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*THE INDIANS' LAST STAND:
A REVIEW ESSAY*

PAUL ANDREW HUTTON

THE INDIAN FRONTIER OF THE AMERICAN WEST 1846–1890. By Robert M. Utley. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984. Pp. xxi, 325. Illus., notes, bibliog., and index. \$19.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

IN 1963 ROBERT M. UTLEY'S *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, a narrative history of the tragedy at Wounded Knee, was published. It received wide acclaim and despite a plethora of publications on the same topic in recent years has never been in danger of being supplanted. Since that book Utley has turned away from strictly Indian history to frontier military topics. His superb volumes in the Macmillan "Wars of the United States" series, *Frontiersman in Blue* (1967) and *Frontier Regulars* (1973), won him recognition as the dean of frontier military historians. He helped professionalize that field of study, long dominated by antiquarians, and laid firm foundations that other historians have since built upon. With *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846–1890*, Utley returns to the field of Indian history. It is indeed an auspicious return, for Utley has written a modern classic. His book, marked by insightful analysis, clear interpretation, and vivid narrative, is the finest synthesis ever to appear on this topic.¹

Most historians of this subject have begun their work with the rapid white expansion westward following the Civil War. Utley, however, wisely begins his narrative with the American conquest of the Southwest in the Mexican War. This allows him to delineate carefully the continuity of white policy and Indian response before and after the Civil War. It was, Utley contends, the westward march of General Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West that symbolically "set off the process of confrontation and conflict between whites and the Indians of the Trans-Mississippi West" (p. 4).

Utley sets his stage with a masterful description of the "Indian West at Mid-century." He takes great pains to point out the wide diversity of the Indian cultures that confronted the white onslaught. He is also anxious to make clear that none of them existed as "a pristine aboriginal group, untouched by white influence" (p. 11). The four centuries of white presence in North America had at least indirectly impacted upon even those Indians who had never seen a white man.

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The white man's horse, of course, had enabled several tribes to move permanently onto the Great Plains and develop a thriving economy and culture based around the buffalo hunt. Within a century that culture collapsed with the white man's slaughter of the great buffalo herds. Horses, the gun, liquor, various other trade goods, Christianity, and, above all, white diseases had an enormous impact on the western tribes. Utley holds that until 1846 "the changes [wrought on Indians by white influence] had been evolutionary and mostly within the bounds of traditional culture. Henceforth they would be revolutionary and finally destructive of traditional culture" (p. 30). The story of that "revolutionary change" is at the heart of his book.²

The emergence of a continental republic in 1848 forced American politicians to develop a new Indian policy. Utley, drawing on the work of such scholars as Bernard Sheehan and Richard Slotkin, traces the evolution of Indian policy from vague Jeffersonian ideas of assimilation to the removal policy of Jefferson's heirs. The disappearance of the so-called "Permanent Indian Frontier" led Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Medill to suggest, in 1848, the creation of Indian "colonies" in the West. This concept won the enthusiastic approval of the bureaucrats who followed Medill and became an established policy by the 1850s. "In broad outline," Utley succinctly explains, "the reservation policy called for concentrating the Indians on small, well-defined tracts of land, protecting them from white contamination, teaching them to become self-sufficient farmers, and conferring on them the blessings of white Christian civilization" (p. 46).³

Creating Indian reservations was one thing, but forcing the natives onto them was something else. The Indian wars after 1848, Utley contends, were all caused by Indian resistance to the reservation system. Indian violence was not directed against individual white outrages, but rather against the slow cultural and psychological strangulation that awaited on the reservation. Such a broad interpretation opens itself to the finding of numerous exceptions (the personal vendetta of Cochise for instance), but overall it presents a valid, comprehensive interpretation for a half-century of warfare. It is the first coherent, all-encompassing interpretation put forward to explain Indian-white conflict.

Utley corrects past accounts that suggested that the Indians rebelled once federal troops were withdrawn from the West to fight on eastern Civil War battlefields. There were, in fact, far more troops in the West during the Civil War than either before or after. These troops, however, were for the most part western volunteers, and they proved far more willing to employ ruthless measures against the natives than the regular army had been. The result was vicious conflict with Sioux, Cheyenne, Navajo, Comanche, Shoshone, and Apache groups. Utley covers these conflicts only briefly, focusing on a few case studies such as the Minnesota Sioux uprising and the Navajo War. Nor does Utley neglect the tragic fate of the Cherokee, who allied themselves with the Confederacy and suffered greatly for it. The climax, of course, came at Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864, in a ghastly massacre that called federal policy into question.⁴

Utley shows that U.S. Grant's so-called Peace Policy, the subject of considerable recent scholarship, was in reality a pragmatic effort to concentrate "friendly"

Indians on reservations while making unrelenting war on "hostiles" off the reservation. That churchmen came to dominate the Indian agencies resulted more from Grant's effort to spite congressional spoilsmen who blocked his attempt to use army officers as agents rather than any humanitarianism on his part. Despite much window dressing, Utley sadly concludes that under Grant, "the old Indian system flourished in all its brazen immorality" (p. 155). The very name of Grant's policy was a misnomer, for "the era of the Peace Policy featured some of the bitterest warfare in the history of Indian relations" (p. 155).⁵

Those in search of detailed military history will be disappointed in Utley's account of that warfare. He is not interested in refighting the Indian wars in this volume, and famous campaigns receive only passing comment. The Battle of the Washita receives but a short paragraph, the Red River War less than two pages, and the Little Big Horn only half a page. Other campaigns, such as the Nez Perce War and the Geronimo outbreak, receive more attention, but Utley's intent is to provide only a brief overview. What he writes, however, is gripping. He opens his chapter with detailed descriptions of an army scouting expedition against the Apaches and a Kiowa raid into Texas. Each vividly illustrates the typical warfare experience of white man and Indian in the West. His detailed notes and excellent bibliography will direct readers to more fulsome accounts, including his own definitive studies of the military frontier. His finely drawn personality profiles and his insightful overview of the campaigns will undoubtedly spark interest and lead to further reading.⁶

One of the book's strongest chapters concerns the white reformers who literally destroyed the Indians with heartfelt sympathy and sincere concern. Citizenship, Indian education, and purification of the Indian Bureau were major humanitarian concerns, but their main weapon to save the Indian from himself was individual land ownership. They looked for a quick panacea, as did other reformers dedicated to prohibition, civil service reform, or a host of other Gilded Age causes, and they found it in the granting of lands in severalty. The resultant Dawes Act of 1887 eventually proved to be a complete disaster for the Indians. It failed to protect Indians in their ownership of the land and failed to transform Indians into yeoman farmers; nor did it reduce Indian dependency. It succeeded in only one of its goals: transferring Indian landholdings to white ownership. Utley is steadfastly unwilling to condemn the reformers as has been the recent trend. "Beyond satisfying the imperative to make the land blossom," Utley writes concerning the Dawes Act, "reformers also sincerely foresaw a host of civilizing influences accruing from individual ownership of land and the values, attitudes and way of life thus forced on the individual owner. Though scarcely a recompense to the victims, the evidence of high-minded motivation is simply too overwhelming to be buried in a later generation's guilt over the hardship and injustice inflicted on the Indians" (p. 269). Utley's story is more complex, especially in human terms, than a simple morality tale of good and evil, right and wrong.⁷

There was, of course, a sharp difference between the theoretical plans of the reformers and the actual operation of Indian policy on the reservation. "Not amid the cushioned comforts of Lake Mohonk, but on the reservations, where the

spoilsman ran the programs, were the theories of the reformers put to the test . . . ,” Utley writes. “But the polished lobby of Mohonk House differed from the hard environment and society of the reservation as night differed from day, and what seemed so ideal and attainable at Mohonk proved considerably less so on the reservation” (p. 226). Utley goes on to describe the sad litany of broken promises and cultural repressions that marked life on the reservations. He contrasts the mindset of the humanitarian reformers and Christian missionaries with that of the Indian agents and the Indians themselves. It becomes clear that even those on both sides who worked hard to understand one another failed miserably. Once again this is not a tale of villains or heroes, even though Utley concentrates on individual lives to spin his narrative where possible. Rather it is a story of mutual misunderstanding and failed communication that led to ultimate tragedy.⁸

That last great tragedy, of course, occurred at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890. Utley does not regard Wounded Knee as the last act of the Indian wars, for he argues that “warfare ended in 1886 at Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, with the collapse of the last armed resistance to the reservation system. Instead of armed challenge to the reservation, the Ghost Dance was a desperate bid for divine salvation where all else failed” (p. 257). The tragedy occurred, according to Utley, because of the militant form that the Ghost Dance assumed among the Sioux and as a result of misunderstanding, distrust, and an incompetent agent.

Utley can never be accused of acting the part of an apologist for the army, but in this book and in *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* he seems more willing than others might be to excuse gross military incompetence. He acknowledges the recent criticism leveled at his earlier work by anthropologist Raymond J. DeMallie, but dismisses it. DeMallie criticized Utley for refusing to accept the basic religious nature of the Ghost Dance, and for overemphasizing its militancy. Utley’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance in this volume will not satisfy his critics.⁹

Utley’s book will find wide acceptance among the general public because of its superb, fast-paced narrative. For the same reason it will undoubtedly prove popular as a classroom text. The many excellent maps and well-chosen illustrations will add to its appeal. Unfortunately the illustrations are sometimes poorly reproduced and arranged on the page. The detailed illustration captions are nicely done, but their grouping together is a bit confusing and leads to much distracting white-space on numerous pages. It is a shame that such a magnificent work of scholarly synthesis should be even slightly marred by defective book design.

Specialists, as well as students and the general reader, can profit from this admirable book. It is a worthy addition to the distinguished “Histories of the American Frontier” established by Ray Allen Billington and now edited by Howard Lamar, Martin Ridge, and David Weber. When established, this series was distinctly Turnerian, but Utley rejects Frederick Jackson Turner’s one-dimensional interpretation of national expansion and character. It was not in conquest that the uniqueness of America was born, Utley argues, but rather “in the cultural cross-fertilization that occurred first in the frontier zones and, more recently, in an America that welcomes and encourages the cultural, spiritual, political, and economic revival of the Indians and increasingly recognizes the rich contributions they have made and continue to make to American life” (p. 272).

Compellingly written, insightful in analysis, and bold in interpretation, *The Indian Frontier of the American West* is narrative history at its very best. It will stand the test of time and remain the standard work on its topic for many years to come.

NOTES

1. After *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), Utley returned to an Indian history topic with Richard H. Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904*, ed. Robert M. Utley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). Utley's other major publications have been more concerned with military topics. See Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962); Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1967); Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973); Robert M. Utley, ed., *Life in Custer's Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jennie Barnitz 1867-1868* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Robert M. Utley and Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The American Heritage History of the Indian Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

2. For his account of changing Indian culture Utley relies on such ethnohistorical work as John C. Ewers, "Intertribal Warfare as the Precursor of Indian-white Warfare on the Northern Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 6 (October 1975): 397-410; Richard White, "The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of American History* 65 (September 1978): 319-43; Nancy Oestreich Lurie, "The World's Oldest On-Going Protest Demonstration: North American Indian Drinking Patterns," *Pacific Historical Review* 40 (August 1971): 311-32; and Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965).

3. A major concern of Utley's is how the white man's false image of Indians led to the formation of policy. He draws upon the work of Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); and Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). A more recent work, one that Utley was unable to use, but that has been quite well received, is Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

For the evolution of American Indian policy, see Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 1973); Ronald W. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); and various essays by Francis Paul Prucha, conveniently reprinted in Francis Paul Prucha, *Indian Policy in the United States: Historical essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). A study that Utley calls "basic to understanding Indian policy in the decade following the Mexican War" (p. 276) is Robert A. Trennert, Jr., *Alternative to Extinction: Federal Indian Policy and the Beginnings of the Reservation System, 1846-51* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975). Another recent work by the same author greatly adds to our knowledge of the economics of Indian removal and the annuity system: Robert A. Trennert, *Indian Traders on the Middle Border: The House of Ewing, 1827-1854* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

4. Recent scholarship on Indian policy during the Civil War includes Edmund Jefferson Danziger, Jr., *Indians and Bureaucrats: Administering the Reservation Policy during the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974); David A. Nichols, *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Columbus: University of Missouri Press, 1978); H. Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-1871* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978). For military affairs, see Gerald Thompson, *The Army and the Navajo: The Bosque Redondo Reservation Experiment, 1863-1868* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976); Clifford E. Trafzer, *The Kit Carson Campaign: The Last Great Navajo War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); and Richard N. Ellis, *General Pope and U.S. Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970).

5. Grant's Peace Policy has been the subject of some notable recent scholarship, which Utley was unable to draw upon. Robert H. Keller, Jr., *American Protestantism and United States Indian Policy, 1869-82* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) gives a detailed overview of the Peace Policy, while Clyde A. Milner II, *With Good Intentions: Quaker Work among the Pawnees, Otos, and Omahas in the 1870s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), provides an excellent case study of the operation of the Nebraska superintendency. Adding to our understanding of the Peace Policy is the fine biography of Grant's first Indian commissioner by William H. Armstrong, *Warrior in Two Camps: Ely S. Parker, Union General and Seneca Chief* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1978).

While Utley acknowledges earlier studies by Loring Benson Priest and Henry Fritz, his main scholarly debt is to the standard work on this period: Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indians 1865-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976). Prucha's emphasis, of course, is more on activities of the reform community than on politicians.

6. Utley's chapter on military affairs draws on his previous publications and uses a wide variety of secondary sources. Most notable of these older standard histories are Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955); Dan L. Thrapp, *The Conquest of Apacheria* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); James L. Haley, *The Buffalo War: The History of the Red*

River Indian Uprising of 1874 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); William F. Leckie, *The Military Conquest of the Southern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); and Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956).

Some recent studies have sought to place frontier military history in a broader context and have reflected a willingness to incorporate the Indians' side of the story. Examples include Thomas W. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army 1860-90* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Jerome A. Greene, *Slim Buttes, 1876: An Episode of the Great Sioux War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Paul L. Hedren, *First Scalp for Custer: The Skirmish at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, July 17, 1876* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1980); Michael L. Tate, "The Multi-purpose Army on the Frontier: A Call for Further Research," in Ronald Lora, ed., *The American West: Essays in Honor of W. Eugene Hollon* (Toledo, Ohio: University of Toledo Press, 1980); and Paul A. Hutton, "Phil Sheridan's Pyrrhic Victory: The Piegan Massacre, Army Politics, and the Transfer Debate," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 32 (Spring, 1982): 32-43.

Biography has continued to be a popular format for frontier military studies. Three recent biographies of note are Marvin E. Kroeker, *Great Plains Command: William B. Hazen in the Frontier West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); John W. Bailey, *Pacifying the Plains: General Alfred Terry and the Decline of the Sioux, 1866-1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979); and Don E. Alberts, *Brandy Station to Manila Bay: A Biography of General Wesley Merritt* (Austin: Presidial Press, 1981).

7. In his chapter on the reformers Utley again follows an interpretive line similar to that of Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*. Another valuable study is Robert Winston Mardock, *The Reformers and the American Indian* (Columbus: University of Missouri Press, 1971). The important role of the reformers has been explored in two other more recent works. For a broad overview, consult Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and for a more detailed account, see Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). The origins of Indian dependency are explored in three case studies by Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

8. Excellent studies of reservation life are provided by William T. Hagan, *United States-Comanche Relations: The Reservation Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965); and Donald J. Berthrong, *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal: Reservation and Agency Life in the Indian Territory, 1875-1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976). Indian education is explored in depth in Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). The effort to replace religious contract schools with government schools is covered in Frederick E. Hoxie,

"Redefining Indian Education: Thomas J. Morgan's Program in Disarray," *Arizona and the West* 24 (Spring 1982): 5-18. For the boarding school experience, see the case study by Robert A. Trennert, "Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920," *Western Historical Quarterly* 13 (July 1982): 271-90.

9. Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Review* 51 (November 1982): 385-406. For a more general criticism of the way Indian history has been written in the past, see Calvin Martin, "Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 9 (January 1978): 41-56. For the most part, however, anthropologists and ethnohistorians will find few faults with Utley's book.