any raiding campaign, Mexicans defending their property would inevitably kill some Comanches. According to Comanche mores, Mexicans would have to die to cover the loss. It did not have to be the same Mexicans. Most importantly, an individual loss could become a rationale for collective vengeance. Raiding parties grew so large that one member’s death could motivate countless acts of retaliation—a second campaign of revenge. “In practical terms,” writes DeLay, “vengeance gave momentum to and imposed political coherence on the widespread desire for the same animals, captives, and war honors that had motivated the first raid.” Thus the “raiding-revenge cycle” became a “self-reinforcing phenomenon” (p. 132).

Part two moves to American and Mexican responses to the Indian raids. Using the language of nationhood, northern departments pleaded with Mexico City to send troops to combat Indians or to send resources so that *norteños* could fight for themselves. The central government generally did neither. In the 1830s and 1840s, frontier defense faced almost impossible competition for money and attention. Mexico’s deep fiscal crisis—mounting debt, controversial taxation—exacerbated its perpetual political crisis. Practically every year, the Mexican government convulsed and transformed. In this era of coups and rebellions, Mexico also had to contend with foreign interventions from France and the United States. On those infrequent occasions when Mexico City scrutinized the northern frontier, it focused obsessively on the possible reconquest of Texas. Independent Indians seemed less threatening than Texan filibusters. As one federal official told a provincial supplicant, “Indians don’t unmake presidents” (p. 164).

In the absence of a centralized response, northern departments acted by themselves. In practice, provincial loyalties trumped national or even regional loyalties. For example, Chihuahua and Sonora both suffered from Apache raids, yet pursued separate strategies. Chihuahua signed its own treaty, promising aid in return for peace. Apaches took that aid and used it to attack Sonora and Durango. In return, Sonora invaded Chihuahua more than once in pursuit of Apaches. At the same time, elected officials and businessmen in both departments placed bounties on Apache scalps over the objections of Mexico City. Provincial leaders outsourced the killing to American scalp hunters such as James Kirker, who murdered something like 487 Apaches for profit. Ironically, *norteños* proved better at killing each other than their Indian enemies. The 1830s brought a series of revolts—mini-civil wars between federalists and centralists. The latter likened the former to Indians. By the time the bloodshed ended,

many of the region's best men—men who knew the terrain, who enjoyed the trust of locals, who could have led the fight against Indian raiders—were dead. Disunity prevailed again in 1841, precisely when the government gave a rare show of attention to frontier defense. When General Mariano Arista arrived in the north to marshal forces for a large offensive strike against Comanches, norteños balked. Coahuila sent nineteen men out of 400 requested; Nuevo México refused outright. Humiliated, Arista cancelled the campaign.

Mexico's anemic response to Indian incursions cannot be attributed only to insolvency and instability. There were legal and rhetorical constraints, too. Compared to Anglo-Americans, who employed racist binaries to compare "whites" and "Indians," Mexicans had "feebler rhetorical tools" (p. 207). Unlike the United States, which regarded treaty Indians as dependent sovereignties and non-treaty Indians as political nonentities, Mexico's enlightened constitution of 1824 granted citizenship to all persons—even *los bárbaros*—born in Mexico. Thus Indian raiders coming from Nuevo México or Tejas could not be classified as foreigners. Meztizo Mexican citizens had to resort to the language of honor and shame to otherize their Indians. Not until the 1840s, writes DeLay, did Mexico finally produce a "useful caricature" of Indian raiders as puppets of Yankee imperialists (p. 212). To use present-day terms, Mexican conspiracy theorists viewed the Republic of Texas as something like a rogue state that acted as a safe haven for state-sponsored terrorist groups. The U.S. annexation of Texas and the ascendancy of James Polk in 1845 seemed to confirm this conspiratorial outlook. In Mexico City, Indian raiders suddenly became a matter of pressing foreign policy—fifteen years or more after northern departments began requesting federal aid to deter systematic raiding. By 1845 it was probably too late. Already devastated, the northern provinces were divided against themselves and distrustful of the central government.

Meanwhile, Americans used northern Mexico's plight to create their own useful caricature. DeLay builds on Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981) as he shows how newly self-styled "Anglo-Saxons" portrayed Mexicans as slothful, cowardly, and incompetent—a retrograde, mongrelized race incapable of defeating the nomads and domesticating the land. Proponents of Manifest Destiny were less impressed by Indian strength than Mexican weakness. They turned a regional collective memory—something DeLay calls the "Texas Creation Myth"—into a nationalist article of faith. According to this invented tradition, the Texans had been invited to Coahuila y Tejas to redeem it from Indians. Mexico supposedly recognized that only Anglo-Saxon power could turn this wilderness—a no-man's land except for roving, robbing savages—into farms and villages. In return, Mexico promised good government. While the Texans fulfilled their part of the bargain, Mexico did not. This broken agreement justified the Texas Revolution. The truth of the Texas Creation Myth was seemingly corroborated by reports from Coahuila,

Chihuahua, and Sonora of deserted settlements and terrorized settlers. Anglo-Saxon expansionists began to view all of northern Mexico like the mythical Texas. Warmongers in Congress and the Polk administration closely followed news of northern Mexico's troubles with Indian raiders, and counted on the region being critically weakened.

In part three, DeLay shows how these two wars—the old “War of a Thousand Deserts” and the new “Mexican War”—converged. In 1846, Nuevo México gave itself up to the United States without resistance, the ultimate proof that Santa Fe had already tied its economic fate to the United States. As also shown in Andrés Reséndez's *Changing National Identities at the Frontier* (2005), nuevomexicanos became partially Americanized long before the American conquest. In a battle for hearts and minds in the other northern provinces, Major General Zachary Taylor broadcast the message that Washington, unlike Mexico City, could provide border security. The norteamericanos portrayed themselves as liberators, not conquerors: they would free the people from state tyranny and Indian savagery. Even as they made such proclamations, U.S. troops fought Mexican guerillas in brutal fashion, earning comparisons to Comanches. Remarkably, Indian raiding resumed in 1846 more forcefully than ever because Comanches had recently made peace with their former foes, the Lipán and Mescalero Apache. If things weren't bad enough for northern Mexico, 1846 marked the beginning of a serious drought. Triply besieged, the border provinces quickly capitulated. The war was lost before General Winfield Scott delivered the final humiliation at the “halls of Montezuma.”

With its sophisticated tri-part analysis, *War of a Thousand Deserts* delivers on the promise of the new borderlands history.¹ It is altogether rare for a U.S. historian to do extensive archival research in Mexico. It is equally rare for a political historian to become an expert in ethnohistory. DeLay does it all with élan. He forcefully illustrates how nation-states work to define themselves at their margins in relation to neighboring states, transborder populations, and stateless peoples. For his exemplar, DeLay begins and ends the book with Article XI of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. One of the few concessions secured by Mexico, Article XI stipulated that the U.S. would “forcibly restrain” its Indians from crossing the new international boundary, for the “savage tribes” were now under the “exclusive control” of America. DeLay derives three lessons from Article XI. First, the domestic issue of Indian raiding was also a foreign policy issue, as Mexico recognized too late. Second, Anglo-American racial swagger facilitated U.S. expansion, yet that swagger was immediately challenged in the war-won borderlands. Exclusive control proved impracticable. Only five years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, U.S. officials cannily abrogated Article XI when they negotiated the Gadsden Purchase Treaty. The U.S. did, of course, eventually conquer the last independent Indians of the Southwest, but not until the 1880s, and not before suspending its border sovereignty. In

1882, the U.S. and Mexico signed a reciprocal border crossing agreement to allow armies from both sides to pursue Apaches into foreign territory.

DeLay's final, most general lesson follows: on both sides of the border, indigenous polities shaped national histories. Indian raids not only help to explain the outcome of the U.S.–Mexican War, they add to any explanation of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Norteño resistance to the modernization programs of Porfirio Díaz owed something to the political and rhetorical legacy of fighting Indians—a connection analyzed on a smaller scale in Ana María Alonso's *Thread of Blood* (1995). Peasant rebels mobilized around a collective memory of an honorable frontier past when they, not the state, fought Indians. Now that the state treated them as fictive Indians—as barriers to progress—they fought back. Seen from this perspective, the warfare of Apaches and Comanches had a long afterlife.

Almost two decades after Richard White's *The Middle Ground* (1991), American historians seem less interested in stories of native accommodation than in native power. Books such as Kathleen DuVal's *The Native Ground* (2006) and Pekka Hämäläinen's *The Comanche Empire* (2008) give Indian groups not just agency but supremacy in the colonial era. In these narratives, European colonies exist at the periphery of the native core. Indians incorporate outsiders in a process Hämäläinen calls "reversed colonialism." Such portrayals of indigenous supremacy work best in the middle of the continent from roughly 1750 to 1850. In Hämäläinen's telling, the U.S.–Mexican War marks the pinnacle of Comanche power—an apogee followed immediately by precipitous decline. Brian DeLay agrees with this timeline, though he doesn't portray Comanchería as a hegemonic force. The key political category for DeLay is the nation-state, not empire. While DeLay's book lacks the sweeping coverage and fine ethnographic detail of *The Comanche Empire*, it does a better job of explaining the significance of independent Indians to U.S. and Mexican histories. Whereas Hämäläinen attempts to fashion a whole new story about the rise and fall of an imperial power in North America, DeLay works to complicate existing national narratives.

Although *War of a Thousand Deserts* is more concerned with the political outcomes of warfare than warfare itself, DeLay contributes to an ongoing debate about Native Americans and violence. The stereotype of the violent Indian has of course been a staple of American culture from the colonial era. Jill Lepore's *In the Name of War* (1998) and Peter Silver's *Our Savage Neighbors* (2008) both focus on discursive violence, and show how colonists in British North America created new identities in relation to images of native savagery. Working in a different colonial context—northern New Spain—James Brooks's *Captives and Cousins* (2002) treats corporeal violence as a creative force that had surprising mutualistic effects. The shared practice of captive slavery made Spaniards and Indians violent in kind, as well as kinsfolk through violence. In

a strong corrective to Brooks, Ned Blackhawk's *Violence Over the Land* (2006) emphasizes violence inflicted upon natives and traces the long legacy of colonial violence in the northwestern periphery of New Spain. Blackhawk argues that American historians have still not come to terms with the "indigenous body in pain." To Blackhawk, the 1863 Bear River Massacre—the mass murder of innocent Shoshone families by troops under the U.S. flag—is the emblematic event in Great Basin history. To the extent that Blackhawk includes violence by Indians—for example, equestrian Utes capturing pedestrian Paiutes to trade to Spaniards—he portrays it as a reaction to external events. Prior to the disruptions of guns, horses, and Old World diseases, native violence was, he claims, "a largely local phenomenon."²

Blackhawk appears to be working against the scholarly current. Following Brooks, Brian DeLay emphasizes not simply the agency of Native Americans but an agency expressed through indigenous forms of violence. The ravages of Indians propel his narrative. Aware of this, DeLay takes pains to distance himself from Anglo-American mythmakers (such as those analyzed by Lepore and Silver) who dehumanized Indians for their warfare:

To say that Comanches and Kiowas waged an extraordinarily cruel war for revenge, personal prestige, and material gain and that they justified it with arguments that might sound unpersuasive today is not to revive the discredited stereotype of the subhuman "savage." Just the opposite: it is to say that these people were fully human. (p. 138)

This hard-edged, Nietzschean assertion has been softly echoed in another new borderlands book, Karl Jacoby's *Shadows at Dawn*, a history of the 1871 Camp Grant massacre—an outrage committed against Apaches by a mixed group of Anglos, Mexicans, and Tohono O'odham. "Until we recognize our shared capacity for inhumanity," Jacoby asks, "how can we ever hope to tell stories of our mutual humanity?"³

DeLay's brutal subject matter is worthy of Cormac McCarthy, but the author only occasionally indulges in novelistic touches, as when he imagines the journeys of stolen horses (pp. 86–88). His standard style is clinical: the historian as coroner at the autopsy of northern Mexico. DeLay painstakingly tabulates data on Indian violence and expertly explains the causes of Mexican suffering and defeat. But he avoids pathos. This may be a personal choice, or it may be a professional necessity. DeLay cannot speak for perpetrators who left no written records, nor can he speak for the dead. As Elaine Scarry famously observed, language fails in the presence of violence even as violence silences language.⁴ Nevertheless, there is something unsatisfying about DeLay's argumentation. If Comanches and Kiowas were being "fully human" by engaging in the culturally sanctioned revenge killing of Mexicans, does it follow that James Kirker was being "fully human" by engaging in the legally

sanctioned scalp hunting of Apaches? Is DeLay arguing that specific conditions in the middle of the continent in the middle of the nineteenth century made specific Indians, Mexicans, and Americans turn to savage violence; or is he agreeing with Hämäläinen that the deepening segmentation of Comanche society largely explains the growing intensity of Comanche violence; or is he (also) arguing that the capacity for brutality is a universal trait? The former two are historical propositions. The latter is an evolutionary, anthropological, or even a philosophical proposition—a line of investigation that requires different proof than DeLay provides.

Not that this book lacks for data. The appendix consists of a 21-page spreadsheet enumerating Indian raids into Mexico from 1831 to 1848, including dates, places, and (when available) numbers of attackers and numbers of dead or captured. A further eighteen pages of notes provide documentation. There are unavoidable problems with the numbers, starting with the fact that Mexicans could never get an exact count of their enemies. But even allowing for error and exaggeration, DeLay's data probably represents an *undercount* of violence because his archival work in Mexico—though impressive—was not exhaustive. By itself, this long list of violent encounters does not add much to the narrative. With some effort, however, one could convert the spreadsheet into a GIS map that shows the sequence and size of Indian raids in time and place. Such a dynamic map would be an improvement over the static, old-fashioned cartography that appears in the book.

If DeLay's conceptualization of native violence is debatable, his contribution to history is not. This is a major work. Yale University Press scored a coup by publishing both *War of a Thousand Deserts* and *The Comanche Empire*; together these complementary volumes compel a revision of every textbook and lecture that covers the U.S.–Mexican War. It now seems clear that the United States did not so much defeat northern Mexico as capture the spoils of Indian warfare and diplomacy. Kiowa raiders and Comanche headmen deserve prominence alongside Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Of course, these Indians did not mean to aid these Americans. DeLay cannot get around the irony. He reluctantly concedes that his narrative can be compressed into a “tidy, grim trajectory in which Indians inadvertently empower their most dangerous enemy and see their own power, prosperity, and freedom disappear as a consequence” (p. 309). Perhaps historians should rename the series of conflicts that bequeathed the northern half of the Mexican Republic to the United States of America. The “Mexican Borderlands Wars” or the “American and Indian War” might better describe this complex transnational event.

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1. See Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds., *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.–Mexico Borderlands History* (2004).
2. Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (2006), 22.
3. Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History* (2008), 278.
4. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985).