KIT CARSON'S LAST FIGHT: THE ADOBE WALLS CAMPAIGN OF 1864

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1864, Brigadier General James H. Carleton sent Kit Carson and
about four hundred men on a punitive campaign against the Kiowa and Comanche
Indians of the high plains. The resulting battle was one of the largest in the history of
North American Indian Wars. Yet this conflict has been relegated to historical obscurity.

In this paper, I examine why Kit Carson’s 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign is
forgotten, I measure the success of the mission, and place it in the larger context of
nineteenth century Indian Wars, particularly those prosecuted against plains tribes.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER 1 THE SITUATION IN NEW MEXICO AND THE SOUTHERN PLAINS...........................................................................................................9

CHAPTER 2 U.S. MILITARY PARTICIPANTS AND AUXILIARIES.........................31

CHAPTER 3 COMANCHES, KIOWAS, AND KIOWA-APACHES.................................45

CHAPTER 4 CARLETON'S STRATEGY & CARSON'S CAMPAIGN.............................66

CHAPTER 5 THE BATTLE OF ADOBE WALLS.................................................................80

CHAPTER 6 THE AFTERMATH.........................................................................................100

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION..............................................................................................111

BIBLIOGRAPHY..............................................................................................................121
Introduction

Visiting Adobe Walls

A cold late Panhandle norther doubled over the yellow grass. I squinted against its chilling force as I stepped out of my truck and into the bottoms on the north side of the Canadian River. A twelve-mile trek off State Highway 207 had taken me to the site of the Adobe Walls fight. Not much remains. Were it not for fingerboards pointing the way and a few markers placed by the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society, I would never have found the site. A gate impedes travel beyond a wide spot between the barbed wire on a caliche road near the Turkey Track Ranch headquarters. Miles of empty prairie surround Adobe Walls. Hours later, as I departed, an inbound driver stopped me to ask whether he was on the right road.

Not many people know that two important battles were fought at Adobe Walls. I made this first trip to the battle site after becoming interested in Christopher “Kit” Carson’s last fight, the Battle of Adobe Walls of 1864. This battle featured Carson, 335 New Mexico and California volunteers, and 75 Utes taking on well over a thousand Comanche, Kiowa, and Kiowa-Apache (or “Plains Apache”) warriors. Department of New Mexico commander General James H. Carleton sent Carson’s force to strike a punitive blow against the Kiowa and Comanche. Their raids on the Santa Fe Trail threatened communications, emigration, commerce, and army logistics between New Mexico Territory and the states. Carlton meant to open the trail, once and for all.

The Second Battle of Adobe Walls occurred in 1874. Hide hunters had established a small community at the site of William Bent’s old trading post on the Canadian. A group of less than thirty of them held off an attack by over seven hundred
Comanches, Kiowas, and Cheyennes led by Quanah Parker and Isa-tai. Indians snuck up on the hide hunters in the early dawn. After inflicting a few casualties in the initial early morning raid, the Indians settled in for a siege. On the second day of the conflict, the famous scout Billy Dixon reputedly shot an Indian off of his horse at a range of nearly a mile. This extraordinary shot startled and discouraged the Indians, who then melted away.

On my arrival at the battlefield, I spent an hour traipsing around the site and reading the markers. One marker lists participants thought to have taken part in the 1874 fight on the side of the hide hunters. Another monument of equal prominence notes the Native Americans known to have lost their lives in the battle. One stone honors Billy Dixon, who lived until 1913 and was buried at Texline. Dixon’s widow had his remains exhumed and reinterred at Adobe Walls. Markers pay homage to the four casualties from the party of hide hunters.

There are no walls at Adobe Walls – at the site or in the distance. The markers are about the only cultural geography. I found the perimeter of one building after a thorough search. Nothing remains of the hide hunters’ village. No pump-jacks, pivot sprinklers, or buildings pollute the view. Dry grass climbs the steep slopes toward the caprock. Isolated trees mark the location of water. It seems the only colors left on God’s palate when painting that part of the Canadian Valley were powder blue and dry gold, with just a dot of green here and there. Most visitors would not call the scenery “beautiful,” but it has a subtle, lonely allure.

I pondered the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society’s presentation of the site as I wandered the grounds. I found it strange that every existing marker commemorated the
1874 battle. The Second Battle of Adobe Walls triggered the Red River War. It sparked a response that would end the reign of the Comanches, who had earned the moniker, “Lords of the South Plains.” At the close of the war, federal authorities removed the remaining Southern Plains tribes to Indian Territory. It makes sense that the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society would commemorate that significant event. The main original marker emphasizes the valiant defense of the few against the many. Locals who know something of Adobe Walls usually remember it for “the shot.”

But what about the much larger 1864 fight with its intriguing characters and ties to so many other elements of nineteenth-century American frontier and military history? That battle has ties to the Civil War, other Indian War campaigns, the implementation of total war, and the winter campaign as a major army tactic against the Plains tribes. The first campaign featured Kit Carson, Satanta, dueling prairie fires, mountain howitzers, and Indians blowing bugle calls to confuse Carson’s troops. In the 1864 battle, thousands of Comanches, Kiowas, and Kiowa-Apaches streamed from their lodges to send Carson and company back to New Mexico. Only a heroic extrication saved Carson’s command from the fate that met the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn twelve years later. One would never know this earlier, larger fight took place at Adobe Walls by reading the monuments.¹

Why has history bypassed this battle? The 1864 Battle of Adobe Walls was one of the largest single Indian War battles fought on the North American continent. This historical omission cannot be due to a lack of military action. Carson’s almost

¹ Part of this disparity of recognition comes from the fact that the site memorialized by the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society was the site of the 1874 battle. The 1864 battle took place just over a mile from the site, but is on inaccessible private land, now pt. of the Turkey Track Ranch. The fact that the PPHS negotiated with the ranch to make the 1874 site accessible and place markers there, but did not do so for the 1864 site is a direct statement about which fight was considered more important.
miraculous extraction of his force, saving his party the dubious distinction that later befell Custer, surely compares to Billy Dixon’s legendary long-distance marksmanship in 1874. It cannot be due to a difference in star power among the participants. Satanta and Dohasan (1864) might be slightly less recognizable to many than Isa-tai and Quanah Parker (1874), but Kit Carson (1864) – maligned though he now is in some circles – is clearly a more recognizable hero than Billy Dixon or Bat Masterson (1874).


A close up of the Comanche and Cheyenne Marker. Photograph by Barclay Gibson, December, 2008, in Adobe Walls, TX.
Success often shapes the perception of historical events. The 1874 battle has always been seen as a victory for the hide hunters and part of American conquest of the West. Although there has been debate on the matter, historians generally consider the 1864 battle a defeat for the army. In this paper, I argue that this perception of the 1864 battle as a failure – or at least confusion over the objectives and achievement of those objectives – has relegated that conflict and its participants to an undeserved erasure from the remembered past.

In order to evaluate meaningfully the success or failure of any military operation, one must understand the objectives of the venture. Historians who have debated the success of the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign have not always agreed on a standard by which that success ought to have been measured. That struggle to come to terms with how the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign should be evaluated has caused confusion over the battle’s significance and aided in relegating the conflict to obscurity. I plan to examine the factors that came to determine success in a campaign against Plains Indians during this era. I will examine the objectives set forth by government and military officials prior to the 1864 campaign and then reexamine the success of the campaign based on those objectives.

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Success ought not be the only measure by which historians judge the significance of past military conflicts. Clearing up the question of success, what defines success, and whether or not this particular conflict should be considered successful will allow us to move beyond that issue to examine other important features of this dramatic clash.

I will examine the strategy and tactics utilized by the army in the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign. I will compare those to strategy and tactics used in previous and subsequent campaigns. Doing so enables meaningful comparison to other engagements with Plains tribes and places the battle in the larger context of the mid-nineteenth century Indian Wars. I plan to show what influence the execution of this campaign had on the prosecution of other army objectives on the plains over the next few decades.

Understanding the objectives of Carleton’s and Carson’s 1864 campaign against the Comanches and Kiowas will help determine the success of that enterprise. Clearing up that point of contention will allow a more effective evaluation of the conflict’s importance. Comparing this battle with others of the era against the plains tribes will show the importance of forgotten, but significant and fascinating campaign. This massive Battle of Adobe Walls fought in 1864 truly does deserves a more prominent place in American history.
1. The Situation in New Mexico and the Southern Plains

New Mexico and the Civil War

In the summer of 1864, Americans were embroiled in the Civil War. Despite the expanse of geography separating New Mexico from the great campaigns in the East, the Civil War remained a major concern for New Mexicans with ties to the states. Turmoil confronted New Mexicans from the outset of the war. Southern New Mexico had Confederate leanings. Confederate sympathizers held a secession convention at Mesilla in March of 1861. The convention voted to establish a Confederate Arizona Territory composed of the southern portions of present-day Arizona and New Mexico. A convention met later in the year in Tucson and adopted the recommendations of the Mesilla convention. Confederate sympathizers constituted a political majority in southern New Mexico.¹

Confederates threatened Union control of New Mexico with more than just political rhetoric. Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley led a Confederate invasion force of about four regiments of Texans from San Antonio through most settled portions of New Mexico Territory in late winter and early spring 1862. The Texans operated up the Rio Grande Valley with considerable success. They won a series of tactical victories and advanced beyond the territorial capital, Santa Fe. At the Battle of Glorieta Pass, Sibley’s Texans were in the midst of another tactical victory. As the Confederates drove Union forces out of the canyon, Major John Chivington, a Methodist preacher turned Union soldier, found the Confederate supply wagons lightly guarded. Chivington’s force plundered the wagons, fired what remained, and killed or captured over five hundred

Confederate horses and mules. By destroying the Confederate supply train, the New Mexico and Colorado volunteers sent the now destitute Texans on a long, hungry march down the Rio Grande Valley back toward San Antonio.²

Surely in the summer of 1864, Brigadier General James H. Carleton remembered how the loss of this single Confederate supply train had crippled the Confederate invaders in back in March of 1862. Carleton faced Indian threats to his own supply line with the states. Perhaps the memory of those starving Texans marching back to San Antonio from northern New Mexico helped convince Carleton to take action against the Indians of the Southern Plains when they began plundering his supply trains on the Santa Fe Trail in 1864.

Many Hispanic New Mexicans probably associated the Confederate cause with Texas and Texans. Most New Mexicans outside the southern settlements had likely never met any Confederate sympathizers who were not Texans. Texas troops made up Sibley’s invasion force. This association takes on greater significance considering the traditional New Mexican dislike and mistrust of Texans. Texas Governor Mirabeau B. Lamar had sent an invading force west from the Austin area toward Santa Fe in 1841 intent on asserting Texas sovereignty on lands that had not historically been part of Texas, but were claimed by Texas after its independence in 1836. The mission was a completed disaster for the Texans. New Mexico Governor Manuel Armijo captured the

vulnerable party.\textsuperscript{3} Even so, memories of that affair agitated the ill will. Some New Mexican mothers even threatened their children with the ultimatum, “If you don’t behave, I’ll sell you to the Tejanos.”\textsuperscript{4}

The Confederate invasion from Texas exacerbated a traditional New Mexican ill-will toward Texans. These agitating factors explain why Union sympathizing New Mexicans remained on edge throughout the war. This uneasiness also affected the way Anglo New Mexicans perceived their Indian neighbors. It dictated shifts in the interactions between New Mexicans and Indians in the Rio Grande Valley and on the Southern Plains during the Civil War.

New Mexico’s Relationship with Comanches and Kiowas

Many long-time New Mexico residents considered the Comanches friendly. Comanches were a valuable link in the regional economy, frequently raiding the Texas frontier to capture livestock, goods, and prisoners. Comancheros – Mexican traders – then made their way from New Mexico onto the plains to acquire the stolen goods. The Comancheros hauled the trappings back to New Mexico, where they profited by selling the inexpensive merchandise and stock to Rio Grande Valley residents. New Mexicans benefited directly from the availability of the low priced goods and livestock.\textsuperscript{5} Of course, the Comanches gained most from the relationship. Comanche scholar Pekka Hämäläinen even argues that through this powerful economic, political, and military empire the Comaches had established a colony in reverse, with the tribe exploiting Euroamerican

\textsuperscript{4} Kenner, \textit{The Comanchero Frontier}, 171.
\textsuperscript{5} For a detailed discussion of the relationship, see Kenner, \textit{Comanchero Frontier}. 
settlers. Whether the Comanche position was that dominant is unclear, but all parties involved in the exchange benefited financially from the Comanche trade. The hated Texans were the only victims in the arrangement, and New Mexicans were fighting a war against them.

The relationship between New Mexicans and the Kiowas is not so clear. Kiowas tended to keep to the plains. They interacted less with New Mexicans than did the Comanches. Far less historical evidence therefore remains to explain this tribe’s relationship to New Mexicans.

Government and the Indians

U.S. Indian policy underwent a shift in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1820’s, American statesmen believed the country had more land that it could ever fill with Euro-Americans. The administrations of James Monroe and John Quincy Adams adopted a policy placing Indians beyond a “permanent Indian frontier” on land they did not think whites would ever want or need. As the population grew, and Euro-Americans moved toward the Pacific, U.S. policy shifted to finding ways to eliminate Indian land claims. They attempted to move Indians onto reservations, teach them agriculture, and assimilate them into American culture. This obviously put the government at odds with native peoples on a more regular basis.

Shifting U.S. policies and administrations caused confusion. One of the most troublesome changes came just after the close of the Mexican-American War. In 1849, Congress created a new cabinet-level department, the Department of the Interior. Prior to

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this, Indian affairs had been overseen by a bureau housed in the War Department. Now the new Interior Department took over the responsibility. At first, the change seemed benign. BIA officials simply reported to a different civilian cabinet official. The different chains of administrative authority would eventually cause seriously strained relationships within the government, and often resulted in dissonant policies applied by the army and Indian Affairs. These problems would fester and eventually cause acute disagreement in New Mexico.

Both the Union and Confederate sides of the Civil War initially approached Indians to enlist them in their causes. During the early stages of the war, neither side aggressively pursued alliances with Native American tribes. But both groups sought mutual nonaggression agreements. Both saw Indians as a potential source of information about enemy movements and whereabouts.

Union commanders in New Mexico knew that any potential invasion force from Texas would have to come along one of two routes. New Mexico and West Texas were always arid. The 1860s were especially dry. The Texans would have to follow a river, either invading along the Rio Grande as they did in 1862, or marching across the plains via the Pecos or Canadian River Valleys.

With the anxious mood in New Mexico, Union military officials in that department looked to Indians on the region’s eastern frontier for intelligence about enemy activity along the Canadian and Pecos rivers. Military leaders viewed Indians with

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caution but still wanted to exploit their ability to ride over the vast expanses Federal
troops and territorial volunteers could not patrol.

Department of New Mexico commander Colonel Edward R. S. Canby sought to
improve relations with the Kiowas for just that reason. In late 1861, troops near Hatch’s
Ranch in eastern New Mexico apprehended a party of Kiowas. Colonel Canby ordered
District of the Pecos commander Colonel J. G. Gallegos to release the captured Indians.
According to Canby, Kiowas were considered friendly as a result of the 1861 Fort Wise
Treaty. (The treaty was in fact between the United States and several Southern Cheyenne
and Arapahoe chiefs). Canby ordered Gallegos to advise the Kiowas to steer clear of
settlements unless they were invited by an army officer or Indian agent. The army
advised against Kiowa participation in the war against the Texan, but entreated them to
communicate any information they gathered regarding Texan movements across the
plains.11

There is no evidence that Plains tribes ever yielded accurate information
regarding the movement of Texas troops on the plains. Some Indians gave the
appearance of cooperation. They were either attempting to supply information in good
faith or were providing false information in hopes of garnering favor and presents. On
several occasions, Indians reported Texan movements far onto the plains or up the river
valleys.12 Confederate forces never mustered anything close to an invasion attempt along
that route. But Indians being pursued or tailed by Texans could have mistaken such

11 Lt Hugh Nicodemus to Col J.G. Gallegos, 19 December 1861, vol. 7, Letters Sent, Department of New
by the Ninth Military Department, the Department of New Mexico, and the District of New Mexico, 1849-
1890, Microcopy No. 1072, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group
393, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
activity for a Confederate troop movement. The historical record is unclear on whether Indians intentionally gave false information or simply misinterpreted Confederate activity. Either way, the relationship between Union troops in New Mexico and their Indian neighbors on the Southern Plains was not adversarial in the early years of the war.

In August 1862, Brigadier General James H. Carleton replaced Colonel Canby as commander of the Department of New Mexico. Carleton was one of the few pre–Civil War officers who received a commission without attending West Point. This lack of formal training did not retard his military effectiveness or deprive him of rigidity. New Mexicans initially lauded Carleton for his decisive pacification of the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos between 1862 and 1864. They later deplored and repudiated his iron-fisted implementation of martial law, which had been declared by Canby but enforced more vigorously by Carleton. New Mexicans eventually formed an angry letter writing campaign to Washington, D.C., in protest. Carleton masterfully employed military force and logistics against the nation’s enemies, but in doing so, he often garnered personal enemies of his own through his abrasive methods and personality.\(^{13}\)

Carleton enacted a strict, no-nonsense approach to command and discipline as well as Indian affairs, but this approach to command did not prevent him from initially maintaining Canby’s policy of using Indians as potential spies or scouts along the eastern frontier of New Mexico. He still viewed the Comanches as peaceful – or at least not as enemies – as late as the summer of 1863. In June of that year, he authorized the quartermaster at Fort Union to send a shipment to Camp Easton, near present

Tucumcari. This shipment contained numerous presents and good-will tokens to be dispersed to Comanches from Camp Easton.

Just six months prior to Carson’s attack on the Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache villages on the Canadian River, Carleton still considered Comanche information potentially reliable and helpful. Texans had allegedly sacked a supply train on the Santa Fe Trail at the upper crossing of the Cimarron River, capturing eighty mules and about ten thousand dollars. In a report on the incident, General Carlton indicated that he was still more concerned about a Texan invasion over the plains than Indian trouble along the Santa Fe Trail. The letter was dated June 4, 1864. Carleton still trusted the Comanches and regarded them as relatively friendly. But that attitude was about to change.

Indian Trouble on the South Plains and Santa Fe Trail

The Fort Wise Treaty of 1861 confined the Cheyennes to the Sand Creek Reservation. They struggled to survive there. Some Cheyennes and Arapahos began to raid wagon trains in 1863. Reports indicated this outbreak would spread to a full-scale Indian war covering the entire South Plains. In the summer of 1863, Robert North was sent to the plains to ransom whites captured in various Indian raids. North had spent time living among Indians and had an Arapaho wife. Upon his return in November 1863, he reported that the Comanches, Plains Apaches, Kiowas, Arapahos, Cheyennes, and Sioux had all allied against whites and would launch a massive war after they attained weapons.

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14 Camp Easton would later be renamed Fort Bascom. It sat along the Canadian River on what is now a private ranch.
15 Assistant Adjutant General for the Department of New Mexico Captain Ben Cutler to Captain Craig, Quartermaster at Fort Union, 28 June 1863, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393; Cutler to Superintendent of Indian Affairs Edgar, 28 June 1863, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393; Cutler to Edgar, 28 June 1863, second letter, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
16 Carleton to Lieutenant Colonel William McMullen, 4 June 1864, vol. 10, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
North said they would remain friendly with whites until the spring of 1864, only raiding and plundering here and there to get arms and supplies.\textsuperscript{17}

That all these tribes colluded is doubtful, but Indian raids increased in the Southwest and along the Santa Fe Trail in 1864. Indians mounted a pair of well-coordinated attacks at Fort Larned and Walnut Creek on July 17 and 18. At Fort Larned, a group of about seventy Comanches, Kiowas, and a few Arapahos used an altercation between the Kiowa leader Satank and a sentry to run off the post stock. The post commander responded by sending a party under a Lieutenant Eayre to destroy the Kiowa lodges about three miles from the post. The Indian party anticipated Eayre’s movement and set a trap. About two hundred Indians appeared in front of his party, but six to seven hundred appeared to the side and behind them, in position to cut the party off from Fort Larned. Eayre wisely maneuvered his command back to the post. As a result of the affair, the army lost twenty-seven horses, forty-seven mules, and the entire post beef herd. The Indians also captured sixty sutler-owned horses and mules, and a few private cattle, all within a quarter-mile of the fort.\textsuperscript{18}

Plains Indians pulled off a similar raid the next day at Walnut Creek, about thirty miles east of Fort Larned. A group of about a hundred Indians, mostly boys, approached a wagon train at that location. The Indians appeared friendly, but several went to the rear of the train and began killing the teamsters. Captain O. T. Dunlap led a rescue party that temporarily drove off the raiders, saving a few men and some of the stock. Once again, a group of about three hundred Indians appeared in the woods along the creek in position to isolate Captain Dunlap’s party, forcing him to return to his fortified encampment.

\textsuperscript{17} Statement of Robert North, 10 November 1863, \textit{The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies} (Hereafter abbreviated: OR), ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 100.

Indians killed ten teamsters in the raid, wounded three, and scalped two teenagers alive. Whether the perpetrators were Arapahos, Comanches, Kiowas, or a mixed party remains unclear.19

Comanches and Kiowas combined to attack the Allison wagon train on August 1, 1864. About seventy Indians entered the camp of the Allison train near Lower Cimarron Springs, giving friendly indications. After a short period of time, they made a sudden attack, killing all five Americans in the group and capturing the train. The Kiowas and Comanches not only spared Mexican teamsters in the party but provided them a wagon and one yoke of oxen for their return trip to New Mexico. The Indians stated that they did not wish to harm the Mexicans but would kill any white man who attempted to make passage along the road.20 Carleton cited this particular incident repeatedly as evidence that something eventually had to be done about the Kiowa and Comanche depredations on the Southern Plains.

The Comanches and Kiowas added several other incidents to Carleton’s mounting evidence. On August 6, a group of about thirty Indians attacked the Zuna and Armizo trains near Arroyo de los Plumas. Between them, Zuna and Armizo lost 135 mules. They reported seeing a larger party of Indians driving a large herd of stock southward toward the Canadian valley.21

About August 11, Indians attacked the George Bryant train near the upper crossing of the Cimarron. Bryant lost all his mules. Indians killed at least two more people while hitting a train near Cow Creek. On the twenty-first, a group of Kiowas and

19 Ibid; Carleton to Superintendent of Indian Affairs Michael Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322; Capt Nicholas Davis to Carleton, 30 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 212-213.
21 Ibid; Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.
Comanches, estimated at sixty to seventy, raided a large wagon train of eighty-four wagons near the west end of the dry branch of the Santa Fe Trail. The Indians netted 240 head of oxen and killed one wagon master. Again, witnesses from the train saw Indians driving the captured stock off toward the Canadian valley.  

The raiders did not selectively target Union personnel, citizens, and materiel. Kiowas and Comanches killed or captured dozens of Texans in attacks on Confederate Fort Murray and at settlements along Elm Creek in the vicinity of present-day Graham, Texas. Comanches struck as far south as Menard, Texas. One expert claimed Comanches stole as many as three hundred thousand Texas cattle during the Civil War. Although that estimate seems high, the problem was clearly severe.

New Mexicans likely felt little sympathy over Indian raids in Texas. But all the raids combined to illustrate an extreme shift in Indian-White relations in the region during the summer of 1864. Fear was in the air in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. One man remembered:

The summer of 1864 will long be remembered by our frontiersmen as a season when the Comanche, the Kiowa, the Arapahoe, the Cheyenne, and the Plain Apache held high carnival on our western plains. From early spring to late fall, not a week went by that they didn’t commit their depredations. . . . No trains crossed the plains that season without being attacked, and none without strong military escorts escaped capture and destruction. Houses and barns on the frontier were fired, stock of all kinds was nowhere secure, large and small parties were attacked, men, women and children murdered.

The situation on the Plains had changed dramatically, and Union military leaders decided that they had to take action to punish the raiders and stop the attacks.

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24 George H. Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight with the Comanche and Kiowa Indians, at the Adobe Walls, on the Canadian River, November 25th, 1864 (Providence, R. I.: Providence Printing Company, 1878), 5-6.
Why the Increase in Raiding?

Opinions diverged greatly over why raiding increased in 1864. In his book on relations between Plains Indians and New Mexico, Charles Kenner suggests the Comanches had become agitated at the extension of white settlement into their domain.\(^{25}\) This argument is overly simplistic. Comanches had more or less peaceably dealt with Spanish and Mexican encroachment for years. They successfully established commerce with the Mexican population of New Mexico. Why fight the whites? Anglo settlement had been ongoing for some time. No massive influx in 1864 took place to trigger such a downturn in relations. In theory, population increases should have provided an even bigger market for the goods and stock Comanches captured in the Texas settlements. Kenner also suggests that a “petty quarrel” between the army and Indian department over sending an agent and paying for Comanche presents at Fort Bascom could have helped trigger the deterioration.\(^{26}\) This event seems too small to have caused such a dramatic shift and so much damage.

General Carleton operated under a different assumption. He knew the troubles in 1863 had started with the Cheyennes and Arapahos. The government bribed these tribes with presents. Carleton believed that the Kiowas and Comanches became jealous over the gifts given by the government to the Cheyennes and Arapahos. The Kiowas and Comanches must have wondered why the government would reward their misbehavior, Carleton thought. He was of the opinion that the Kiowas and Comanches commenced

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\(^{25}\) Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 144.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 143-44.
depredations in an effort to convince the government to pay them off as it had the Cheyennes and Arapahos.27

Michael Steck served as superintendent of Indian affairs for New Mexico Territory at the time. Steck went to medical school in Pennsylvania and then joined a wagon train bound for the West. He became agent to the Apaches in the early 1850s and was promoted to territorial superintendent in 1863. He often feuded with Carleton on everything from the general’s enforcement of martial law in the territory to the wisdom of his Bosque Redondo Reservation project. The separation of leadership between the War and Interior Departments did nothing to help the matter. Carleton fought to get the federal Indian bureau to take over funding of the Bosque Redondo Reservation once he had populated it with Navajos and Mescaleros. Steck refused to fund it, arguing to his superiors in Washington that Bosque Redondo’s extravagant costs precluded the reservation from being funded by any cabinet department but the War Department.28

Steck’s analysis of the rise in Kiowa and Comanche raiding came close to agreeing with Carleton’s. Steck concurred with Carleton that the Indians were agitating for provisions. But Steck believed the depredations were only being committed by a few specific bands in the tribes. He argued that the U.S. government was responsible for the robberies and murders on the overland trails. If the government would just hand out more provisions and goods to Indians, there would be little if any trouble from them.

27 Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.
Given the government’s stinginess with provisions and presents, Steck was surprised the raiding had not been more intense, lethal, and destructive.\(^{29}\)

Some observers offered naïve suggestions. Retrospectively, George Pettis thought the Indians were somehow convinced that “the white man could be exterminated by concerted action, and by striking at different points to have fondly hoped they could once more roam and hunt at their pleasure, free and un molested by white man’s civilization.”\(^{30}\)

Colonel W. S. Nye offers a more accurate explanation for the increased Indian raids in 1864. In his history of Fort Sill, Nye addresses the “prairie war of 1863-64” in a short chapter that deals with both the Comanche and Kiowa activity and the Cheyenne and Arapaho uprising. He suggests Indian affinity for raiding exacerbated by absence of regular troops during the Civil War caused the increase.\(^{31}\)

Nye was correct about Comanches’ and Kiowas’ desire to raid. He was also right that there were not enough troops to protect traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. However, this circumstance was not unique to 1864 or the Civil War era. After an initial exodus of regular troops at the outset of the Civil War, the federal government eventually manned the frontier with ever larger contingents of troops – volunteers – than had been available during the preceding decades.\(^{32}\)

From the close of the Mexican-American War on, the U.S. government struggled between two major frontier security strategies. It could scatter small posts throughout the West wherever settlers needed protection, or it could mass large forces for an occasional

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\(^{29}\) Steck to Dole, 10 October 1864, folder 1, box 2, Michael Steck Papers, MSS 134 BC, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

\(^{30}\) Pettis, *Carson’s Fight*, 5-6.

\(^{31}\) Nye, *Carbine and Lance*, 32.

summer punitive march. Neither option fielded an agile, mobile force. The decision rested on whether authorities placed greater value on presence than on concentration of power. Both were tried; neither worked. The post – Mexican-American War army had an on-paper strength of scarcely more than ten thousand, and it increased only slightly before 1861. Prior to the Mexican-American War and the settlement of the Oregon question in the 1840s, the army had only to defend a “permanent Indian frontier,” aling the western borders of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. After the war, there were too many square miles to defend and too little manpower.33

Emigration exacerbated the problem. Streams of pioneers raced across the Great Plains to destinations west in the 1840s and 1850s. Surprisingly, the Civil War did not stem that flow in the least. Even greater traffic through their traditional lands put additional pressure on the Southern Plains tribes and often drew them to the immigrant trails – whether to raid or trade. This increased pressure and contact made conflict more likely than ever.34

Raiding was a cultural imperative for most Plains Indian males. Supply and emigrant trains made their way across the heart of South Plains Indian territory on the Santa Fe Trail with little or no escort. The army attempted to man a few posts along the trail but lacked sufficient manpower to patrol its entire length. There were too many trains to escort them all adequately. Trains often set out across this treacherous stretch of unguarded and arid plains with inadequate protection. Although none of these factors were unique to 1864, they do illustrate some reasons for the vulnerability of Santa Fe

33 Utley, *Frontiersmen*, 2-6, 18-19.
Trail traffic during the period leading to Carleton’s decision to strike. To the Plains tribes, the trains must have seemed like ripe, low hanging fruit.

Assigning Responsibility and the Carleton – Steck Feud

Whatever the cause of the raids, they convinced army leadership that military action was necessary. In order to respond, General Carleton had to determine who the culprits were. Captain Nicholas Davis made a six-week scout from Fort Union between August 4 and September 15. His circuitous path took him first to the breaks of the Red River and then to Lone Mountain. The Davis party next visited the site of the Lower Cimarron Springs attack. Davis found the corpses of the deceased strewn about the prairie. After burying the bodies, the men visited the west end of the Dry Route. They then visited the site of the Walnut Creek assault, saw where a train had been attacked at Cow Creek. Enroute back to Santa Fe, they camped along the Arkansas River.

At each stop on this scout, Davis collected evidence on most of the Indian attacks listed above. In his report to General Carlson, he stated that eye witnesses had placed responsibility for each and every occurrence on the Comanches and Kiowas. Some other reports blamed the Walnut Creek raid on Arapahos, but the Comanches and Kiowas were clearly responsible for the majority of the incidents. Based on the testimony at hand, Carleton declared the Kiowas and Comanches hostile to the United States and ordered frontier posts to guard against surprise attack.

35 Westbound travelers on the Santa Fe Trail had a choice to make once they got to West-Central Kansas. They could follow the Arkansas almost to the front range of the Rockies – generally considered to be a safer route with better water – or they could cut cross country and pick up the Cimarron Cutoff, traversing the present-day Oklahoma Panhandle and Northeastern New Mexico. The two trails rejoined northeast of Las Vegas, New Mexico; Robert M. Utley, “Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign,” The American West 2 (1995), 8-9.
37 Ibid.
38 Kenner, Comanchero Frontier, 145.
Soon afterward, Carleton ordered a punitive winter campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches. He selected Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson, his primary field commander, to lead the expedition. Carleton did not consult with Superintendent Steck before ordering the strike. Steck only learned of the operation by reading a copy of General Order Number 32, Carleton’s order to send Carson against the Plains tribes.

Carleton had an aggressive, abrasive personality. He clearly rankled Steck by unilaterally deciding to attack the Kiowas and Comanches. Furthermore, Steck doubted the prudence of taking any military action against the Indians. First, he pointed out the long record of peaceful relations between New Mexicans and Comanches. Second, he argued that it was dangerous to pick a fight with a tribe as powerful as the Comanches. Third, he made an effort to distinguish between the Comanches and Kiowas. Steck claimed that his contacts in San Miguel County attributed any disturbances in the area to Kiowas, who had been avenging the death of a chief. Steck believed that with vengeance satisfied, the Kiowas now desired peace. Fourth, Steck conceded that Comanches had been involved in raids into Confederate Texas, but that raiding aided the Union cause. Comanches brought large herds of stock to New Mexico from the hated Texans. Steck opposed a campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches outright. But if he could not convince Carleton to cancel the operation altogether, he would do all he could to protect the Comanches and divert Carleton’s wrath toward the Kiowas.

Carleton never liked Steck, whose determination to shield the Comanches aroused Carlton’s suspicions. All of Carleton’s reports implicated the Comanches in the havoc of the summer of 1864. Comanches almost certainly perpetrated the most damaging of the

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39 Carleton to Blunt, 22 October 1864, Inclosure 1, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198.
40 Steck to Carleton, 26 October 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
41 Ibid.
attacks, such as the incident at Lower Cimarron Springs. Why would Steck try to deny their involvement? Carleton thought he had a pretty good idea.

Steck’s sources in San Miguel County profited from the Comanchero trade. Comanche raids provided them an inexpensive source of goods and especially livestock. They did not care whether the booty came from the Texas settlements or the Santa Fe Trail. If relations with the Comanches deteriorated, that stream of bargains would quickly run dry. Historians do not know whether Steck himself profited from the Comanchero trade, but Carlton certainly suspected Steck of operating with an ulterior motive.42

Carleton’s reservations went beyond a mere recognition of commercial interests. He suspected full-scale Nuevo Mexicano (Hispanic New Mexican) support of the mounting Indian war. Americans had not been running New Mexico for two full decades in 1864. Many Nuevo Mexicanos held onto a latent animosity toward Americans. Carleton had reason to believe that resentment might bloom into outright rebellion. In 1863, when North reported the possibility of a great Indian alliance, he also testified that Comancheros were encouraging the Indians. Comancheros told the Indians that Mexicans would stream out of New Mexico to join the alliance of Comanches, Plains Apaches, Kiowas, Arapahos, Cheyennes, and Sioux against the Americans.43

The attack on the Allison train at Lower Cimarron Springs also helped convince Carleton that Nuevo Mexicano information about the disposition of the Comanches could not be taken at face value. Comanches and Kiowas killed only the whites in the train. Carleton saw the fact that Kiowas and Comanches spared the Mexican teamsters and

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42 Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.
43 Statement of Robert North, 10 November 1863 OR, ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 100.
provided them means of transportation back to New Mexico as clear evidence that Nuevo
Mexicanos and Comanches were in collusion and neither could be trusted.\textsuperscript{44}

Carleton may have had his own ulterior motives for driving the Comanches out of
the region. The previous winter, he had sent Carson on a successful campaign to round
up the Navajos. One of Carleton’s principal projects while department commander in
New Mexico was the establishment of a Navajo reservation called Bosque Redondo near
Fort Sumner. This establishment, designed to assimilate Navajos and Mescaleros into an
agricultural society, sat on the fringes of Comanchería. The Navajos and Mescalero
Apaches – traditional enemies of the Comanches – confined at Bosque Redondo made a
ripe target for Comanche raids.\textsuperscript{45}

Carleton had a great deal of time, effort, resources, and his own reputation at
stake in Bosque Redondo. He desperately wanted to see the project to a successful
conclusion. However, it seems unlikely that Comanches could have made enough trouble
at Bosque Redondo to have motivated a punitive strike from Carleton solely on that basis.
The Navajos had only been there a few months when Carleton ordered the strike against
the Comanches and Kiowas. Anyhow, they were too busy pillaging the Texas
settlements and the Santa Fe Trail to have bothered with the struggling Navajos and
Mescaleros at Bosque Redondo.

In response to Steck’s arguments, Carleton offered to differentiate between “good
and bad” Comanches. He suggested that Steck send a representative along with Kit
Carson on the campaign. This agent could then sort the guilty from the innocent bands

\textsuperscript{44} Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.
of Comanches if such discrimination could be made.\textsuperscript{46} The impracticality of this suggestion suggests that Carleton may have been mocking Steck or pushing him to back down or to consent to the campaign. In spite of his personal dislike for Steck, Carleton did consider it important for both “branches of government” to share the same objectives.\textsuperscript{47} On occasions when they could not agree, however, Carleton did not hesitate to invoke a moral trump card, his “duty to protect the citizens of New Mexico,” to justify his course of action over Steck’s.\textsuperscript{48}

General Carleton was in no mood to follow Superintendent Steck’s military advice, particularly since he believed Steck’s sources – and perhaps Steck himself – were deeply interested in protecting their age-old trade relationship with the Comanches.

Throughout the first half of November, 1864 – even after Carson’s party had embarked on the campaign – Steck still prosecuted his spirited effort to protect the Comanches. He and Carleton exchanged a series of letters during this time. Although they displayed the overtly congenial respect and deference typical of Victorian-era correspondence, their mutual dislike became more thinly veiled as the interchange continued.

Steck completely abandoned any attempt to relieve the Kiowas of responsibility. In fact, by his second letter to Carleton he wrote, “The Kiowas I believe should be severely chastised and hope the Genl. will be able to inflict the punishment they so richly deserve.” He still favored excluding the Comanches. By this time, he admitted that some Comanches may have been involved but argued that the involvement of a few did not

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Carleton to Steck, 16 March 1865, box 2, folder 2, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM. By “two branches of government,” Carleton means the Army and Indian Affairs.
\textsuperscript{48} Carleton to Steck, 8 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
justify punishing the whole tribe. Further, Steck claimed that any Comanche participation must have been instigated by renegade whites or secessionists, although he offered no evidence to support this hypothesis. Steck was angry at being left out of Carleton’s investigations into culpability for the summer raids. Carleton’s use of Utes and Jicarilla Apaches in Carson’s punitive party without consulting Steck also offended him.49

After Steck’s exchange with General Carleton became a hopeless and acrimonious exercise, the Superintendent washed his hands of the matter.50 He sent copies of the entire string of correspondence to U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Dole with a recommendation that the matter be brought before Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton.51

The Decision to Act

In 1864, Secretary Stanton had larger problems and issues to resolve than a dispute over which Indians to punish for frontier raids. By the time Steck involved Dole and attempted to alert the secretary of war, the issue was moot. Colonel Carson and his battalion had embarked on their campaign. By November 10, the expedition was at Fort Bascom.52

New Mexico could not support even a small army domestically in the 1860s. The Department of New Mexico relied on supplies imported from the states. These goods could only reach New Mexico by one route, the Santa Fe Trail. That road was the very

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49 Steck to Carleton, 5 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
50 Steck to Carleton, 9 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM; Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
51 Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
52 Carson to Captain Ben Cutler, Assistant Adjutant General, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.
lifeline of the department. All communications and supplies bound for New Mexico came over the trail.

When the Confederates invaded in 1862, they were tactically successful on the battlefield. Only the loss of their supply train at Glorieta Pass turned them back. Even at a strength of only 2,590, Sibley’s Texans had not been able to live off the land. They practically starved on the long walk back to San Antonio. Perhaps Carleton’s knowledge of that incident helped make up his mind to protect his lines of supply and communication at nearly all costs.

So ultimately, Carleton’s decision was easy. He used the term “avenge” in some of his correspondence with Steck. But revenge was not a necessity. Carleton felt that in order to keep his army – not to mention some eight thousand Mescalero and Navajo charges at Bosque Redondo – well fed and supplied, he would have to punish the tribes and prevent future threats to Santa Fe Trail traffic. “It is certainly understood that the interruption to our line of travel to the States is owing to the hostility of the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches and Kiowas,” Carleton told Steck. He could not permit that line to be endangered. Colorado and Kansas could take care of the Cheyennes and Arapahos, but if the Comanches and Kiowas were to be dealt with, Carleton would have to do it himself.

53 Wilson, *When the Texans Came*, 3.
55 Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.
2. U.S. Military Participants in the Adobe Walls Campaign and Their Auxiliaries

The Problem of Finding Troops

Once General Carleton decided to strike the Kiowas and Comanches threatening his line of communication with the East, the real planning had to begin. Military manpower in New Mexico was scarce. The Army had never manned its frontier regions adequately following the war with Mexico.\(^1\) The Civil War placed an even greater premium on federal troops. Given the U.S. military situation at the time, Carleton probably knew that he would have to construct an unconventional military force for this punitive campaign. He may have anticipated this obstacle, but he did attempt to solicit regulars from outside the Department of New Mexico to strengthen his expeditionary party.

Carleton first sought additional manpower from the East. He may have felt that with hundreds of thousands of troops fighting for the Union in the Eastern theaters, the War Department could spare a few hundred to keep New Mexico secure. Carleton wrote Major General Henry “Old Brains” Halleck for troops. By this time, Halleck had been relieved as commander in chief of Union Armies and was serving as chief of staff under Ulysses S. Grant. Halleck thought it preposterous that Carleton should ask for troops from the main theaters of war. Halleck considered the Indian trouble on the South Plains resolved as a result of U.S. military successes against the Cheyennes and Arapahoes in Kansas. That assumption illustrated Halleck’s lack of understanding of the military situation along the Santa Fe Trail. Even had he understood the difference between the Cheyenne-Arapaho affair and the Kiowa-Comanche activity, it is unlikely that he would have authorized troop reinforcements for Carleton. As it was, Halleck indicated that he

\(^1\) Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 2-6.
might even be inclined to remove troops from the Southwest. After that rejection, Carleton looked elsewhere for the additional manpower. The potential benefit of explaining the situation to Halleck would have been offset by the risk that Carleton might actually lose troops in his attempts to garner reinforcements.\(^2\)

Carleton next looked to the Kansas and Missouri theater for support. He planned to stage a multipronged attack on the Kiowas and Comanches camped for the winter somewhere between his command and the posts in south-central Kansas. Carleton wrote Department of Kansas commander Major General Samuel R. Curtis in October of 1864 to outline his plan. Carleton proposed a cooperative action between his own troops moving up the Canadian and a large force under Major General James G. Blunt that would “make this the last war that it will be necessary to prosecute against these two most treacherous tribes of the plains.”\(^3\)

Curtis agreed to Carleton’s plan in principle and agreed to the plan. Carleton promptly relayed that assent to Blunt in an effort to expedite his scheme.\(^4\) However, when it came to prioritizing military operations, Curtis, like Halleck, was more concerned with Confederates in Missouri and Arkansas than with Kiowas and Comanches.

In the fall of 1864, Confederate forces mounted their last serious challenge to Union troops in the Trans-Mississippi region. Major General Sterling Price led a force of about 8,500 Confederate troops to liberate his home state of Missouri. Price advanced as far as Kansas City, where he was turned back by Curtis’s command at the Battle of

\(^2\) Major General Henry Halleck to Brigadier General James H. Carleton 2 October 1864, A/260, Letters Received, 1864, Department of New Mexico, roll 24, microfilm, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1980) Registers of Letters Received and Letters Received by Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, 1854-1865, Microcopy No. 1120, National Archives Publications, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

\(^3\) Carleton to Curtis, 23 October 1864, 923, LS, 1864, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

\(^4\) Carleton to Blunt, 22 October 1864, Inclosure 1, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198.
Westport on October 23, 1864. In the weeks leading up to Carleton’s strike against the Kiowas and Comanches, Curtis was pondering how to deal with this threat from Price’s advancing force. During the last week of September, Curtis directed Blunt to protect the Santa Fe Trail as best he could by stringing a few troops along his section of it. Blunt and the remainder of his troops were to rendezvous with Curtis’s main force at Council Grove. This would allow Blunt and his troops to help Curtis check the Confederate advance in Missouri but prevent Blunt from participating in any meaningful action against the Kiowas and Comanches on the Southern Plains.

Although it appears Carleton sent Kit Carson into the field to strike the Comanches and Kiowas under the assumption that Carson’s force would be cooperating with a significant body of troops from Blunt’s command, the support from Blunt never materialized. Carson’s battalion would fight at the Adobe Walls with only the military force that could be raised in New Mexico.

Carleton also proved diligent in his search for manpower in New Mexico. In his refusal to send Carleton troops from the East, Halleck did authorize him to call upon the territorial governor if he needed additional troops to replace those whose terms of service were expiring. Carleton could also call up additional territorial militia, but only if the summons was deemed “absolutely necessary.” Like many military commanders of his day, Carleton considered every project he undertook “absolutely necessary.” Not surprisingly, Carleton immediately requested that Governor Connelly call out a portion of the New Mexico militia to participate in the campaign. Governor Connelly proved to be just another obstacle to Carleton’s plans. Connelly agreed with Steck on the Comanche

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6 Halleck to Carleton, 2 October 1864, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 24, M1120, RG 393, NA.
question. Like Steck, he claimed that the Comanches were at peace with New Mexico. He, too, may have been influenced by players in the local economy of the Rio Grande Valley, which was heavily reliant on Comanchero trade. Whatever the reason, Connelly refused Carleton’s request to activate more territorial militia to support the campaign.

This absence of support from outside New Mexico left Carleton to prosecute the campaign with troops at his disposal. This meant the primary force would be composed of New Mexico, Colorado, and California volunteers. Some of these units were the remnants of those used to repel Sibley’s Confederate invasion in 1862. Others were part of the “California Column” which had marched to New Mexico under Carleton to aid Canby in repelling Sibley’s invasion, but had not arrived in time to participate in the campaign. The Californians remained in New Mexico to protect it from future Confederate advances and to quell Indian disturbances if needed.

Carleton’s meddling with Indian affairs in New Mexico did present him with another option. He could use Indian tribes on friendly terms with the federal government against others he considered hostile. General Carleton relied heavily on his field commander, Kit Carson, to rally support from friendly tribes. As a former fur trapper and Indian agent, Carson had developed a good relationship with the Utes.

In absence of an overwhelming force of federal troops, Carleton toyed with the idea of sending a force comprised solely of Utes and Jicarilla Apaches. Carson, however, argued that an all-Indian force would be impossible to control and that U.S. troops, even

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7 Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
8 The military experience of the California Column is covered in Darlis Miller, The California Column in New Mexico (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 3-30.
9 Dunlay, Kit Carson and the Indians discusses Carson’s diverse relationships with Indians at length.
if they were volunteers, should make up the majority of the strike force.\textsuperscript{10} Carleton wisely took Carson’s advice and ultimately used friendly Indians as an auxiliary force supplementing the California and New Mexico volunteers launched against the Comanches and Kiowas.

In spite of any difficulties anticipated in controlling Indian auxiliaries, they were a tempting source of manpower for several reasons. First and perhaps most importantly, they were readily available and not preoccupied with fighting Rebels. New Mexico military authorities believed some tribes would be willing allies. The Utes and Jicarilla Apaches were “mountain Indians.” They bore a traditional animosity toward Plains tribes such as the Comanches and Kiowas. Carleton believed that this feud, combined with Carson’s established relationship with the Utes, would make it easier for federal forces in New Mexico to recruit from the ranks of some tribes.\textsuperscript{11}

Carleton expressed another belief commonly held by federal authorities in frontier regions. He thought there would be a political advantage in creating and maintaining alliances with some tribes against others considered belligerent by federal authorities. By allying with friendlier tribes, Carleton hoped to prevent the outbreak of a general Indian war pitting all Indians against the Angloamericans in New Mexico.\textsuperscript{12} This line of thinking implied a divide and conquer strategy. Carleton did not necessarily think that the Utes and Jicarillas would be an indispensable addition to his force. He was hell-bent on sending Carson out to punish the Comanches and Kiowas with or without them. But he believed that in addition to the extra manpower they brought, the employment of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} Carson to Carleton, 21 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, pp. 295-296.  
\textsuperscript{11} Carleton to Steck, 8 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.}
Indian auxiliaries would help keep Indians as a whole divided and therefore weak and incapable of massive, unified, organized resistance.

Carleton queried one other Indian source for assistance. Prior to the Navajos’ arrival at Bosque Redondo, Carson had subdued the Mescalero Apaches, who had become Bosque Redondo’s first occupants. When the Mescaleros at Bosque Redondo asked Carleton for horses and food, he told them he had no horses to give away. He did indicate, however, that horses would be available to those who joined Carson’s punitive expedition onto the plains. Carleton added that there were plenty of rations at Fort Bascom, the jumping off point for the Adobe Walls Campaign. In spite of these enticements, though, Carleton was unsuccessful in recruiting any manpower from the relocated Mescaleros.

Composition of the Federal Force

Field Commander. In addition to finding manpower, General Carleton had to appoint someone to command the expedition. As department commander, Carleton directed military operations in New Mexico from his headquarters in Santa Fe. Like most departmental commanders, Carleton needed a field commander to direct military actions in person. Finding manpower may have been difficult for Carleton, but choosing a field commander was easy: Carson was the obvious choice.

Kit Carson had dealt with Indians in every phase of his life. He grew up in a Missouri-frontier settlement constantly threatened with Indian attack. As a mountain man in the West, Carson learned to trade and interact with some Indians, and how to fight others effectively. He fought and negotiated with Indians while guiding John C.

13 Carleton to Buckner 22 October 1864, 925, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
14 For a detailed discussion of Carson’s varied relationships with Indians during his life, see Tom Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*. 
Frémont’s explorations of the West in the early to mid 1840s. As an Indian agent in New Mexico, he labored diligently to improve federal treatment of certain tribes of Indians. Biographer Edward Sabin called Carson’s attitude toward Indians during his agency as “hopeless compassion.”  

Carleton certainly would have wanted to leverage Carson’s experience as an agent to the Utes to garner support from the “mountain Indians.” But he did not select Carson to lead the expedition for primarily diplomatic reasons. Carson was a well-known and highly successful Indian fighter – a true legend in his own time. His campaign against the Navajos had devastated them. Carson was in his mid-fifties by 1864. He brought exceptional experience to the task of punishing the Comanches and Kiowas. Carleton himself was no stranger to Indian Wars. It was, in fact, Kit Carson who introduced Carleton to Indian fighting. They served together against the Mescaleros in 1854. In that conflict, Carleton learned the basic difficulties Indian fighting presented and gained an appreciation for the differences between Indian campaigns and conventional warfare. Much of this he learned from Kit Carson, the master craftsman of the trade.  

General Carleton had placed Carson in command of previous expeditions against the Mescalero Apaches and the Navajos. Once entrusted with these missions, Carson carried them out effectively. Both tribes were subdued and sent to Bosque Redondo. Kit Carson executed these campaigns over the course of one winter apiece. Particularly against the Navajo during the winter of 1863-1864, Carson’s winter campaigning techniques brought a rapid end to the conflict. His men went about destroying Navajo

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foodstuffs and cornfields. The resulting lack of food forced the Navajos to capitulate and begin their “Long Walk” east to Fort Sumner.

This effectiveness displayed by Carson against the Mescaleros and the Navajos compelled Carleton to order Carson to command the Comanche-Kiowa expedition. There is no evidence that Carleton ever considered anyone else. Carson’s successes on previous missions against Indians made him the best fit to wage the campaign.

**Infantry.** Lieutenant Colonel Francisco P. Abreu commanded the infantry contingent assigned to the expedition. Abreu had recently commanded Fort Union and would serve another stint as commander of that post in early 1865, not long after his return from Adobe Walls. He held a commission in the First Infantry of the New Mexico Volunteers. He was a resident of San Miguel County, and lived out his life there after completing his military service.17

Abreu’s infantry contingent was small. Portions of two California Volunteer Infantry companies were attached to the force. In all, Abreu had under his command less than ninety infantrymen, many of who were assigned to Lieutenant Pettis’s small artillery unit. Some of the participating cavalry, however, fought dismounted and were treated as infantry, at least in the execution of portions of the battle itself.18

**Cavalry.** Cavalry comprised the majority of the U.S. military contingent on the Adobe Walls campaign. Carson had at his disposal four full cavalry companies and a detachment from a fifth, for a total of over 240 officers and men. As mentioned previously, not all of these men were mounted. Two companies came from the First

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17 1870 Federal Census San Miguel County, New Mexico Territory (Index: File 1 of 29); 1910 Federal Census San Miguel County, New Mexico Territory (Index: File 1 of 44).
Cavalry of New Mexico Volunteers, while the other two and another fraction had been part of the First Cavalry of California Volunteers.\(^{19}\)

Major William McCleave was selected to command the cavalry arm. Like most of the accompanying cavalry, McCleave was a member of the First Cavalry of California Volunteers. He was a veteran of the trip from California, and as such had been under Carleton’s command for some time. He seems to have been well qualified for the job, and the best equipped in terms of manpower of the component commanders.\(^{20}\)

Carleton placed special trust in McCleave. The general was often able to overlook faults in subordinates whom he thought were generally upstanding and competent. McCleave, an Irish immigrant, enlisted in the regular dragoons in 1850. Early in his career, he was arrested after a drunken tirade in which he threatened an officer. He was made to walk bound behind a wagon from Las Vegas to Santa Fe. Carleton thought enough of him to appoint him first sergeant. He left the regular army in 1860, but joined the volunteer First California Cavalry as a captain once the war broke out. He played a pivotal role in Carleton’s and Carson’s roundup of the Mescalero Apaches in 1862, for which he later received a brevet promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. McCleave continued his service in the regular army’s officer corps until his retirement in 1879.\(^{21}\)

**Artillery.** Lieutenant George H. Pettis took charge of the artillery. U.S. troops on Indian campaigns often did not take along artillery. Fortunately, Carson’s command did. Pettis commanded of an element of one company of infantry totaling twenty-seven

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid; Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 239.  
men. He had two mountain howitzers at his disposal. It would seem that twenty-seven men would be a few too many to operate two small guns. It is not clear whether he was merely placed in charge of this cadre of infantry and happened to have the mountain howitzers, or whether his men had been trained specifically to operate the guns.

The mountain howitzer was a small artillery piece. Howitzers in general were designed to be more mobile than other pieces of field artillery. For that purpose, they were shorter in all aspects. Even the tongue/trail was shorter. This difference in length from other field guns made howitzers less stable. As a result, howitzers had to be fired with smaller charges and thus had a shorter range and had to be fired at a higher trajectory. Military leaders often accepted these limitations in favor of the mountain howitzer’s greater mobility.

Mountain howitzers in particular were a type of pack howitzer. Mountain howitzers were designed to be highly mobile and transportable over difficult terrain. Military crew members could disassemble them into just a few relatively small parts, each of which could be borne by a single pack animal. Carson originally intended to bring a train of pack animals on the trip. When only one hundred pack saddles could be found, he opted instead to bring a wagon train. Even with a wagon train rather than pack animals, mountain howitzers would have been the only field artillery that could have been brought on the trip. These small field guns would prove an essential psychological and tactical weapon at the Battle of Adobe Walls.

Auxiliaries. More than once General Carleton toyed with the idea of supplementing his uniformed manpower with Indian auxiliaries. As early as 1862, he discussed with Carson the possibility of seeking Ute cooperation against Confederate invaders. Although that plan never came to fruition, he believed that finding Indian auxiliaries to join Carson in his strike on the Comanches and Kiowas ought to be easier than convincing them to fight Rebels. Mountain tribes had been hereditary enemies of Plains tribes like the Comanches and Kiowas. Carleton believed that Carson could easily use his influence with the mountain Indians of Northern New Mexico to garner a good deal of manpower from these tribes.

Attaining that support proved not to be so easy. Carson went to Cimarron, New Mexico, to recruit Utes and Jicarrilas for the expedition. He departed Cimarron with a sizeable Indian auxiliary force from those tribes, but he had great difficulty convincing them to participate. Carson ended up enticing some Utes and Jicarillas to join the expedition by promising them extra rations, a pound and a half of extra meat and flour. Even at that, Carson did not get the hearty response Carleton had expected, at least in part because the rations were not present. They were just a promise, albeit a promise from a relatively trusted source, Carson. Carson wrote General Carleton to request the extra provisions be sent to Lucien B. Maxwell, and to warn him that keeping the agreement would be important in preserving Ute and Jicarilla cooperation. It would not only keep those tribes friendly to whites, but also keep them on terms for use in future campaigns should they become necessary.²⁶

²⁶ Carson to Carleton, 3 November 1864, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 23, M1120, RG 393, NA.
Carson initially left Cimarron with sixty-five Utes and Jicarilla Apaches. He later amended the number to eighty-two in a postscript to the letter he sent to Carleton requesting provisions. In his after-action report, Carson reported that seventy-five Indians made the entire trip. Once along, these Utes and Apaches proved to be enthusiastic warriors, chomping at the bit for a chance to wreak havoc on their enemies from the plains.²⁷

A Force Evaluation

In spite of all General Carleton’s searching for additional troops for this punitive expedition, he believed this force of 321 officers and men with 75 Indian auxiliaries would be sufficient to accomplish his tactical goals. At least that is what he told Kit Carson. Carleton said he gave Carson “more than he requested” because he intended Carson to give these Indians, especially the Kiowas, “a severe drubbing.”²⁸

But would a force of about four hundred men be adequate to subdue two powerful tribes likely concentrated in their winter encampments? In The Comanchero Frontier, Charles Kenner argues emphatically that Carson’s force was far too small for the task at hand.²⁹ Kenner’s retrospective assessment happens to be true, but that may be a bit of Monday morning quarterbacking. Should Carleton have known his force was too small?

It certainly had been difficult, to that point, to find Plains Indians concentrated in large aggregates. Carleton may have thought a force of four hundred would be more than adequate to punish whatever individual bands Carson would encounter on the South Plains. Carleton anticipated a cooperating force under Blunt to march toward the Canadian from Fort Larned to the east. Carleton’s expectation of a two-pronged attack

²⁹ Kenner, Comanchero Frontier, 148.
may have left him with the impression that the mission could be accomplished with a small force raised from the New Mexico theater.

Even if Carleton somehow knew he would get no help from Blunt and the Kansas units, past experience may have led him to believe that only a limited force was necessary to operate against and chastise the Indians. Carson had perfected winter campaigning techniques against the Navajos during the winter of 1863-1864. By concentrating on destroying food stuffs and the Navajo means of survival, Carson had forced them to surrender without fighting a pitched battle. These tactics allowed him to subdue the Navajos – a tribe arguably as powerful as the Comanches – with a force of only 389 men.\(^{30}\) Why should a winter campaign against the Comanches and Kiowas require any more personnel or firepower?

The Plains Indians often scattered at the first sign of an enemy attack – a tactic that they applied for several reasons. Obviously, a surprise cavalry attack would first and foremost put families and noncombatants in jeopardy. Additionally, Plains tribes seldom lingered to give battle unless victory was almost certain. They would only fight with a distinct and massive advantage, unless cornered. Knowing these tendencies, Carleton may have been content to deploy a small force. Even if they would not be able to round-up and capture all Comanches and Kiowas (this was never the objective in the first place), Carson’s battalion would be in little jeopardy. Once engaged, the Indians would likely not enjoy a decisive advantage and would thus be inclined to break off any engagements that might put Carson’s party at risk for severe casualties.

In retrospect, Carleton erred in sending such a small strike force against the two powerful South Plains tribes. But for the several reasons listed above, he expressed

contentment with the force he fielded. He had a sound, experienced field commander in Carson. He had done his due diligence to secure more troops – they were simply not available. The force seemed large enough, and the winter-campaign tactics had proven successful in the past. General Carleton was confident of a favorable outcome.31

3. Kiowas, Comanches, and Kiowa-Apaches

The Southern Plains are a hard place. They boast a unique beauty, but the very elements that make the Plains beautiful make them a difficult place to live. Massive summer storms seem to rise from nowhere. Endless prairies wave in the wind that blows incessantly. Extreme weather fronts sweep across the smooth terrain. The same day can be hot and cold. Sometimes the day’s high temperature is set at 12:01 a.m., and it just gets colder all day. West of the hundredth meridian, mother nature often fails to produce enough water to grow much more than a good crop of grass. Then water comes, but when it does, it can fall in a massive downpour or a destructive hail storm.

Life on the plains demands adaptability, and a certain toughness. This is true today, and was even more so before the age of modern technology and conveniences. Tools, however, often help humans to adapt to harsh environments. They allow humankind to overcome difficult circumstances. A few Indians lived on the Southern Plains prior to contact with Europeans. But the tribes that occupied the Southern Plains by the mid nineteenth century had utilized tools acquired from Europeans to populate the arid plains in greater numbers and more effectively exploit them than had their predecessors.

It was not so much contact with Europeans that so profoundly changed the plains lifestyle as the material and animal culture introduced by outsiders. Europeans brought with them tools that utterly transformed life on the plains. With them came, among other things, the horse and the firearm. Elliott West says that horses and guns were essentially the cotton gins and steamboats of the Indians and the Great Plains.¹

Before horses, Plains tribes used dogs for work and aid in transportation. The horse allowed Plains Indians to shift from a society that occasionally hunted buffalo to a truly nomadic, hunt-centered existence. Plains Indians hunted buffalo before acquiring the horse. The horse culture allowed an amazing hunting efficiency not otherwise possible.²

Firearms were less important than horses in this shift toward reliance on the buffalo. Indians hunting on horseback preferred the more mobile traditional bow and arrow for the task at hand. Firearms did, however, prove useful in another aspect of this cultural change. Many different tribes had the same designs on the newly viable buffalo hunting lifestyle. They converged on the now highly desirable hunting grounds of the High Plains. The situation spelled conflict. The firearm, combined with the horse, made Plains warriors decisively more mobile and deadly than they had been. Plains tribes’ masterful application of the horse and firearm arguably made them the world’s finest light cavalry.³

Horses and guns gave Plains Indians a new identity. These tools ushered in a completely new way of life. They gave the Indians power, mobility, freedom, and responsibility. But horses also required additional resources and care. They sparked changes in geography among tribes as well as lifestyle. They allowed greater access to resources, and caused conflict.⁴ Acquisition of the horse simultaneously brought great power and caused unforeseen strife.

Tribes like the Kiowas and Comanches had not always been on the Great Plains, nor had they always been horse cultures. But by the mid nineteenth century, they were

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² West, Contested Plains, 70-71.
³ Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, 7.
⁴ West, Contested Plains, 55-58.
clearly defined by both the animal upon which they depended, and the environment in which they lived.

**Kiowas**

The Kiowas were one of these groups that converged on the Plains as they adapted to the horse culture. According to tradition and oral history, they emerged from the area around the headwaters of the Yellowstone River. Some traditional stories allude to the geysers famous to that region. Kiowas spoke a dialect most closely related to the Tanoan languages of the Pueblo tribes. This linguistic difference separates them from the Comanches and Kiowa-Apaches (or Plains Apaches), the tribes with whom they became most closely associated.\(^5\)

While living in the mountains, the Kiowas hunted buffalo but used dogs and travois for transportation. They surrounded bands of bison on foot and drove them over cliffs. After some ancient disagreement, the Kiowas divided into two groups and left the Yellowstone area. One group traveled northward and became disaffiliated with the tribe. The party we now call Kiowas moved out onto the plains. Their oral history from this period seems to refer to geographical features such as Devil’s Tower and the Black Hills.\(^6\)

Upon arriving on the Northern Plains, Kiowas soon ran into the Crows and Arikaras. The Kiowas made an alliance with the Crows sometime in the very early eighteenth century. From this interaction with other plains peoples, Kiowas developed into the horse-based raiding culture they became known for. During this period, they

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adopted buffalo-hide lodges, the Sun Dance, and the use of horses. Kiowas may not have even known about the existence of the horse before their rendezvous with the Crows. Ethnologist James Mooney visited the Kiowas in 1896 as part of an effort to collect what knowledge he could about the tribe before it disappeared. (The perception of the Indian as a “vanishing American” was prevalent in Mooney’s time). Several of the eldest members of the tribe claimed at that time to remember this affiliation with the Crows and Arikaras. Although Crow tradition does not corroborate the Kiowa version of a close relationship, they were likely in some contact, and Kiowas probably acquired the skills and culture associated with the plains life from observing or associating with either the Crows or some similar tribe.7

At first, horses did not come easily to the Kiowas. They were able to acquire them a few at a time in raids on their future allies, the Comanches, whom they pressured toward the south with their occupation of the area near the Crows. This dearth of horses did not last long. In 1682, LaSalle said the Plains tribes he encountered had “plenty of horses, probably stolen from Mexico.” He was most likely referring to the Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and other tribes of that area. While this acquisition of horses certainly helped make the Kiowas more efficient hunters, it also gained them prowess and renown as raiders. By the 1730s, they had already been condemned by the Spaniards, who labeled Kiowas among the hostile tribes.8

Lakota and Cheyenne pressure pushed the Kiowas south toward the end of the eighteenth century. The Kiowas collided with northern bands of Comanches and pushed them south. Comanches and Kiowas had an adversarial relationship as this migratory

8 Nye, Bad Medicine & Good, viii. Mayhall, The Kiowas, 12.
pressure mounted. Kiowas passed through the region of the upper Platte and Republican Rivers, eventually coming to the region they controlled during recorded history. Although their raids covered a vast area including Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and even the coastal bend area of Texas, Kiowa territory was generally thought to have included parts of western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, as well as bits of northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, and southwestern Kansas.9

Kiowa-Apaches or Plains Apaches

Kiowa-Apaches were a small, Athapascan tribe occupying the Great Plains in the mid nineteenth century. Several bands of Apaches gained horses very soon after the Spanish arrival in the Rio Grande Valley in 1598. These bands, with the advantage of their mounts, charged onto the plains, lances in hand, and drove Caddoan fixed-agriculture societies off the high prairies eastward in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century. After their arrival on the plains, they settled in the river valleys and planted crops such as maize, beans, squash, and tobacco. They based their economy on both sedentary agriculture and the buffalo hunt. Sometime after their arrival, these Plains Apaches broke into several bands – what were later known as Jicarillas, Lipans, and Kiowa-Apaches.10

It was the northernmost of these three bands that later came to be known as Kiowa-Apaches. They appear to have occupied parts of western Kansas and dwelt along

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9 Nye, Bad Medicine & Good, viii; Mayhall, The Kiowas 3; Greene, One Hundred Summers, 6; Newcomb, Indians of Texas, 194-195.
the Canadian River for a time during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Early European travelers found them to be reliant on the buffalo but short on horses.  

As the Comanches flooded onto the plains in the early eighteenth century, they forced these bands of Plains Apaches to scatter. While other groups headed south or west, the “proto” Kiowa-Apaches fled north and ran into the Kiowas. Thus began an enduring relationship that so clearly stamped the Kiowa-Apaches that it became their identifying feature. The Kiowas took in this Plains Apache tribe. By this time, they numbered only a few hundred. Kiowa-Apaches remained autonomous in language, internal politics, and social structure. They even retained some of their unique cultural attributes. They did, however, borrow many aspects of Plains Indian culture from the Kiowas. They maintained representation at Kiowa tribal councils.

This alliance saved the Kiowa-Apaches from oblivion, and allowed them to return to the part of the plains they identified as their homeland. They would later find themselves in a much larger, more powerful alliance as a result.

Comanches

Like the Kiowas, the Comanches emerged from the mountains. Crow tradition has their origins in the Snake River region. These early people were not, however, the Comanches known to history on their exodus to the plains. In their earlier history, the Comanches were an indistinguishable part of the Shoshones whence they came. Lewis and Clark knew only of the Shoshones. Like many other peoples that became the Plains warriors of the nineteenth century, the component of the Shoshone that became the

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13 Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 161.
Comanches made their way onto the plains either due to a change in climate, pressure from other tribes, or perhaps attraction to the bison-hunting life.\textsuperscript{14}

By the mid seventeenth century, a distinct group of Plains Shoshone had emerged. They were a dog-based culture, taking to the horseless version of the buffalo hunt. Pedestrian stalkers carefully planned means of stampeding the animals over a cliff or into an area of deep snow or melting ice where they could be more easily dispatched with the tools at hand.\textsuperscript{15}

Late in the seventeenth century, these Plains Shoshones split. One component headed north. The others – one author calls them “proto-Comanches” – moved south, apparently into the Ute country that is now northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. They may have moved due to pressure from other tribes. Maybe Plains tribes from farther east shared European diseases with these early Comanches, prompting the move. By this time, they had also been exposed to the horse and may very well have moved south to gain better access to the horse supply in Spanish New Mexico.\textsuperscript{16}

Whatever their reason for moving, the Comanches established a relationship with the Utes, with whom they had linguistic ties. This may have been a basis for early interaction. Although the Utes were not purely a Plains tribe, they had access to horses and introduced the Comanches to many methods and customs that would come to define their prominence on the plains. For a time, they even shared territory with the Utes, who seem to have shared horsemanship skills with the Comanches. They also introduced the

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\textsuperscript{14} Wallace and Hoebel, \textit{The Comanches}, 6; Hämäläinen, \textit{Comanche Empire}, 22; Mayhall, \textit{The Kiowas}, 4.
\textsuperscript{15} Hämäläinen, \textit{Comanche Empire}, 22.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 22-23; Wallace and Hoebel, \textit{The Comanches}, 11.
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Comanches to the nuances of Spanish borderland interactions. Comanches also learned the advantages of trade with the New Mexico settlements.¹⁷

They may have still occupied some Ute territory, but by the turn of the eighteenth century, Comanches had moved into the headwaters of the Arkansas, where the Spanish encountered them. Some bands still relied on dogs for transportation as late as 1726. But by the 1710s, mounted Comanches raided New Mexico villages often enough for the Spanish to call them “fierce but elusive raiders.”¹⁸

The Spanish and Jicarilla Apaches entered an alliance in 1719 in a futile attempt to check Comanche military and political incursions on the Southern Plains. The Comanches had already gained the upper hand on the Jicarillas, and they were too fast and too far from Spanish centers of power for the alliance to be effective. A Spanish punitive expedition set out in 1719 to crush the Comanches, but met with only frustration, burnt fields of Apache maize, and Jicarillas running the other direction.¹⁹

At mid century, Comanches had not yet reached the height of their power, but they had established the limits of what territory they would control. Comanches swept the Jicarilla Apaches from the New Mexico and Texas plains, and drove the Lipans off the southern reaches of Texas grassland. Their domain, known as “Comanchería,” now stretched from the Arkansas River to the Balcones Escarpment in Texas, and from the Pecos River to the Cross Timbers area in central Texas and Oklahoma. They had massive herds of horses and were the most feared horsemen on the plains.²⁰

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¹⁷ Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 24-25.
¹⁸ Ibid, 20, 25; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 7-8; West, Contested Plains, 64.
¹⁹ Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 28, 33-34; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 8, 288.
²⁰ Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 55; West, Contested Plains, 64; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 12; Mayhall, The Kiowas, 4.
Comanchería suited its occupants well. It was close enough to Spanish New Mexico to make raids convenient, yet far enough to make Spanish reprisals difficult. Comanche retreat onto the Llano Estacado made life difficult, if not dangerous, for foreign pursuers. A Spanish party on the caprock had to contend with a well-mounted, adroit enemy, long supply lines in relatively barren territory, and a landscape almost completely devoid of landmarks. One of the best defensive aspects of the Llano Estacado was its ability to geographically baffle outsiders. These plains also suited Comanche horses well. The horses they acquired from the Spanish originated in North African Barb/Iberian crosses bred to survive desert conditions and live strictly off grass.21

For a time, other tribes formed a barrier between Comanches and most European colonial powers. Lipans and Tonkawas stood between Comanches and the Texas settlements. Cheyennes and Arapahoes sat between the Comanches and the English and French. Comanchería bordered only New Spain, which by the mid-eighteenth century was not the power it had once been. Indeed, Comanchería offered the Comanches and their future allies an ideal locale from which they could build a position of impressive power.22

Beginning in 1752, the Spanish government in New Mexico took a different tack on Comanche relations – at least part of the time. Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín saw Comanches as a potential trade partner, as well as a barrier to French and Anglo expansion in the continental interior. He adopted a policy of peace toward the Comanches and allowed them into the New Mexico trade fairs. Although the peace between Spanish New Mexico and the Comanches proved to be only temporary, it was

21 Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 28-29; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 13-14.
the beginning of several important developments. It opened the door to meaningful trade between the two peoples, ended serious Spanish challenges to Comanche control of the area between the Arkansas and the Red Rivers, and essentially ended the now-obsolete Ute-Comanche alliance.23

As often happened with agreements between Indians and Europeans or Americans, changes in political leadership muddled Comanche relations with New Mexico. When Cachupín rotated out of New Mexico, relations soured and the raids recommenced. Cachupín returned to the governor’s office in 1762, and the trade reopened and amicable interaction resumed. Comanche raiding patterns may also have been driven by a careful evaluation of which course of action, raiding or trading, was more profitable at the time. This cycle continued until a more lasting agreement with the Spanish was reached in 1786. From that point forward, the Comanches primarily traded with New Mexico and, with a few exceptions, turned their horses toward the Texas frontier and Mexico proper for raiding opportunities.24

Comanches had become arguably the most dominant force in the region by the end of the eighteenth century. They controlled a large territory. They ran a profitable trade operation. They had mastered the Plains Indian horse culture. For all of their benefits, these accomplishments also earned the Comanches enemies. The Utes gave the Comanches more than just an introduction to the horse. They also named the Comanches. The word Comanche is a Spanish derivative of the Ute word for “enemy,” which literally translated means, “任何人 who wants to fight me all the time.” This name reflected Comanche power and their neighbors’ perception of them. Their list of

23 Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 47-49; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 289.
24 Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 289; Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 51-55.
traditional enemies by this time included Utes, Pawnees, Osages, Tonkawas, Navajos, and Jicarilla Apaches. They occasionally scrapped with Cheyennes and Arapahoes who had been driven south by the Sioux as well. The Comanches may have been strong enough militarily to deal with any of these foes alone, but a combination might pose a threat. The Comanches showed a diplomatic skill that complemented their renowned trading and raiding prowess by forming a helpful and powerful alliance.\textsuperscript{25}

Native Alliance

Sometime in the very late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, members of the Kiowa and Comanche tribes met by accident in the community of San Miguel del Vado. A Spanish settler friendly to both sides helped the tribes negotiate a peace that proved exceptionally durable. From this period on, the Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and Comanches occupied common territory (although some Comanche bands ranged much further south than the Kiowas or Kiowa-Apaches) and shared many customs.\textsuperscript{26}

The Comanches were clearly the dominant force in this alliance. At the time, the Kiowas numbered only about twelve hundred, and the Kiowa-Apaches as few as three hundred. The smaller tribes offered political, military, and economic aid without greatly taxing the resources of Comanchería.\textsuperscript{27}

The business aspect of this relationship should not be overlooked. The Comanches by this time ran a thriving trade with the New Mexico settlements. Kiowas and Kiowa-Apaches formed a conduit with their northern allies. The Mandans and Hidatsas had better access to English firearms due to their contact with the East. The Kiowas often transported horses up to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages on the Missouri,
where they traded for better quality firearms than were available in the Rio Grande Valley. Kiowas likely often had a role in acquiring the horses and probably distributed the European firearms among their Comanche allies.\(^{28}\)

Although it has been suggested that commerce was the most important factor in the Comanche–Kiowa–Kiowa-Apache alliance, this aspect of the relationship cannot be differentiated from the alliance’s military benefits. Raiding was a fundamental part of the Comanche alliance’s commerce. Comanches stole massive numbers of horses from Spanish colonies and later Texas settlements. Without these raids, they would not have had anything to sell. They literally put into effect the Bedouin proverb, “Raiding is our agriculture.” Raiding by this alliance drove their commercial ventures.\(^{29}\)

For all these tribes of the Plains culture, raiding was the genesis of nearly everything important in a male’s life. These tribes cultivated and maintained a martial society. Status followed from raiding and warfare exploits. Honor came from raiding, as did material possessions, which could then be traded for other, rarer goods found only on the periphery of Comanchería. Status, honor, and material possessions all derived from raiding and military success. So this three-way alliance was beneficial to the three tribes militarily and commercially, but those elements were one and the same.\(^{30}\)

This culture of raiding depended almost completely on the horse. Horses not only were much larger and stronger than dogs, their previous source of transportation and animal labor, but they more efficiently utilized the resources available on the plains. People had to share food sources with their dogs. Horses, on the other hand, ate the one thing found in great quantity on the plains – grass. Horses made the Comanche world

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 161-162.

\(^{29}\) West, *Contested Plains*, 65, 68.

\(^{30}\) Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 39; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches* 245.
smaller. They made warfare bloodier. They provided both a means and a reason for conducting raids.\textsuperscript{31}

The Comanche alliance had plenty of targets to raid. One was the Santa Fe Trail. In 1838, Comanches attacked Pecos, New Mexico, so hard that the town depopulated. Its residents moved back to the relative safety of the Rio Grande Valley. Comanches frequently raided deeply into Mexico as well. As time went on, their favorite target was Texas. After they made peace with New Mexico, Texas became the most likely raiding field. Texas sat on the southern fringe of Comanchería. Its settlements were dispersed and lightly defended. Neither the Mexican government nor the fledgling Republic of Texas, created in 1836, could adequately defend the outlying livestock operations. Farmers and ranchers on the Texas frontier offered a prime selection of horses and cattle that could be had with little risk.\textsuperscript{32}

Comanches often raided for revenge and retribution as well. The Texas government only exacerbated that aspect of Comanche violence during its short tenure. Republic of Texas president Sam Houston, who served from 22 October 1836 to 10 December 1838 and again from 12 December 1841 to 9 December 1844, lived among Indians for a time during his youth. He was generally sympathetic toward them and implemented more pacifist policies. Mirabeau Lamar, whose term was from 10 December 1838 to 12 December 1841, took a far more aggressive tack during his term. No one in Texas (except maybe Houston) understood that no single Comanche leader controlled all bands in the tribe, let alone the entire alliance. These inconsistent policies

\textsuperscript{31} Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 25; Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 245.
\textsuperscript{32} Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches 3, 292.
caused nothing but confusion and strained relations. They served to fuel the Plains tribes’ motivations for raiding the Texas settlements.\textsuperscript{33}

The onset of the Civil War did nothing to alleviate Comanche raiding in Texas. Initially, the Confederate administration in Texas was able to provide a level of protection similar to what the U.S. government had offered in the 1850s. But as time went on Confederate resources dwindled much faster than federal resources. The frontier of Confederate Texas became even more vulnerable. From the early to mid nineteenth century, the Comanche alliance evolved toward an almost complete reliance on the pilfering of Texas to sell to New Mexico. This shifted somewhat in the 1850s and 1860s when settlers began streaming across the Kansas plains in greater numbers, providing improved opportunities for looting further north. Commercial and military shipments on the Santa Fe Trail during the Civil War increased as well, providing lucrative raiding targets.\textsuperscript{34}

Kiowa Leaders

Since the primary village assaulted by Kit Carson’s force was Kiowa, most of the Indian leaders known to have been present and active at the Battle of Adobe Walls were members of that tribe. One-Eyed Bear reportedly led the band of Comanches during the battle. Iron Shirt was the principle chief of the Kiowa-Apaches. He refused to flee when Carson’s battalion attacked. He died at the entryway of his lodge.\textsuperscript{35}

Dohasan. Also known as Sierrito or Little Mountain, he served as principle chief of the Kiowa tribe from 1833-1866. He succeeded A’date (Islandman) following a

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 245, 292-296; Hämäläinen, \textit{Comanche Empire}, 52.
\textsuperscript{34} Wallace and Hoebel, \textit{The Comanches}, 305-306.
Kiowa massacre at the hands of the Osages. Dohasan was in the upper village at the time of Carson’s attack and led the defense of the village. He was an old man at the time of the battle.\textsuperscript{36}

Dohasan was one of a few older chiefs arguing for peace with whites when Colonel Edwin V. Sumner met with him in 1858. Kiowa chiefs struggled to keep younger warriors off the warpath. Dohasan’s peaceful position in no way reflected a sense of defeatism or inferiority to U.S. power. As agent Robert Miller distributed Kiowa annuity gifts that same year, he warned the Kiowas that if they did not cease their depredations, the government would not only withhold presents but would send troops to punish the tribe. Dohasan reportedly leapt to his feet and replied:

The white chief is a fool. He is a coward. His heart is small – not larger than a pebble stone. His men are not strong – too few to contend against my warriors. They are women. There are three chiefs – the white chief, the Spanish chief, and myself. The Spanish chief and myself are men. We do bad toward each other sometimes, stealing horses and taking scalps, but we do not get mad and act the fool. The white chief is a child, and like a child gets mad quick. When my young men, to keep their women and children from starving, take from the white men passing through our country, killing and driving away our buffalo, a cup of sugar or coffee, the white chief is angry and threatens to send his soldiers. I have looked for them a long time, but they have not come. His heart is a woman’s. I have spoken. Tell the great white chief what I have said.\textsuperscript{37}

Dohasan was the most powerful Kiowa chief in remembered history. In a radically democratic and politically eclectic society, he was one of the few plains chiefs who truly was a “principle chief” – the kind of a single, powerful tribal leader that the United States government expected to be able to negotiate with. He retained this venerated status until his death in 1866.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Mayhall, \textit{The Kiowas}, 16.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 216-217.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 16.
Satanta (White Bear). He was born sometime around 1820. For his prowess in battle during his early life, he achieved the rank of subchief. A doctor visiting the Kiowa camps to vaccinate the tribe for smallpox in 1864 described him as “a fine-looking Indian, very energetic and as sharp as a brier.” Satanta put on quite a show for the doctor, who ate three meals a day with the chief. He had carpets for guests to sit on and used painted fireboards decorated with brass tacks for a table. He sounded a brass “French horn” to summon diners at mealtime. Most historians believe Satanta blew a bugle at the First Battle of Adobe Walls. The horn referenced by the doctor may be the same instrument.\(^{39}\)

No overall chief of the Kiowas succeeded Dohasan. Satanta was probably the most influential of the subchiefs. He became known as an orator for lengthy speeches he made while treating for peace. Satanta agreed to both the Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge Treaties of 1865 and 1867 respectively. Neither agreement led to permanent peace.\(^{40}\)

Following George Custer’s Washita Campaign in the late fall of 1868, Satanta and Lone Wolf (another important sub-chief) came in to discuss peace terms with Custer, who promptly took both chiefs hostage and held them until the Kiowas as a whole surrendered to reservation life. After his release, Satanta led several major raids, including the Warren Wagon Train raid in 1871. General William T. Sherman himself arrested Satanta and Big Tree not long after that raid. A Texas court tried, convicted, and sentenced them to hang. The Texas governor reduced the sentence to life under pressure.

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\(^{39}\) Ibid, 227.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid, 227, 238-241.
from a group of Quakers whom President Grant had placed in charge of Indian policy. The two Kiowas were released after just two years.41

Satanta’s presence at the Second Battle of Adobe Walls violated his parole. He was again thrown in prison and subjected to forced labor. He lost hope of escaping and became increasingly sullen. He committed suicide by throwing himself out of an upstairs prison hospital window on October 11, 1878.42

Satank (Sitting Bear). He was another Kiowa subchief. Satank instigated (perhaps inadvertently) one of the raids on Fort Larned that drew General Carleton’s military response in 1864. Like Satanta, he signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty. He participated with Satanta in the Warren Wagon Train Massacre. However, after he was arrested, he freed himself from his bonds and launched a suicide attack on the guards. He was shot to death by his army guards on June 8, 1871.43

Weapons and Tactics

Many Plains tribes were well armed by the mid 1860s. Comanches and Kiowas had excellent access to firearms based on their long-running and prolific trade with New Mexico, and to a lesser extent with the Mandan and Hidatsa villages to the north. Carson reported that every Indian he fought at Adobe Walls was armed with a rifle. He was nearly certain that the Indians he fought had acquired their weapons and ammunition from Comanchero traders within the preceding week and a half. This angered Carson and Carleton. The general had ordered a halt to all trading passes following the summer raids. Superintendent Steck had apparently ignored the edict and allowed traders to pass

into the Southern Plains. They armed the Kiowas and Comanches whom Carson fought.44

Firearms played a key role in Plains Indian warfare, but in many situations Indian tactics favored the bow. Muskets provided an advantage in range over the bow when fired from a fixed defensive position, but the bow and arrow provided a much faster rate of fire and were exponentially easier to fire from horseback. Indian warfare relied heavily on mobility, and firearms often did not fit well into their tactics. Firearms undoubtedly increased the effectiveness of the Indian skirmishers at Adobe Walls, but the mounted warriors probably used a combination of the two weapons.45

In addition to firearms and bows, the Indian combatants at Adobe Walls would also have carried decorated shields crafted from several layers of buffalo hide from the shoulder of the animal, the toughest part of the hide. They carried lances designed to be thrust from under the arm. They also generally carried flint war clubs or battle axes. These weapons weighed about two pounds, were a little over a foot long, and had a six-inch-long head that tapered from about three inches to one inch in width from front to back. Although it had little long-range use, the war club could be a deadly short-range weapon.46

In war or battle, Plains Indians depended heavily upon maintaining the initiative to achieve military success. They carefully chose their fights and usually waged an offensive battle. Comanches and Kiowas raided on moonlit nights. If they struck during the day, it was to surprise outmanned parties or widely scattered settlements unlikely to

45 Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 258.
mount adequate resistance. They relied on surprise and shock, and tended to fight only when facing extremely favorable conditions. They seldom fought pitched battles like those the army preferred, unless they held some significant tactical advantage.47

When unable to surprise an enemy, they might send forth a small party, mounted on their fastest horses, in an attempt to draw the enemy into an ambush. They would shout with a fierce cry and make a sudden, ferocious charge with the goal of scaring the enemy into flight and turning the odds drastically in their favor.48

The Comanches and Kiowas did not always surprise or run off foes. When forced to fight a formidable, alert foe, or stage a defense as they did at Adobe Walls, drew upon a different set of tactics. They would initially form a mounted wedge, charging toward the enemy. Once within relatively close range, the riders would shift to a wheeling circle sometimes more than one rider deep. Each revolution came closer to the enemy, and warriors ducked under the necks of their horses to fire their guns or bows as their side of the wheel neared the desired target. They used the leeward side of the circle to reload.49

Defensive tactics did not escape the Comanches and Kiowas. At Adobe Walls, they likely utilized the above wheeling tactic while in close contact with Carson’s troops. After abandoning the upper village, they employed a slow fighting retreat, exchanging ground for time. Plains Indians seldom stood their ground against a concerted charge. They sought to retain freedom of movement and keep losses at a sustainable level. When charged, their skirmish line would drift away and reform farther back or on a flank either to press an enemy there or to bide time and reform at a further defensible position.50

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid, 258.
50 Ibid.
Exchanging territory for time and mobility would have been the most logical Indian response to Carson’s advance.

Camp positioning also figured into Plain Indian defensive tactics. Camp placement varied from tribe to tribe. Comanches and Kiowas uniquely preferred their campsites near running water and in open timber where available. They sought areas protected by a canyon, arroyo, or some kind of escarpment. This allowed some wind protection, access to feed and game, wood, and a reasonable opportunity to avoid being surprised by an enemy. All these elements factored into the selection of this site on the Canadian for the winter camps in late 1864.51

Pressures on the Comanches and Kiowas

Plains tribes all felt a pinch on their resources by the late 1850s. Their adaptation to the horse culture brought more tribes to the plains and demanded more horses than the area had seen or supported before. Plains tribes’ collective harvesting of the buffalo herds had already diminished the size of the herds. Emigrants flooding westward further depleted resources – not just grass and game but also wood along streams. Possession of land was important, but it was outside threats to the resources tied to the land they controlled that pressured Plains Indians most.52

Kiowa and Comanche leaders certainly gave off impression that they were intimidated by U.S. military might on the plains, but they must have begun to feel pressure from U.S. military presence by the late 1850s. Perhaps they only begrudged the

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army the resources consumed by its men and horses. More likely, though, U.S. cavalry threatened their security.53

By 1858, the army had placed more effective leadership on the frontier. Cavalry effectively struck the Comanches north of the Red River an unprecedented three times that year. This combined with the strain on resources began to split Indian parties up into smaller groups, making it more difficult for older chiefs favoring peace to control younger, more militant warriors. Most importantly, though, these army missions in 1858 provided the first hints that the army was willing to penetrate previously uncontested Comanche territory. The Llano Estacado remained a safe haven, but the army showed it could and would march deeply into Comanche country. The 1858 campaigns did not conquer nor show mastery. But they must have made Indians in the region feel pressured and uneasy, and may have driven them toward more aggressive responses.54

For decades, European presence on the periphery of Comanche and Kiowa territory had provided a lucrative raiding and trading market. But never before had such volumes of people paraded through and around their territory. The increased presence and traffic presented more opportunities for raiding, but also challenged their access to resources and in the long term threatened their way of life. These latter threats only gave further motivation to raid. Raiding served many functions – honor, profit, retribution, and warning. It is no wonder raiding increased in the period leading up to 1864.

54 Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 302; Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, 128-141; Ball, Army Regulars, 48-51.
4. Carleton’s Strategy & Carson’s Campaign

The Winter Campaign

General Carleton and Kit Carson faced challenges that had burdened U.S. Army officers trying to prosecute campaigns against the Indian tribes of the Great Plains throughout the 1850s. The fact that Plains tribes were able continually and consistently to exploit their few tactical advantages testified to their creativity and tactical prowess. Plains tribes showed an exceptional aptitude for adaptation. Repeatedly, they engaged Angloamerican troops equipped with vastly superior technology and firepower with success that frustrated American troops for decades.

The U.S. Cavalry plodded about the plains like a clumsy heavyweight fighting the nimble, flyweight Indians. The U.S. usually brought more firepower to a fight than any single band or collaboration of Indians. Indian tactical mobility time and again rendered the army’s superior firepower useless. Internal confusion over U.S. Indian war strategy did not help.

Indians generally avoided direct conflict, with two exceptions. They would attack or fight if they held an advantage in numbers or firepower that virtually assured success. For instance, they were amenable to attacking individuals, small parties, or green settlers who would not likely be able to mount a sufficient defense. Indians would also fight if cornered or trapped. If their families were threatened by an imminent attack on their village, they would sometimes join pitched battle until their dependents were safe or had escaped.¹ Both of the above elements came into play at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Custer’s attack placed the Sioux villages and families at risk, forcing the warriors to fight. At the same time, Custer’s Sioux opponents vastly outnumbered his assault

force. The Sioux also had the better firearms than their Seventh Cavalry assailants. Many Sioux had repeating rifles, while the Seventh Cavalry fought primarily with single-shot breach-loaders.² 

Plains tribes consistently used superior mobility to frustrate army attempts at engaging Indians in pitched battles. Since most Plains tribes followed the buffalo, their societies were naturally mobile. This proved helpful for defense both against the army and rival plains tribes. Army leaders could not plan to take strategic “points,” such as cities or lines of communication, because Plains Indian societies were not tied to such static formations. With significant warning, a Plains village could be dismantled and its inhabitants vacated long before the army ever struck.³ 

In summer 1860, the Comanches repeatedly flustered Major Charles F. Ruff, who commanded a 225-man scout force intended to strike a blow in the Canadian River region. Ruff’s troops, a force of Mounted Riflemen, came upon a Comanche village of about three hundred people along the Canadian River. Ruff’s regulars surprised the village. But the Indians fled with what they could easily carry, shooing along the livestock.

The Comanches bolted in three different directions. A main party of warriors, about eighty to one hundred, broke one way. A dozen and a half drove the village’s herd of five hundred or so livestock in another. The remainder of the populace, primarily women, children, and elders, took off in a third.⁴

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³ Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, 6-7.
⁴ Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.
This tactic employed by the Comanches against Ruff’s cavalry had its risks. They left their entire herd of livestock lightly protected. They also left the women and children at risk. And of course, any hope of protecting the valuable goods that could not be brought along from the village was lost. Eventually, the cavalry did make it back to the abandoned village and destroyed most of the property.5

While they lost many possessions when Ruff’s troops burned their lodges, the Comanches’ tactics were largely successful. The entire populace escaped, and they left the army’s horses in such poor condition that further pursuit was impossible for quite some time. Ruff said of the encounter, “The Indians abandoned everything, (and) separated into three parties. We took the direction of the warriors of the party and pursued them for 12 miles, most of the time under full run, over a high prairie. It soon became apparent that the Indian horses ‘out footed’ our animals, and that unless they chose, we could not come up with them. It was in fact marvelous that our poor broken down horses were able to keep up the killing pace for the distance they did.”6

The Indian warriors probably could have further “out footed” the Mounted Riflemen. The Comanches allowed the Ruff’s troops to remain close, stringing out the pursuit and drawing the cavalry further away from their women, children, elders, and livestock while allowing the warrior party to keep eye contact with the riflemen and ensure that they did not break off to pursue one of the other fleeing Comanche contingents. The scheme worked masterfully. Ruff claimed it was “soon apparent” that he would not be able to overtake the warriors, but was still following the Indian decoy twelve miles later. Twelve miles at a dead run would kill most horses.

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
This same game of cat and mouse occurred at least three times during Ruff’s scout. Each time Ruff’s prey split up, and each time he was unable to run down the warrior party. Once, during the night, the Indians mounted their own attack. It was daylight before the cavalry could respond. By then, pursing the Comanches was futile. Although Ruff blamed his repeated failure to corner the Comanches and Kiowas on a lack of competent guides, it seems doubtful that he would have been any more successful unless he explored different tactical pursuit options.  

Of the three basic nineteenth-century army units – infantry, artillery, and cavalry – cavalry was by far the most mobile. But even U.S. cavalry was no match for the mobility of the Plains tribes. U.S. cavalry horses were large, sturdy animals, capable of carrying a rider and his field kit, together weighing about 350 pounds.8 Such horses, like the men who rode them, could not survive on the plains without a supply line. They simply were not incapable of indefinitely “living off the land.”9 Ruff’s mounted scout encountered this problem. He found that summer rains on the Southern Plains did not support sufficient grass to keep his horses strong. His men wound up “dragging their exhausted horses, in the hottest of days.”10

Indian ponies were smaller than American dragoon or cavalry horses and incapable of bearing the heavy loads the army demanded of its mounts. But they did not need to. Indian ponies could bear a warrior and thrive on prairie grass. A cavalry unit involved in a long chase across the prairies was usually tied to a cumbersome supply train or static post whose rations and forage were needed for men and stock. Indians and their

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7 Ibid.
8 Ball, Army Regulars, 30.
9 Utley, Frontiersmen In Blue, 339-340.
10 Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.
mounts could live off the land and were therefore more mobile and flexible than mounted army units. If they did not want to confront the cavalry, they did not have to.

Captain Kirby Smith, famous more for his career as a Confederate general than for his service in the antebellum army, summed up the challenge of operating on the plains. After six weeks of chasing Comanche chief Sanico around the upper drainage of the Brazos and Colorado Rivers, he lamented, “As has been the case with all large expeditions against the nomadic tribes on our western prairies, we traveled through the country, broke down our men, killed our horses, and returned as ignorant of the whereabouts of Mr. Sanico as when we started.”

If U.S. forces were to subdue the Plains tribes, they had to devise a way to convince them to capitulate. The army could either remove Indian ability to survive or their ability to resist. Thus the U.S. army developed the tactic of the winter campaign, first demonstrated by Colonel William S. Harney in 1855. During the winter, tribes were less mobile than they were during spring, summer, or fall. This time of year, they lived in fixed villages in river valleys and relied heavily on shelter and stored food supplies. Plains Indians were vulnerable to plodding U.S. cavalry attacks during the winter.

Kit Carson himself directed one of the first winter campaigns, albeit not against a plains tribe. During the winter of 1863-1864, he prosecuted a destructive war against the Navajo Nation in present-day western New Mexico and eastern Arizona. Citizens of New Mexico had been complaining for years about Navajo raiding. This conflict between the Navajos and the Spanish, and later the Mexicans had been going on for two

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centuries.\footnote{12} When the United States occupied New Mexico in 1846, Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearny promised to put an end to the Navajo trouble.\footnote{13} General Carleton planned to fulfill Kearny’s promise in 1863.

Carleton ordered the Navajos to surrender by July 20, 1863, and prepare for transportation to Bosque Redondo or face total annihilation. Few if any Navajos responded to the initial surrender demand. Carleton then sent Carson into Navajo country with orders to kill the men and capture the women and children. Carson’s winter campaign impoverished and terrorized the Navajos, convincing thousands to surrender and walk to Bosque Redondo.

Carson made his way through Navajo country utilizing the kind of scorched earth tactics General Sherman would use the following year against the southern white population in Georgia. Carson’s men destroyed Navajo corn crops and burned hogans. Carson’s command even penetrated Canyon de Chelly, the ancient Navajo stronghold, undoubtedly leaving Navajos with the impression that no place was safe. Contrary to precedent, Carleton allowed Utes, Pueblos, and Nuevo Mexicanos to harass the Navajos as well. Starving and defeated, the Navajos surrendered.\footnote{14}

After the recent success of the winter campaign against the Navajos, Carleton sought to employ similar tactics against the Comanches and Kiowas the following winter. The winter campaign would allow Kit Carson’s command to locate a concentrated group of Kiowas, Comanches, and Plains Apaches. The winter strike also enabled Carson to

catch them in a less mobile state. However, it brought about other consequences resulting in an outcome far different than that achieved in the Navajo campaign.

“Adobe Walls” in the Canadian Valley

Carson planned from the outset to use a place he knew as Fort Adobe for his base of operations against the Kiowas and Comanches.15 Fort Adobe, or Adobe Walls, served as a landmark for travelers through an area noted for its lack of them. North of present-day Amarillo, the Canadian River cuts a gash through the high plains caprock. Down in that gash stood a set of Adobe Walls. These walls were all that was left of an abandoned trading operation that had been attempted by the same outfit that ran the much better-known Bent’s Fort along the Arkansas River in present-day southeastern Colorado in the early and mid 1800s.

Bent, St. Vrain, and Company established Fort Adobe in the mid 1840s as a satellite of their main trading enterprise at Bent’s Fort. The post sat about ten miles east of present-day Stinnett and Borger, north of Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle. The Bent brothers had attempted to establish trade with the Comanches and Kiowas as early as the late 1820s.16

These tribes made operations for Bent, St. Vrain, and Company treacherous almost from the outset. The company apparently built a log structure in the vicinity in the early years and assigned Ceran St. Vrain to run the post. Comanches and Kiowas eventually ran off every single animal St. Vrain had in his possession. Stranded and desperate, he resorted to some crafty, if morally questionable, tactics. Under a white flag,

16 Paul I. Wellman, “Some Famous Kansas Scouts,” The Kansas Historical Quarterly, V. 1, No. 4, 1932, p. 347. For a comprehensive history of the Bent – St. Vrain venture and Fort Adobe, see Lavender, Bent’s Fort, p. 264-265 discuss the establishment of the post.
he assembled the tribal leaders in his wooden stockade. He locked the doors and held them under arms, threatening to kill the lot of them if their tribes did not return his stock and grant him safe passage back to Bent’s Fort.\textsuperscript{17}

Questionable or not, the tactics worked. St. Vrain escaped with his stock and his skin. When the company sought to reestablish trade from its post on the Canadian sometime in the mid 1840s, Bent and St. Vrain sent out Mexican adobe builders to create a more stout and defensible position. The adobe structure, nine feet high and eighty feet square, was aptly named Fort Adobe.\textsuperscript{18}

The enterprise at Fort Adobe never turned enough profit to balance the constant Indian trouble faced by this remote outpost in the Canadian valley. Comanche and Kiowa raids continued to plague Fort Adobe. In 1848, the company sent Kit Carson with a small party of four old mountain men and two Mexicans – a cook and a herder – to reestablish the trade. Almost as soon as they arrived, Jicarilla Apaches killed the herder and drove off the entire herd of livestock, save two mules that happened to be tied up inside the adobe post. Absence of stock led Carson and company to cache what trappings they had acquired so far and return to Bent’s Fort. A Kiowa party noticed this small party of traders walking across the plains on their return trip to Bent’s and attacked. Carson’s party formed up around the two remaining mules. They used a circularly rotating firing pattern to hold off the Indian attackers. The Kiowas called off the assault after losing three warriors – too high a price to pay for a couple of mules.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} Wellman, \textit{Famous Kansas Scouts}, 347; David Lavender, \textit{Bent’s Fort} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 246-247. Lavender calls the event legendary, while Wellman states it as fact but cites no source. Either way, it appears that wariness on the part of Bent, St. Vrain & Co. led to the establishment of a better fortified position.
\textsuperscript{18} Lavender, \textit{Bent’s Fort}, 246-247, 264-265.
\textsuperscript{19} Rathjen, \textit{Texas Panhandle Frontier}, 74; Lavender, \textit{Bent’s Fort}, 309.
Always eager traders, the Comanches convinced William Bent that Kiowas had been the source of all his trouble around Fort Adobe. They wanted him at least to continue hauling trade goods from the Arkansas to trade with the Comanches. Bent sent a party of twelve, this time with Dick Wootton, back to Fort Adobe to retrieve the goods cached by Carson and to trade with the Comanches. Immediately upon arriving, Wootton’s party perceived their Comanche trading partners as a threat and let only two or three into the post at a time. Soon, seeing even this practice as too risky, they cut a hole in the wall about the size of a train ticket window and conducted all business through the window. The Comanches took offense at this and commenced taking occasional pot-shots at the trading window. A senior Comanche chief eased tempers, and business was allowed to continue, although in a very tense environment. Wootton departed with a rich load of robes and deerskins, but he later recalled, “it was the most hazardous trading expedition I ever had anything to do with.”

William Bent himself made a final attempt at salvaging the Canadian River operation in the spring of 1849. With some ox-drawn wagons he hauled trading goods for Fort Adobe. Not long afterward, local Indians killed some of his livestock. Bent must have suspected he would have more trouble after all the precedents. He apparently also brought with him the means to put an end to Fort Adobe for good if things did not work out, or so he thought.

Bent eventually gave up on the enterprise, conceding any future trade along the Canadian to the Comancheros. He set off a huge explosion meant to destroy the outpost,

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and then returned to the relative safety of Bent’s Fort.\textsuperscript{22} He succeeded only in blasting down the roof and some of the interior walls. The roofless remains became the landmark known as Adobe Walls.

Roofless or not, the structure still had some utility in the 1860s. It served as landmark to Comancheros, and it was stout enough for Carson to plan on using it as a base. It functioned as a protective corral for Carson’s horses when the fight at Adobe Walls broke out in 1864.\textsuperscript{23} In spite of the explosion, much of the structure of the Adobe Walls seems to have been in good condition as late as 1860. In his report on a scout from that year, Major Ruff described it. “The ruins of an Adobe Fort, or trading post, a building of 9 rooms, the walls of seven of which are in good preservation, the west wall is 100 feet, and the north wall is 180 feet long. Nothing of the wood work of this building remains.”\textsuperscript{24}

Nothing remains of the structure today.

Operating to Comanche Country from New Mexico

Transporting Colonel Carson’s troops and equipment to the heart of Comanche country on the Canadian River would prove a difficult task. The idea of the winter campaign was to strike Indians when mobility was difficult and they were most dependent upon stationary resources. A hazard of operating on the Plains in the winter was the likelihood of contending with foul weather and miserable travel conditions.

Adobe Walls was a foreboding place of windblown isolation. Both in terms of distance and climate, the remains of Fort Adobe sat a world away from the mountains of Santa Fe. Getting a force of four hundred men from the relative civilization of New

\textsuperscript{22} Rathjen, \textit{Texas Panhandle Frontier}, 75; Lavender, \textit{Bent’s Fort}, 310.
\textsuperscript{23} Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.
\textsuperscript{24} Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.
Mexico to the windswept high plains of Comanche country would be a chore any time of year. Doing it the winter would be that much harder.

Kit Carson’s expedition embarked from Fort Bascom on the Canadian River near present day Tucumcari, New Mexico, but most of the troops came from the Santa Fe area. Several companies under Major McCleave traveled from Fort Union near present day Pecos, New Mexico, to Fort Bascom before they could depart. Carson traveled to Cimarron, brought Indian auxiliaries from that place, and then rendezvoused with Abreu and the infantry at Bascom.

Even with the expedition embarking from Fort Bascom, Carson’s party faced a two-hundred-mile journey down the Canadian. The region was isolated and barren, no easy place to lead an expedition. Early frontiersmen knew the Canadian River for its unpredictability. It was thought to be either a dry streambed (unhelpful for watering stock and troops) or a raging torrent.

November was not the season for raging torrents. It was, however, a season of heavy snows. Kiowas called the winter of 1864-1865 the “muddy traveling winter.” Twice during Carson’s party’s descent of the Canadian Valley, short but severe snowstorms delayed travel and made movement difficult and miserable. As with previous expeditions against Plains tribes, Carson faced the logistical problem of how to supply hundreds of troops and horses in inhospitable territory. He originally planned to bring along a massive mule train. Since there were only one

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25 Abreu to Cutler, 5 November 1864, A/256, inclosure, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA.
26 Carleton to Carson, 18 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 243-244.
27 Rathjen, Texas Panhandle Frontier, 5.
hundred pack saddles available, he abandoned that plan in favor of supply wagons. His column would march with the supply wagons as far as Fort Adobe, and then use the remains of that place as an operating base. In preparation to outfit Carson’s force, the quartermaster at Fort Bascom received 27 wagons and an ambulance on November 4.\textsuperscript{30}

Carson’s battalion departed Fort Bascom on 12 November 1864. The party had some difficulty crossing the Canadian from south to north. Once across, the column utilized an established wagon road on the north bank of the river. The wagon road was no longer an active immigrant trail or a venue for large scale commercial trade and shipping like the Santa Fe Trail. The road had been established by Comanchero traders doing business with the Indians.\textsuperscript{31}

The strike force camped the first night out of Fort Bascom camped at Ute Creek just west of the Texas line. Within a few days, the party passed near the location of Carson’s failed attempt to rescue Ann White. Many troops in Carson’s party likely knew the story. Jicarilla Apaches had captured White in 1849 when they raided a wagon train just outside Fort Union. Carson was commissioned to guide a rescue party. He struggled greatly to keep the trail, but after several days his party made contact with the Jicarillas. A brief disagreement ensued between Carson and the army officer commanding the pursuit as to how they should proceed. In the meantime, the Jicarilla captors killed White and her young child. Obviously, this was a traumatic emotional moment for Carson. His feelings were intensified by the fact that his party found a paperback novel featuring

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid; Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 9.
Carson among White’s effects. Thoughts of White holding out false hope that Carson would rescue her plagued Kit for the rest of his years.32

On reaching the site, Carson related the details of the event to his accompanying troops. Revisiting the site must have been painful for Carson, but hearing him retell the already legendary tale certainly made an impression on the junior officers of the expedition. Lieutenant George Pettis recalled in his memoir, “Carson explained to us how their attack was made, the position of the Indian camp, where the bodies were found, etc., in his usual graphic manner.” Interestingly, Pettis remembered the perpetrators in the story to be the Comanches his party was pursuing on this trip rather than the Jicarillas, who happened to be serving as his party’s auxiliaries.33

Pettis’ other main entertainment during the eastbound trip came from the Ute and Jicarilla Apache auxiliaries. Each night upon making camp, the accompanying Indians engaged in what Pettis described as a war dance. Although initially interesting to the curios officer, several evenings the Indians dancing prevented him from getting a good night’s sleep.34

On about the fifteenth, Carson’s command camped at Cañada de los Ruedes, or “Wheel Canyon.” A legend stated that this place had an ample supply of large cottonwoods and that, it had been a stopping point for Mexican traders on the way to or from Missouri in the days before the main Santa Fe route on the Arkansas and Cimarron

32 Milo M. Quaife, Kit Carson’s Autobiography (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 131-134; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 9-10.
33 Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 10-11.
34 Ibid, 11.
Rivers came into use. The trees made the stop a convenient place to repair ox-cart components.\textsuperscript{35}

As they proceeded west, Carson employed prudent tactics to ensure the practical safety of travel and to discover the Comanches and Kiowas before they discovered him, hopefully preventing the usual game of chase. Each day, Carson dispatched two of his scouts several hours in advance of the main party. These scouts would return in the evening to report any findings. He additionally deployed scouts well out on each flank.\textsuperscript{36}

Early in the afternoon of November 24, Carson camped his party at Arroyo de la Mula (Mule Springs or Mule Creek) about thirty miles west of old Fort Adobe. The main contingent ate its supper around sunset. Some were doing camp chores, some sleeping, others gambling. Suddenly, the auxiliaries leapt to their feet. The scouts dispatched that morning were faintly visible, some two miles distant. Lieutenant Pettis could not spot them without assistance. By some signal, they had conveyed to the rest of the auxiliary force that the Comanches had been located.

Once back in camp, the scouts relayed to Carson that about ten miles downstream they had located a sizeable camp of Comanches and Kiowas. Signs indicated a large body of Indians and a large herd of livestock. Carson’s scouts assured him, “We would have no difficulty in finding all the Indians that we desired.”\textsuperscript{37} That prediction turned out to be true – and then some. Finding the mobile Plains tribes was often difficult, but by engineering a campaign during the cold season, Carleton and Carson successfully located the Comanches and Kiowas in even greater numbers than they had expected or prepared for.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 11, 13.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 13-14; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.
The evening of 24 November 1864, Kit Carson and a force of just over four hundred made camp at Arroyo de la Mula, a few miles upstream from Bent’s abandoned Adobe Walls trading post and out of the main valley of the Canadian. Carson had sent two scouts from his Ute and Jicarilla Apache auxiliary force forward that morning, as he did each day, to observe what lay ahead and report evidence of any Kiowa and Comanche presence.\(^1\)

Carson’s expedition had marched through snow and mud for two weeks. His men wanted to find the Indians, punish them, and return comfortable winter accommodations. That evening, Carson’s scouts brought back the anticipated news, which inspired a flurry of excitement. The scouts discovered signs of an Indian presence ten to fifteen miles downstream from the present federal camp. The evidence indicated a large body of Indians and an even larger herd of livestock. The Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries would have all the livestock they could drive off and Carson would find all the Indians he or Carleton desired.\(^2\)

Carson immediately threw his subordinates into action. He ordered all the wagons loaded for easy defense and left them under the protection of Lieutenant Colonel Abreu’s force of infantry and dismounted cavalry (about seventy-five men). Carson directed Abreu and the infantry to remain in camp that evening, and then start after the remainder of the strike force the morning of the twenty-fifth. Carson moved out with the

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\(^1\) Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 12-15; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, p. 940.

\(^2\) Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 13-14; Carleton to Carson 18 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 243-244 shows Carleton offering the auxiliaries all captured stock that was not property of the United States or U.S. citizens (U.S. citizens would have to pay a reasonable recovery reward to recuperate their animals).
entire mounted force along with Lieutenant Pettis and the mountain howitzers in the fading light of dusk that same evening.$^3$

The remaining combined strike force – now about 350 cavalry and auxiliaries with the artillery pieces$^4$ – marched through the night under strict orders not to talk, smoke, or create any other disturbance that might give away Carson’s location and ruin the surprise. At midnight, the column descended from the rugged edge of the caprock escarpment into the lowlands of the Canadian Valley.$^5$

Once in the bottoms, Carson’s command ran across fresh signs of the large Indian party. Carson knew the enemy was near but did not know its precise location. Rather than stumbling onto them, he immediately halted his party and again dispatched scouts. Carson’s men dismounted and stood next to their horses, shivering as a heavy frost fell. They remained alert, awaiting further instructions.$^6$

The scouts returned in the first light of dawn on the twenty-fifth, reporting the enemy camp still some distance off. Carson’s column resumed its silent march. Orders, if absolutely necessary, were relayed with a whisper. Carson led from the front, riding with his experienced Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries. The Indians crept down the valley, perched atop their horses. They curled their legs curled beneath buffalo robes to stay out of the biting late-November wind. A couple of cavalry companies followed the Indians. Lieutenant George Pettis and his howitzers came next, tucked safely in the center of the procession. The remaining cavalry served as the rear guard.$^7$

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$^3$ Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 14, 30.

$^4$ Company A, California Infantry, was comprised of 58 men. Pettis said Company A remained behind to guard the train. Carson says the infantry and dismounted Cavalry stayed behind, fails to give a number.


A couple of hours into their march, Carson heard a voice calling from across the river, “Viene aca! Viene aca!” (Come here! Come here!). He had come across what was either something akin to a Kiowa picket, or just some younger men of the tribe out rounding up their horses before breakfast. A quick signal to Major McCleave sent him, Captain Charles Deus, and Company M, First Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers (seventy-one men in all) splashing across the shallow Canadian in a desperate attempt to intercept the three enemy Indians before they could alert the balance of their village to the presence of the column.\(^8\)

At the prospect of battle with their long-time rivals, the Comanches, Carson’s Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries dove into a brush thicket and emerged just as fast, painted and ready for action. Carson spotted an enemy village, still about five miles distant and ordered the column forward. He sent Company B, First Cavalry, California Volunteers (60 men) under Captain Fritz ahead to strike the village in cooperation with McCleave’s force on the opposite bank of the river.\(^9\)

Carson appears to have been attempting to maintain surprise by striking with the most mobile part of his force. Although he would later be quite relieved to have the howitzers along, at this point they inhibited a rapid advance. The mountain howitzers had small wheels that made dragging them through the high grass and occasional brush thickets of the Canadian River bottom difficult and time consuming. Pettis’s crews had to take special care not to overturn the undercarriages in haste, since righting them would cost him even more time. The gun crews could not bring mounts, slowing things down even further. Even if they had, the guns carriages themselves could not advance at the

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\(^8\) Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 16-17; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 315.
\(^9\) Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 17.
speed of a man on horseback. Carson, however, could not leave them unguarded. He had no choice but to plod along, hoping McCleave’s horsemen would impede the Indian pickets’ ability to notify the village of his approach.\textsuperscript{10}

Carson and several companies of cavalry remained with the artillery. Once out of the thickets, progress improved somewhat. But the diverse units in the command progressed at different speeds, hindering steady and even advance. Like an inchworm, they bulged and stretched across the valley floor trying not to get too far behind the advance cavalry. “Trot, march!” would come the order. The cavalry guard would advance with the horse-drawn gun carriages, as the gun crews – traveling afoot – scurried along behind, trailing across the prairie. Then the order, “Walk, march!” allowed the pedestrian gun crews to catch up. As soon as the horseless men caught their breath, off went the horses again.\textsuperscript{11}

Before long, high grass and divergent travel speeds prevented Carson and Pettis from maintaining visual contact with the advanced cavalry. They never got out of earshot. Shots rang out in the distance, and Carson knew the battle was underway. He ordered Lieutenant Heath and his command, a detachment of thirty-eight men of Company K, First Cavalry, California Volunteers, into the fray. They charged ahead in pursuit of Fritz’s company as Carson, his ungainly howitzer crews, and their cavalry escort labored along in the rear.\textsuperscript{12}

The valley widened to about two miles as Carson’s party approached the Kiowa village he had seen in the distance. Kiowas had been grazing their cattle and horses in the lush bottomlands. Upon discovering these choice livestock prizes, Carson’s Ute and

\textsuperscript{10} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 18.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 19; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940.
\textsuperscript{12} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 18; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940.
Jicarilla allies began rounding up Kiowa livestock. The intrepid auxiliaries would ride into a group of Kiowa animals and identify a fine horse from the group. They would leap on the back of the fresh animal for use in the upcoming battle, while substituting their exhausted mounts as claim markers. The idea was to return later and take possession of the herds they had “liberated.”

The cavalry strike force under McCleave and Fritz successfully surprised the Kiowa village, which contained approximately 150 lodges. The warriors of the village rushed to its defense. Stumbling Bear, a respected warrior in the tribe, knocked a soldier and a Ute off of their horses. Lean Bear charged into the fray, singing the war song of the Tonkonko military order. He was honor bound to kill at least one enemy before fleeing. A Kiowa-Apache who happened to be in the village at the time of the attack was knocked off his horse by a Ute ball. The Ute dove from his horse and captured the Kiowa-Apache warrior’s war bonnet, a fine trophy.

The warriors held off the approaching cavalry long enough to allow most of the noncombatants to evacuate while they gathered up their weapons. The Kiowa women and children scrambled to the relative safety of the breaks in the caprock, sheltering a handful of white captives from Carson’s detection. A small boy named Setkopte grabbed his younger brother’s hand and ran in desperation after his mother. She flung a baby on her back and scooped another in her arms and they all fled for the escarpment.

Dohasan, the renowned but aging Kiowa chief, leapt to his horse and sped downstream to alert other allied Indian camps. When he arrived, his horse foamed with a

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mixture of sweat and flecks of blood. Upon hearing his warning, the men of the lower village galloped their horses upstream to join in the defense, while the women, children, and aged fled to safety in the breaks.  

After the Kiowa warriors departed the upper village, a few Ute women who made the trip rifled through the lodges seeking what plunder they could acquire. They found four ancient Kiowa men – two blind and two crippled – who could not evacuate with the young and the healthy. The Ute women split their skulls with axes, perhaps as part of the custom of mutilation of enemy bodies prevalent in some Native American cultures.

After abandoning the village, the Comanche and Kiowa warriors inched backward down the Canadian, contesting the federal advance every step of the four miles between the upper village and the old Adobe Walls ruins. The artillery and its guard filtered between the abandoned Kiowa lodges. At the abandoned trading post, the warriors made a stand that stymied the U.S. cavalry advance.

The advance cavalry loosed their horses and corralled them in the Adobe Walls ruins, the walls of which were still high enough and sound enough to adequately protect the animals. The dismounted cavalry deployed around the ruins as skirmishers. The first Kiowa and Comanche assaults on McCleave’s position occurred before Carson arrived with the artillery and its guard. Once within about a thousand yards, Carson had the engagement in plain sight. He and the remaining cavalry charged into the fray, with Pettis’ guns rumbling along behind.

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16 Nye, Carbine & Lance, 36.
17 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 21, 35; Paul A. Hutton, Phil Sheridan and His Army, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 81.
18 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 21.
19 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 22.
Comanche and Kiowa warriors galloped by in their wedge and wheel formation. The warriors laid over or ducked under the necks and backs of their ponies to fire as they passed at a full run – some with bows, some with firearms. The auxiliaries zipped to and fro, screaming war cries and firing into the circling enemy. Skirmishers lay here and there, prone in the grass, firing when they could get a clear shot.20

Shortly after Pettis arrived with the howitzers, the Kiowas and Comanches appeared to be massing for a charge. Carson deployed the guns atop a small, thirty-foot hill that rose within a hundred yards of the ruins. Kiowas and Comanches must have looked on in wonder as the federals unlimbered their strange looking guns. “Pettis, throw a few shell into that crowd over thar,” hollered Carson. With a quick salute Pettis wheeled and called out, “Battery, halt! Action, right! Load with shell, load!” Within a few seconds the guns were loaded and sighted. “Number one, FIRE! Number two, FIRE!”21

The opposing Indians peered at the strange weapon in astonishment and began a retreat back down the Canadian toward the upper village that Dohasan had visited for reinforcements. This village was not yet known to Carson and company. By the time Pettis fired his fourth shot, not a Kiowa or Comanche was in the outermost range of his guns. It seemed the howitzers had done their duty. Thinking the battle was over, Carson called in the skirmishers, unsaddled the cavalry horses, and directed that they be watered. He allowed his exhausted troops – they had been up all night and had not eaten since the

21 Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 22-25; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.
previous evening – to rest and breakfast. After a brief hiatus, Carson planned to go back upstream and destroy the abandoned Kiowa village.22

McCleave and the cavalry found a cool, clear stream nearby and let the horses drink their fill, then tied them off on pickets to browse the lush prairie grass of the bottomland. The men rummaged through their haversacks to mine bits of bacon and hardtack, probably relieved at having come through the day’s fighting unscathed.23

Carson soon discovered that this peace and quiet marked only the eye of the storm, rather than its passing. Through his spyglass he observed over a thousand warriors making their way back toward the Adobe Walls with a renewed sense of urgency. A village of at least 350 lodges lay down stream beyond them. Carson threw his command back into action. The cavalry saddled their horses and drove them back into the ruins. Pettis prepared his artillery to renew the battle. Again, the cavalry deployed prone in the tall grass, fighting as skirmishers.24

After abandoning their upper village and valiantly contesting the federal advance until grinding it to a halt at the ruins, the Kiowas had initially backed away out of artillery range. They did this not to retreat or give up the fight but to secure aid from the lower villages before continuing the engagement. The lower villages probably housed more Kiowas, and their allies the Comanches and Kiowa-Apaches. Carson believed the larger part of his foes at Adobe Walls was Kiowa, with a few Comanches, Plains Apaches, and

22 Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 25; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.
24 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 26.
Arapahoes cooperating. Historical consensus is that Carson’s opponents that day were largely Kiowas and Comanches, possibly accompanied by a few Kiowa-Apaches.25

Dohasan led the Kiowa effort at Adobe Walls, probably assisted by Satanta and Satank. It would be a misrepresentation to say that any of these fine warriors and leaders actually “commanded” the Kiowa and Comanche forces, however. Plains tribes operated in a radically independent, democratic structure that precluded the selection of a single commander in the same sense the term is applied to the armies of Europe and other Western societies.26

The composite Plains Indian force was a formidable one, whatever its precise composition. At least a thousand Kiowas and Comanches made the afternoon assault on Carson’s party,27 again somewhat confined to the area around the ruins of the abandoned trading post. The warriors in this larger Indian force brought their best and freshest mounts. The Indian force at Adobe Walls was the largest to ever face the U.S. army, other than the Sioux at Little Bighorn. They fought shrewdly. The majority of the Indian combatants formed what amounted to light cavalry, sporting their finest and most brilliant war dress. They made frequent charges across the front of the federal skirmish line – left to right, then right to left. They took cover behind the bodies of their mounts, firing under their necks and over their backs. Like the U.S. dismounted cavalry, the Indians deployed skirmishers. These skirmishers laid flat to the ground hidden amongst

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27 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941 calls the strength of the afternoon assault “at least a thousand.” Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 29, sets the number at as many as 3,000. I defer to Carson’s experience vs. Pettis’ somewhat distant memory. It is also possible that Carson’s number represents the initial assault after the half-hour lull (which is clearly what Carson is referring to), and Pettis’ refers to the cumulative total of Indian warriors who had arrived from the lower villages by the end of the day.
the high clumps of grass, taking shots at the U.S. troops. The idea behind this deployment may have been for the mounted warriors to inflict what damage they could while drawing fire and helping to expose the location of hidden U.S. skirmishers. This would seem to have given the Indian skirmishers improved firing possibilities.\textsuperscript{28}

The Plains Indian force had learned quickly from its initial experience with Pettis’ mountain howitzers. When the warriors renewed combat after the initial engagement, they refrained from operating in masses that would be vulnerable to artillery fire. In this phase of the conflict, Carson and Pettis used the howitzers when they could, which was not often.\textsuperscript{29} While this adjustment in Indian tactics certainly reduced the effectiveness of the U.S. artillery, it also prevented the Kiowas and Comanches from massing for charges that may have overwhelmed the much smaller federal force.

The Plains Indians at Adobe Walls had another fascinating tactical trick up their collective sleeves. One of their number had at some point captured and learned to play an army bugle. Pettis reports that about a quarter of a mile distant from the main body of federal troops, an Indian stood on a small hill. Throughout the battle he would periodically sound his bugle. The bugler may well have been Satanta himself. He was known to have a bugle he sounded on stately occasions. Remarkably, the bugler consistently issued calls countermanding the signals being used to command the U.S. dismounted cavalry skirmish line. When the U.S. bugler signaled advance, the Indian bugler called retreat, and vice versa. Pettis seems to suggest that the Indian bugler was issuing commands to his own side. The Indian bugle signals could also have been an attempt to confuse U.S. forces. In any case, the event is remarkable. In order to

\textsuperscript{28} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 28; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864 OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, p. 941.
\textsuperscript{29} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 26-27.
successfully order his own troops or confuse his enemies, the Indian bugler needed more
than just possession of an army bugle. He must have known the meanings of the signals
as well. The Indian bugler played his calls so crisply and accurately that Carson believed
there must have been a white man blowing the horn in the enemy camp. There is no
evidence to suggest any non-Indian participation on the side of the Comanches and
Kiowas. Whatever the purpose of the Indian bugler, he added a fascinating element to
the battle – one that intrigued many on Carson’s side of the fighting that day.  

As Indian warriors fell injured or killed during the course of the battle, their
comrades swept in to remove the casualty from the field to prevent him from falling into
enemy hands. On one occasion, a federal artillery shell scored a direct hit on an Indian
pony, killing the horse and throwing its rider. As the dazed Indian lay helplessly on the
ground, two of his brothers in arms galloped their mounts to his aid. They split paths
around the downed man. Each of the riders draped himself over the back of his horse and
grabbed an arm of the injured man as they sped past, dragging him to safety amidst a
flurry of army rifle rounds. Pettis observed the execution of this Plains warrior custom
several times throughout the afternoon. 

The afternoon wore on and Carson’s party fended off the passing assaults of his
Indian enemies. It became apparent to both sides that the situation would not be resolved
with a sudden, dramatic, aggressive assault. Carson’s artillery prevented the Plains
warriors from mounting an overwhelming charge, and Carson lacked the manpower to
capture or decisively defeat the massive Indian force he had discovered. The Indian force
did not completely abandon the present fight, but took positions just out of gun range and

30 Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 28-29; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 317
31 Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 27; see also George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, (Norman: University of
seemed content with the possibility of bottling Carson’s command in its present position around the ruins.\textsuperscript{32}

Plains tribes did not normally practice siege warfare, and Carson soon ascertained their aims. Two to three miles distant, he saw lines of noncombatants flowing past toward the abandoned village, intent on retrieving the lodges, livestock, and other possessions they had left behind. He knew immediately his mission required at least an attempt at preventing these Kiowas and Comanches, whom he was charged with severely punishing, from recovering all the goods and stock they began the day with. Carson may have also been concerned for his supply train. The Indians likely did not know of its existence, but had they discovered it they would have found a ripe plundering opportunity protected only by the seventy-five infantry and dismounted cavalry left with Lieutenant Colonel Abreu. Such a loss of both manpower and supplies would cripple U.S. hopes of near term survival, let alone a safe return to New Mexico.\textsuperscript{33}

Several junior officers lobbied Carson to make a charge at the next downstream village – a larger settlement of about three hundred fifty lodges – that was visible not far off.\textsuperscript{34} Carson found himself in a difficult position. Duty called him onward to destroy the entire complex of Indian villages. His present position offered the benefits of a safe place to store his horses, and a small hill useful to his artillery, but he could not stay there indefinitely. He was divided from his supply train, and if the Indians were allowed to escape with all of their possessions the entire mission would have been for naught. He could race the Indians back to the smaller, upper village, confiscate the stock held there,

\textsuperscript{32} Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid; Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 29-30.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 30-31.
and destroy what possessions he could. Then again, this course of action would require abandoning his defensive positions.

Carson lost no time and set out to destroy the upper Kiowa village before its inhabitants could return to salvage the lodges and contents. At about half past three, he ordered the group into a column of fours, with one man in each set of four leading that element’s horses. He dismounted Fritz and Company B of the First California Cavalry and sent them into a skirmish line designed to protect his right flank. He ordered Company M, First California Cavalry and a part of Company M, First New Mexico Cavalry, with Captains Gilbert T. Witham and Charles Deus respectively, into a similar formation on his left. Captain Joseph Berney and Lieutenant Sullivan Heath led Company D, First New Mexico Cavalry and a detachment of Company K, First California Cavalry into position as rear guard just behind Pettis and the howitzers who brought up the rear of the column.  

The Kiowa and Comanche warriors read Carson’s intent and mounted their best effort of the day to buy time for their other villagers to protect their property. Plains warriors charged the federal rear with an even greater fury. Pettis’ guns were limbered, making it more time consuming to fire them. The burden of defending the rear of the column fell to Berney’s skirmish line. The dismounted cavalry proved up to the challenge. The pressure was great enough for Carson to later report, “For some time I had serious doubts for the safety of my rear, but the coolness with which they were

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35 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 8, 30-31;
received by Captain Berney’s command, and the steady and constant fire poured into them, caused them to retire upon every occasion with great slaughter.”

Dohasan, while leading the Kiowa effort, had a horse shot from under him. Stumbling Bear led many charges. He wore his daughter’s shawl that day for good luck. It worked. Stumbling Bear survived the day unscathed. The shawl, however, was riddled with holes from the fight.

This hot fighting did not adequately impede the U.S. advance on the upper village, so the Plains warriors literally turned up the heat on Carson’s command. The brush, high dry grass, and weeds did slow the column’s advance somewhat. The Indians saw the slower progress of the troops amidst this vast fuel supply and started a prairie fire. A brisk east wind (wind is certainly not uncommon in the panhandle) fanned the flames toward Carson’s rear, sending his skirmishers and the tail end of his column on a double-quick march toward the front in accordion fashion.

The prairie fire put Carson’s command in a difficult position. It could not outrun the flames through the thick vegetation on the valley floor and bring out all the men, horses, and howitzers. To clear the path for his troops and remove the fuel for the Indians’ fire, Carson ordered the prairie in front of his line fired. This tactic, a counter-fire, allowed the command to move forward more quickly. As soon as Carson could, he steered his column onto the caprock overlooking the Canadian Valley. This repositioning solved the immediate problem. The caprock grass was too short to provide enough fuel to make the fire dangerous and too short to obstruct forward progress.

36 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.
37 Nye, Carbine & Lance, 37.
38 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 31.
39 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.
Moving to higher ground eliminated the threat from the fire itself, but the Kiowa and Comanche warriors continued to exploit their fire’s effects. Mounted warriors zoomed in behind the thin curtain of the advancing prairie fire. Under the cover of the smoke, they could get close enough to fire a shot without detection and then fade back to safety. On one occasion, a big gust of wind blew back the smoke exposing a Comanche warrior who had approached the skirmishers on the left flank, about six or seven yards from one another. A cavalryman and the Comanche simultaneously raised and fired their weapons. The Indian missed, and the young Hispanic volunteer shot him off his horse. Later that evening, the young man sold the Comanche scalp, reportedly the only scalp taken by the U.S. force that day, to the Ute auxiliaries.  

Plains warriors attempted to use the cover of the fire to mount charges. Whenever Carson noticed groups massing to make a charge, he ordered artillery fire in that direction. Pettis’s artillery successfully thwarted any attempts to mount a massed advance on the rear of the column. His howitzers fired only a few rounds during the return march toward the upper village. The shells no doubt had a significant psychological effect. A few rounds were all that was necessary to scatter massing warriors.  

When Carson’s column got within about five hundred yards of the upper village, the warriors made one last attempt to draw his command away from it, “acting with more daring and bravery” than he had ever witnessed. He immediately ordered his howitzers

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41 Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 33.
into position and called for Pettis to drop shells into the charging Indians. The shells ended the charge, and Carson turned his attention to the village.\(^{42}\)

Kiowas scurried throughout the village, desperately trying to salvage as much as they could. Pettis dropped two more shells into the village. This, along with a cooperating charge, drove the remaining occupants to its southern edge. Just before sundown, the column entered the village. Approximately half the command was detailed to destroy the lodges, while the other half went to work clearing the remainder of the village and taking up defensive positions.\(^{43}\)

Carson sent Pettis atop a twenty-foot sand hill with his howitzers to aid in the defense of the column’s new position in the village. Apparently, the sand hill was fairly steep and not in a completely secure position. The location required an awkward firing and reloading procedure. According to Pettis, the sand hill…

served as earthworks for the detachment. The pieces were loaded at the foot of the hill, and at the command of . . . . By hand, to the front . . . . they were pushed to the top, when the gunner would aim the piece, and at the command . . . . ready . . . . number four would insert the friction primer, and lying on his stomach, with no part of this body exposed, would wait for the command to fire. The piece on being fired would recoil, sometimes tumbling over and over and at others coming down fairly on the wheels to the bottom of the hill, when the other piece, having been loaded meanwhile, would be moved to the top and fired in its turn.\(^{44}\)

Skirmishers drove about three dozen remaining Kiowas and Comanches steadily toward the southern limit of the village, fighting “lodge to lodge” in a tactical precursor to today’s urban warfare. As the sun sank in the west, these last defenders leapt on their

\(^{42}\) Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941-942.

\(^{43}\) Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 33; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.

\(^{44}\) Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 33-34.
mounts and dashed off toward the river. Pettis dropped one more twelve pound shell into the receding party for good measure, and the long day’s fight finally drew to a close.45

The Kiowa warriors and villagers succeeded in salvaging some of their possessions from the captured upper village. They regained all their livestock, except those animals that had been “traded” by the Utes and Jicarillas on the inbound leg of the day’s journey. They also recovered the women and children who had fled to the breaks in the caprock near the village, as well as a few white captives that had been taken to that place.46

That being said, the material loss suffered by the Kiowa residents of the upper village must have been devastating in the winter season. Carson’s command fired all the 176 finely constructed lodges. They destroyed large supplies of dried meat, berries, buffalo robes, powder, cooking utensils, and other household items. Soldiers confiscated several finely dressed buffalo robes for their own use.47

Carson’s soldiers discovered many items confirming that they had indeed “punished” the intended party. They burned a buggy and a spring wagon, along with several sets of harnesses. They also found numerous items of women’s and children’s clothing, several photographs, and a cavalry sergeant’s hat with accompanying belts and saber that had belonged to a member of the Colorado Volunteers.48

Carson’s men and their horses were exhausted after a long day. The battle had been far more grueling than anyone had expected. After the destruction of the lodges and remaining contents was complete, however, Carson ordered his men back into column

48 Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 34; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.
formation. He did not want to risk ending the day with a divided force. Lightly wounded troopers mounted their horses and rode back to the west. Carson used his two gun carriages and the two accompanying ammunition carts to transport the more seriously injured. Cautiously, the column made its way back to the supply wagons. After a three hour ride from the upper Kiowa village, Carson’s men saw the faint glow of campfires in the distance.49

Once in camp, most soldiers laid down and went to sleep. Carson posted a double guard. The men unsaddled the horses, unhitched them from the carts, and set them out on pickets. In spite of eating nothing all day other than the pork and hardtack, most of the men did not think of eating before calling it a night.50

Carson anticipated that if the enemy planned to attack his camp, they would do so just before dawn. He ordered reveille well before first light and posted his troops to receive an attack. It never came. The entire party – cavalry, artillery, Utes, Jicarillas and all – devoured a massive prairie breakfast, which depleted their food stores to the point that they had to send out hunters to restock the commissary wagons. The men gorged on wild turkey and antelope until it was gone.51

On November 26, Carson moved his force only about five hundred yards to procure better grass for the animals. With his men and horses exhausted, Carson chose to rest a day and consider his options. He opted against reengaging the Kiowas and Comanches. In his report, Carson said he could no longer surprise the Indians, and his

50 Ibid, 37-38.
51 Ibid, 39.
horses were in no condition to pursue them and their livestock. The aggressiveness and size of the Comanche-Kiowa force also factored into his decision.\textsuperscript{52}

For most of that day of rest, the Kiowas and Comanches were present on a hill about two miles distant. Indians from Carson’s party initiated the day’s only excitement, a nineteenth-century game of chicken. Two of the Indian auxiliaries mounted their horses and set out at a walk toward the distant Comanches. Two Comanches responded in kind. A dozen more of the auxiliaries then joined the first two. Again the Comanches followed suit. This game of brinksmanship continued until as many as two hundred Indians seemed headed for a meeting on the prairie. Once within about two hundred yards, someone fired a shot. Several others follows, but the Comanches wheeled and dashed off in short order, and no other fighting ensued.\textsuperscript{53}

While Carson carefully weighed his options, most of his officers wanted to attack and destroy the larger villages. The Utes and Jicarillas favored returning. The auxiliaries were right, and Carson sided with them. Without a stronger, better equipped force and without fresh horses, the column could accomplish nothing, except to jeopardize its survival, which had been tenuous on the twenty-fifth.\textsuperscript{54}

Carson and his column began a slow march back toward Fort Bascom. Initially they moved cautiously, based mostly on Carson’s understanding that they had been fortunate to have escaped such a large party of plains warriors with no worse losses than they sustained. As they moved further west, it became apparent that they were no longer in danger of Kiowa and Comanche retaliation. Carson sent his initial report back to

\textsuperscript{52} Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.
\textsuperscript{53} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 40.
\textsuperscript{54} Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942; Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 41.
headquarters from camp at Rita Blanco on December 4. His party reached Fort Bascom on December 10.\textsuperscript{55}

Carson’s column lost two soldiers and one Ute killed. Ten soldiers were wounded, as were five Utes. Some of the wounded soldiers later died. Kiowa and Comanche losses are more difficult to ascertain. Carson estimated about sixty killed and wounded. Pettis claims to have met a Comanchero trader three years later who was in the villages at the time of the attack. This Comanchero informant allegedly told him Indian losses were 100 killed and between 100 and 150 wounded. In later interviews, Kiowa participants claimed a loss of just five, although this number may have been just from the Kiowa upper village. It seems most likely that the true number of Plains Indian casualties lies somewhere between the extreme estimates. Army reports often overestimated Indian casualties, and Indian interviewees nearly always grossly understated their own.\textsuperscript{56}

Whatever their human loss, the Kiowas suffered a great material loss when the cavalry located and destroyed their upper village. That being said, the Kiowas and Comanches surely gave Carson’s party a rude awakening. In spite of what he said in his initial reports about teaching the Indians a severe lesson, Carson clearly stated in later accounts that he felt quite fortunate that he and his command made it out of the Canadian Valley alive. Were it not for the mountain howitzers, there may not have been a white man left to tell the tale.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.
\textsuperscript{56} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 38, 43; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942; Utley, “Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign,”\textsuperscript{75}.
\textsuperscript{57} Pettis, \textit{Kit Carson’s Fight}, 44; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.
6. The Aftermath

“I Have Taught These Indians a Severe Lesson”

In his initial report, Colonel Carson wrote to General Carleton commending his troops for their coolness in combat. He certainly thought his force had successfully prosecuted the mission as he understood it. He wrote, “I flatter myself that I have taught these Indians a severe lesson, and hereafter they will be more cautious about how they engage a force of civilized troops.”\(^1\)

Carleton had only Carson’s report from which to assess the Canadian valley operation. He had no reason to believe Carson misrepresented his results. He fully understood that a large force of Kiowas and Comanches remained at large on the Canadian and that Carson’s party had only managed to destroy the upper village. Carson’s report indicated his failure to capture the large quantity of Indian livestock held near the villages. Carson made it clear to Carleton that more work remained to be done. None of this dampened Carleton’s praise of Carson and the expedition. He expressed “thanks for the handsome manner in which you all met so formidable an enemy and defeated him... This brilliant affair adds another green leaf to the laurel wreath which you have so nobly won in the service of your country.”\(^2\)

Carson wanted to embark on another, larger expedition as soon as his livestock recovered. He estimated that time at about six weeks. He believed that if he had a force of about a thousand troops (he made no mention of auxiliaries), four more guns, and forage and supplies to camp near Adobe Walls for four months, he could completely bring the Comanches and Kiowas to U.S. terms. Carson knew that he had not decisively

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\(^1\) Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 942.
\(^2\) Ibid; Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943; Carleton to Carson, 15 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 944.
defeated the Indians, otherwise another such campaign would not have been necessary. He also learned after the campaign that Indians held several white captives in the villages. Carson always felt honor-bound to liberate captives; so this knowledge likely influenced his desire to lead a follow-up mission.\(^3\)

Carleton understood that he had not solved the problem of potential raiding on the Santa Fe Trail, but his department lacked the resources to undertake the operation Carson proposed. As he did the previous summer, Carleton requested aid from the Department of the Missouri. He suggested that Major General Curtis strengthen his garrisons at Forts Atkinson and Larned and place a semipermanent camp in the Palo Duro area. The latter would function as a base from which they could readily punish hostiles the following summer when traffic on the trail – and the corresponding raids – increased. Carleton believed that he could protect the trail from his department to the Arkansas Crossing but that he could not guard Bosque Redondo, protect the Santa Fe Trail, and prosecute campaigns against hostile Indians with the manpower at his disposal.\(^4\)

Major General Grenville M. Dodge succeeded Curtis as departmental commander after the Atlanta campaign in the East. Upon receiving Carleton’s request, he expressed his desire to cooperate with Carleton to protect the Santa Fe Trail. He took immediate action to bolster his posts along the route. The two attempted to set up a system by which Carleton’s command escorted trains between Forts Union and Larned, and Dodge’s command escorted travelers between Larned and Council Grove (about twenty-five miles south of present Manhattan, Kansas). Trains embarked twice a month, and deviations

\(^3\) Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943.  
from these sanctioned, escorted parties were prohibited. Dodge initiated no direct action against the Kiowas or Comanches by sending an expedition to the Palo Duro, however.\(^5\)

General Carleton initially found reason to hope his punitive mission had pressured the Comanches to sue for peace. A Comanche named “Sheer-ke-na-kwaugh” visited Fort Bascom in mid-January claming to be the head chief of the Comanches. The commander at Bascom, Major Bergmann, believed that he had honest intentions. The visiting Comanche promised peace and even offered to provide any information he could attain about planned Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache raids. Bergmann told him that only Carleton could make that peace and suggested that he wait at Bascom until Carleton arrived. Sheer-ke-na-kwaugh would not wait but promised to return at the “last quarter of the moon.” Carleton was quite pleased at the prospect but still skeptical. He made plans to attend the meeting at Bascom and asked Carson to accompany him. Relations with the Comanches appeared headed in the right direction, apparently as a direct result of the Adobe Walls campaign.\(^6\)

“Our Troops Were Badly Whipped”

Not everyone offered such a sanguine evaluation of Carson’s campaign. A string of articles and letters criticizing the affair appeared in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. Although the writers made every attempt to avoid criticism of Carson and the expedition’s participants, they published reports that milked every possible negative connotation from available battle reports and laid the blame squarely upon General Carleton. They cited several reasonable arguments in calling the affair a defeat: failure

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of Carson’s command to make off with any livestock, the fact that the Indians were left in possession of the field of battle, and lack of evidence to support federal estimates of Kiowa and Comanche casualties. Their overall assessment was “that our troops were badly whipped” and that the whole operation had been ill-advised and completely unnecessary in the first place.\(^7\)

The newspaper business in Santa Fe was a highly politicized enterprise during Carleton’s tenure as departmental commander. Two competing papers, the *New Mexican* and the *Gazette*, traded barbs on just about every issue. The *Gazette* supported Carleton and published favorable accounts of his doings at Bosque Redondo, of the Adobe Walls campaign, and of just about everything else. The *New Mexican* portrayed Carleton as something just short of Attila the Hun. Carleton could do nothing right in the *New Mexican*, and the *New Mexican* consistently castigated the *Gazette* for being Carleton’s mouthpiece. The *New Mexican* referred to the *Gazette* as “the ‘Carletonian Gazette,’” “the translator for Head Quarters,” and “the Carletonian.” Neither the *New Mexican* nor the *Gazette* bothered with publishing sober assessments. The latter half of the Gazette’s motto says everything: “Independent in all Things, Neutral in Nothing.”\(^8\)

Political ambitions clouded credibility in this argument over whether the campaign was a “victory,” successful, or necessary. For all the reasons stated in the first chapter, Michael Steck and his allies wanted the campaign perceived as a failure. They pointed out the fact that Carleton had exerted power over Indian affairs to shut down the lucrative Comanchero trade by disallowing all passes issued by Superintendent Steck. He did this under the guise of a war against the Comanches. Subsequently, Carleton

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\(^7\) *New Mexican* (Santa Fe), 24 February; 24 March; 7, 28 April 1865.

\(^8\) *New Mexican* (Santa Fe), 28 October; 18 November; 16 December 1864. *Gazette* (Santa Fe). 29 October-17 December 1864. Emphasis added.
allowed some traders to pass but only with his personal endorsement. The anti-Carleton party claimed that he was using his military authority to create a trading monopoly for his favorites and associates. They sought to portray the Carson campaign as just another Carleton power grab at best. At worst, it was an impending disaster to residents of the territory’s eastern frontier who might face reprisals from angry Comanches and Kiowas.9

Carleton and his allies needed to show that the campaign had been a success in order to retain credibility, and garner support for the candidate for territorial governor endorsed by Carleton and his allies at the Gazette. Further, Carleton remained under heavy criticism throughout his tenure as departmental commander, and could use public support wherever and however he could get it. The pro-Carleton party was more than willing to point to the Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh visit as evidence that the Adobe Walls campaign had made the Indians “feel the white man’s power” and had pressured them into accepting peace on terms favorable to the United States.10

The Comanche Peace

Unfortunately, the meeting between Carleton, Carson, and Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh never materialized. The man who purported to be “head chief” of the Comanches disappeared from both the Department of New Mexico and the historical record. This brought great delight to Carleton’s opponents – not that they wanted to face Comanche reprisals, but as evidence of Carleton’s failure and incompetence. “Where is Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh and his peace makers?” taunted the New Mexican.11

Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh’s disappearance foreshadowed approaching troubles. One of the traders Carleton allowed onto the plains in the spring of 1865 was Arthur

9 New Mexican (Santa Fe). 24, 31 March 1865; General Orders No. 2, 31 January 1865.
10 Gazette (Santa Fe). 4 February 1865.
11 New Mexican (Santa Fe). 28 April 1865.
Morrison, who had been an aide to Carleton during his time in the army. Comanches accosted Morrison’s Nuevo Mexicano scouts, stealing their saddles and firearms. Morrison encountered another Nuevo Mexicano trading party that had been endorsed by Carleton. Comanches had stolen all of their trading goods and threatened them with death, should they return. Morrison considered himself lucky not to have lost his trading stake and fled the plains.\textsuperscript{12}

Morrison brought bad news for Union forces. The Comanches and Kiowas had joined forces with a dozen more tribes across the Southern Plains and Indian Territory in an alliance with the Confederates. They said the Confederates promised them food, clothing, and ammunition in return for their cooperation in a general strike against New Mexico. Nuevo Mexicanos, who had been safe on the plains for decades due to their favorable trade relationship, were now also in danger when attempting to trade on the Llano Estacado. A large portion of Carson’s force at Adobe Walls had been Hispanic. The Kiowas and Comanches recognized this and now considered their former trade partners enemies.\textsuperscript{13}

May of 1865 was a bad time to make deals with Confederates. Bereft of aid from the Confederates and now estranged from their former New Mexico allies, the Kiowas and Comanches signed the Little Arkansas Treaty in October 1865. This treaty, like most others, proved ineffective within a year. The U.S. reached another agreement in 1867, the Medicine Lodge Treaty. It, too, brought only a temporary peace. In the long run,


only military conquest of the Comanches and Kiowas in the Red River War of 1874 and
1875 finally brought peace to Comanchería’s neighbors.\textsuperscript{14}

Michael Steck

Although the Adobe Walls campaign may not have been militarily decisive, Carleton thought that he might walk away from the affair with a different kind of victory. He believed he had the necessary evidence to rid himself and the territory of Superintendent Steck. Steck ardently opposed almost every initiative Carleton undertook involving Indians. The two had long standing feuds over Carleton’s administration of martial law in the territory in general, the Bosque Redondo affair, Carleton’s launching of the Adobe Walls campaign, and his use of Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries without consulting Steck, to name a few.\textsuperscript{15}

Steck was not alone in opposing Carleton’s administration of martial law. Steck, however, held a high enough position occasionally to stand in Carleton’s way. Once Carleton knew he would prosecute a campaign on the plains in 1864, he attempted to shut down the Comanchero trade to prevent the Kiowas and Comanches from receiving advance notification of Carson’s arrival. He also, of course, wanted to prevent Comancheros from supplying the Indians with ammunition and supplies they would later use against his force. Carleton asked Governor Connelly to cease granting trade permits and ordered his detachment at Fort Bascom to halt any trading parties bound for Comanchería. Connelly agreed to the restriction.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} Refer back to first chapter for a discussion of the Carleton-Steck feud.

\textsuperscript{16} Kenner, \textit{The Comanchero Frontier}, 148; Carleton to Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, 29 January 1865, 44, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
Steck disregarded Carleton’s request and Connelly’s policy. He continued to issue the passes. The Fort Bascom command was ineffective in stopping the traders but did confiscate passes from several traders on their return trip. Steck had signed the passes after Carleton’s decision to prosecute the campaign. Carleton and Carson were livid. They were certain that their men had been killed and wounded by ammunition Comancheros had provided the Comanches in the days just prior to the assault. They directed the force of their anger not at the traders but at Michael Steck – understandably so, considering the personal history between the two, and the signatures on the passes.¹⁷

Carleton figured that he finally had the evidence he needed to get rid of Steck once and for all. He wrote a letter to the adjutant general of the army, Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, which included several supporting documents. His letter lamented the difficulty of prosecuting hostile Indians while other governmental agencies appeared to be aiding and abetting them. Carleton wrote:

> The military is doing its best to protect the people and the lines of communication from the hostile Indians; but when a high civil functionary gives passports to men to carry on a nefarious traffic, when he knows in reason that those men will give information of the movements of the troops; and when he sits down and deliberately writes to the Governor that he has not given such passports, you must know, General, that such conduct adds not a little, to say the least, to our many embarrassments.¹⁸

Carleton’s efforts were ultimately successful. The commissioner of Indian affairs asked Steck to resign “for the good of the service” on March 18, 1865.¹⁹

Carleton Follows

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¹⁷ Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943; Bergmann to Carleton, 26 November 1864, B/642 LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA; Bergmann to Cutler, 4 December 1864, B/666, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA.
¹⁸ Carleton to Thomas, 29 January 1865, 44, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
¹⁹ Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 149; Commissioner to Steck, 18 Mar 1865, box 2, folder 2, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.
The removal of Steck as superintendent of Indian affairs in New Mexico may have seemed like a great victory for General Carleton. However, he would have little time to gloat. Steck was only one of a sizable contingent of politicians in Santa Fe who despised Carleton and wanted him out. They resented Carleton’s rigid enforcement of martial law and his seemingly arbitrary enforcement of his own edicts. They determined that most of Carleton’s decisions had the aim of personal empire building.20

Bosque Redondo fell squarely in the center of the debate. Steck’s allies in Santa Fe vehemently opposed Bosque Redondo, but not because they saw it as some kind of inhumane experiment. They argued that it left the hated Navajos far too close to settled New Mexico. The costs of the operation were exorbitant and amounted to favors Carleton could use in building his personal empire. They additionally argued that such large government purchases drove the prices up on items they needed for daily existence. Carleton’s expedition against the Comanches only added fuel to the fire. Some of his enemies believed the whole affair was just an excuse to build another Bosque Redondo and pilfer even more government funding to distribute among his “cronies.”21

On July 4, 1865, Carleton attempted to quell the anger against him in Santa Fe. He felt safe abolishing martial law now that the Civil War was over. In his rescission declaration, he concluded with a conciliatory passage apparently aimed at mending fences. The damage was done by now, however. Anti-Carleton forces in Santa Fe undertook a letter-writing campaign demanding an investigation into Bosque Redondo specifically and the Carleton regime generally.22

20 New Mexican (Santa Fe), 28 October; 18 November; 16 December 1864.
21 New Mexican (Santa Fe), 16 December 1864.
Although no investigation followed, words consistently flowed back to Washington complaining of Carleton’s administration of military affairs in New Mexico. On October 6, 1866, the war department removed Carleton from command and reassigned him as a lieutenant colonel in the Fourth Cavalry, headquartered in San Antonio, Texas. Whether he was reassigned merely as part of the postwar army reorganization, the Doolittle Commissions findings on the Bosque Redondo affair, or consistent pressure from New Mexicans, is unclear.  

One thing was certain. Carleton’s career was effectively over. He was never again promoted, nor did he receive any other important assignment. He remained in San Antonio until pneumonia claimed his life on 7 January 1873.  

Kit Carson’s Last Fight

Kit Carson did not share the fate suffered by General Carleton or Superintendent Steck. It may seem strange that his last and largest Indian fight is largely forgotten. That may be in part because many perceive it as a defeat. Carson did not see the fight that way. He knew that getting his men out of such a dangerous situation was victory enough.  

Carson remained a devoted Carleton disciple as long as the latter remained in command in New Mexico. Carleton was delighted to know that his trusted field commander would remain in the service of the country throughout his tenure in the territory. Carleton allowed Carson a few months’ respite at home – something Carson consistently longed for at this stage of his life. Shortly thereafter, Carleton called Carson back to duty as part of his cooperative endeavor with the Department of the Missouri to

protect Santa Fe Trail traffic from Comanche and Kiowa retaliation. On May 20, 1865, Carson led a contingent to Cold Spring, at the extreme western edge of “no-man’s land.” There he set up camp on a high bluff overlooking a segment of the Cimarron Cut-Off and watched for trouble. There was none. Adobe Walls was indeed Kit Carson’s last fight.26

General Carleton’s Adobe Walls campaign was militarily indecisive. It contributed to the demise of both Carleton and his principle political opponent Michael Steck. Many consider the battle a loss that might damage the record of Carson, an otherwise great frontiersman. These factors may be reasons why the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign has been largely forgotten.

The rancorous New Mexico politics that surrounded Carleton and the Adobe Walls campaign obstructed what would have been a difficult mission under the best of circumstances. As it turned out, the near term results of the campaign not only killed the careers of two prominent leaders, but did not yield significant results. But it was Adobe Walls’ place in the larger context of the wars with the Comanches and Kiowas and other Plains tribes (discussed in the next chapter) that marked the battle’s importance.

7. Conclusion

The Forgotten Campaign

Die hard aficionados of Western history may have heard of Adobe Walls. If so, they probably remember the 1874 battle between the hide hunters and Comanches featuring Bat Masterson, Quanah Parker, and Billy Dixon’s famous shot. The Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum – one of the finest regional museums in the country and the most prolific historical interpreter in the area – does not even differentiate between the 1864 and 1874 battles in its archive. If it has a document referring to Adobe Walls, it assumes that material pertains to the hide hunters’ fight.

How could the 1874 Adobe Walls Fight, a relatively minor skirmish, dwarf Kit Carson’s campaign in regional memory? Perhaps an explanation can be found in contemporary context. The 1864 campaign took place in the midst of the Civil War. It was certainly not the largest, best known, or even most important battle in 1864 – a year during which the Atlanta campaign, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg were fought.

Maybe Adobe Walls fails to live up to the American frontier myth. From our twenty-first-century perspective, it is difficult to look positively at a cavalry force riding in to assault Indian villages. We see villages as the peaceful residences of families – which they no doubt often were. But they were also the only place the army could find the warriors conducting the damaging raids. Army leaders believed Indians had to be fought where they could be found, and that was during the winter in villages. Regardless of the absence of alternatives for prosecuting Plains Indians, the story is not so well received in America today.
Most likely, historians neglect the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign because they do not know what to do with the fight. The campaign was indecisive. Nineteenth-century American Indian War battles and campaigns almost always were inconclusive, primarily due to the nature of the fighting and Indian tactics. Like Major Ruff’s fruitless scout in 1860, or Kirby Smith’s hunt for Sanico, campaigns against the Plains tribes so often netted the army only frustration and wasted energy.¹ When the American military achieved success on the plains, it came through persistence and destruction rather than a decisive Napoleonic battle.² When Indian Wars battles were decisive, the decision often favored Indians as at Pine Creek (1858) and Little Bighorn (1876) since they seldom fought toe-to-toe without some significant advantage.³

Many historians – and Americans in general – prefer to make definitive statements about historical events. We call battles either victories or defeats and campaigns success or failures. Most interpreters of Adobe Walls either speak of success or failure in guarded, cautious terms, or call the mission an outright military defeat.⁴ Decisive, watershed moments in history such as Gettysburg, Waterloo, or the use of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima make for sharper studies, and provide far easier subjects on which we can definitively comment.

Was the 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign a Success or a Failure?

In many ways, the Battle of Adobe Walls feels like a U.S. failure. The classic measurement of military success – possession of the field of battle – points to a Kiowa

¹ Parks, General Edmund Kirby Smith, 89-90; Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.
² Dunlay, Kit Carson & the Indians, 339.
³ Wallace and Hoebel, The Comanches, 257.
and Comanche victory. Though that relic of Napoleonic warfare could not successfully measure the success of a battle with Indians for the reasons stated in chapter four, many contemporaries viewed the battle as a defeat on those grounds. At the time, Carson’s officers seem to have been of the same opinion. They argued in favor of continuing the fight in spite of Carson’s experience and their obvious numerical disadvantage.⁵

Carson’s later admission that if not for some adept artillery fire, “few would have been left to tell the tale,” also suggests failure. Such scrapes do not occur in decisive victories. Many contemporaries pointed to Carson’s failure to retain and confiscate captured Indian livestock as evidence of failure. Carson clearly regretted missing the opportunity to liberate several white captives in the villages at the time of his attack. Despite General Carleton’s best efforts, the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos at Bosque Redondo could not be convinced to join the expedition.⁶

If Carleton intended the punitive aspect of the mission to prevent future raiding along the Santa Fe Trail, that seems to have failed as well. Sporadic raiding continued throughout the spring and summer of 1865. Since revenge played a central role in the military cult that inspired Plains Indian raiding and war, such punitive campaigns – when not decisive – did more to trigger an increase in future raids than to cow Indians into submission. The campaign did not stop raids, nor did it prevent large expenditures of manpower drawn from two departments the following spring to protect Santa Fe Trail travel and commerce.⁷

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⁵ Pettis, Kit Carson’s Fight, 30.
⁶ Utley, Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign, 75; New Mexican (Santa Fe) 24 March 1865; Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943.
On the other hand, Carson destroyed well over 150 Kiowa lodges, and huge stores of winter foodstuffs. Surely they felt the sting of that loss, particularly since it came at the onset of winter. Carson and Carleton also successfully prevented the pan-Indian uprising that they had feared in light of Robert North’s report of the previous summer. The most significant success of the campaign may have been a psychological victory. For good reason, the Comanches and Kiowas saw the Llano Estacado as an almost impenetrable barrier protecting them from hostile foreigners. The Adobe Walls campaign showed that their winter abodes were no longer safe havens, even on the most remote stretches of the Canadian River.8

On the surface, the evidence conflicts as to whether or not Adobe Walls should be considered a successful campaign, with perhaps a preponderance of evidence appearing to suggest failure. It would, however, be remiss to attempt to evaluate any military operation without considering its commander’s intent. Carleton did not post a list of objectives from which pundits or historians might judge his success. His correspondence, though, does specifically state some of the objectives he brought to this campaign.

Carleton’s stated objectives change a bit depending on whom he was addressing and when. In September correspondence to Carson and when giving instructions as to how Carson’s party would be outfitted, Carleton emphasized the campaign’s limited resources and limited objectives. He also highlighted the importance of bringing the Utes into the conflict on the U.S. side. He wanted to reduce the likelihood that the Utes would

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“join in any league which the (Plains) Indians may attempt to make for a general war by all the Indians between the mountains and the Missouri on the whites.”

Carleton clearly had designs on a more significant campaign, though, if adequate forces were available. In October, he urged Curtis to send a large force from Kansas “so as to make this the last war that will be necessary to prosecute against these two, the most treacherous tribes of the plains.”

With a large force at his disposal or not, Carleton clearly intended the mission to be punitive. His General Orders No. 32, which officially committed manpower and resources from his department to the expedition, emphasized its punitive nature as an intended means of preventing Santa Fe Trail depredations the following spring and summer. The orders were dated October 22, 1864. The same day, he told Blunt that he wanted to strike a blow “which these two treacherous tribes will remember.”

In some of his final instructions to Carson before the column embarked on the mission, Carleton made his wishes simple: “It is my desire that you give those Indians, especially the Kiowas, a severe drubbing.” He articulated clearly that women and children were to be spared, while acknowledging that a few noncombatant casualties were likely when Carson’s force struck.

Carleton clearly failed to make this the “last war necessary” against the Kiowas and Comanches. But that objective had been based on having a larger force of converging columns. With the limited resources at hand, Carleton focused on bringing in

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10 Carleton to Curtis, 23 October 1864, 923, LS, 1864, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.
the Utes and impressing on the Plains tribes that their raiding would trigger U.S.
retaliation. Carleton implicitly trusted Carson’s ability to relate with Indians, and for
good reason. Carson was completely successful in incorporating the Utes and Jicarillas,
thus preventing them from joining a larger Indian movement.13

Carleton was unable to give the Kiowas and Comanches the “severe drubbing”
Carleton would have liked, but he did strike a blow “which these two . . . tribes will
remember.” Carson was fairly successful in destroying Kiowa lodges and winter
resources. However, “punishment” was likely an ill-advised objective in the first place.
Carleton and Carson may not have realized it at the time, but the psychological “blow” of
challenging winter homeland security was probably the biggest near-term success of the
campaign. The knowledge that the army could strike them anywhere in any season
would have a lingering effect.

For the Kiowas, the implications were even greater. The Comanches had battled
whites from Texas and the United States since Texas was Mexican territory. Adobe
Walls was the first major military campaign against the Kiowas. It was literally the
beginning of the end for them and their traditional way of life.

Remembering the 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign

The 1864 Adobe Walls campaign of 1864 should be remembered for several
reasons. The battle itself was one of a very small number of clear, pitched battles in the
North American Indian Wars. The list is short – Cieneguilla (1854), Pine Creek, (1858),

13 It seems unlikely based on inter-tribal relationships and alliances that the Utes and Jicarillas could have been brought into an alliance with the Kiowas and Apaches in the first place, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Some kind of large council took place between over a dozen tribes and the Confederate government. Leavenworth to Ford, 30 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt.2, p. 687-688; Adair to Veatch, 20 July 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1102-1103; Kenner, The Comanchero Frontier, 153-4; Smith to Pike, 8 April 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1266-1269; Cooper to Throckmorton, 16 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1309.
Four Lakes (1858), Fort Defiance, (1860), Little Bighorn (1876), Adobe Walls – there just were not very many. And even among those, Adobe Walls was numerically one of the largest Indian War battles in American history, perhaps second only to Little Bighorn. That fact alone argues for the battle’s importance.

Kit Carson’s involvement also deserves attention. Adobe Walls was his last fight, but it is significant in his life for more reasons. In Carson’s long experience on the frontier, he interacted with Indians in numerous ways, including fighting them. His understanding of Indian fighting allowed him to recognize the danger his command was in at Adobe Walls and avoid disaster. Even after he decided to move his force back toward the supply train, Carson’s quick and creative tactical responses managing his formations and countering “fire with fire” – not just with howitzers – gave his men a safe return to New Mexico. Heroism is often measured in clear triumphs, and success in multitude and magnitude of victories. Adobe Walls shows Carson’s heroism in his ability to make an unpopular decision that salvaged the best possible results from an unfavorable situation.

On a larger scale, the Adobe Walls campaign illustrates several elements of U.S. military action against Plains Indians that eventually became the army’s formula for defeating them: destruction of resources, winter campaigning, and the development of converging columns.

Destruction of Indian resources was not new to Indian warfare. It was a strategy borrowed from the Indians themselves and used by Angloamericans against Indians as early as the colonial wars. Union forces were in the process of using similar tactical applications of total war against the Confederates the same year Carson and Carleton
prosecuted the Adobe Walls campaign. Carleton effectively used violence and destruction in an environment – the nineteenth-century American West – where those were often the only language spoken and respected.\textsuperscript{14} Carleton and Carson used the method with brutal effectiveness against the Navajos in 1863, and incorporated it in their plans for the Kiowas and Comanches the following year. It was a bit more difficult to implement against the Plains tribes, which lacked the sedentary agriculture and large pastoral herds maintained by the Navajos. U.S. forces instead sacked caches of food and supplies the Kiowas had stored for the winter and destroyed lodges, exemplifying a tactic that would be used repeatedly in warfare against the Plains tribes. The army supported a similar concept and applied it more effectively in the mid to late 1870s when white Americans hastened the demise of the plains tribes’ most important resource – the great buffalo herds.\textsuperscript{15}

Carleton had initiated his operation against the Navajos in the summer of 1863. The acute shortage of resources that forced the Navajos to surrender, however, became readily apparent in the winter. Resources available to western Indian tribes were nearly always most scarce that time of year. Furthermore, winter weather particularly limited the Plains tribes’ mobility – one of their greatest advantages. Carleton did not originally intend his campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches to be a winter campaign, but by the time Carson launched his men down the Canadian valley, winter weather was at hand. Adobe Walls proved that winter greatly aided U.S. troops in locating large, stationary groups of Plains Indians. It turned out to be in essence a “proof of concept” for winter campaigning on the plains. This concept of winter campaigning played a crucial role in

\textsuperscript{14} Kane, “James H. Carleton,” 141-143.
\textsuperscript{15} Dunlay, \textit{Kit Carson & the Indians}, 272-274; Hutton, \textit{Phil Sheridan and His Army}, 246.
later expeditions against Plains Indians. It was decisive against the Cheyennes in the 1868 Washita campaign.

Carleton never successfully elicited support from other departments for his Kiowa and Comanche campaign. This was not for lack of trying. His concept called for columns to converge from Kansas and New Mexico. Each column was to be large enough not to be vulnerable alone to raids. This multitude of large army forces would negate some of the mobility disadvantages on the plains, and create the appearance that federal armies were everywhere in the Indians’ home land and could not be avoided.

Although Carleton could not see this plan through to fruition due to other taxes on military manpower in Kansas and Missouri, this very strategy met success in the Washita campaign and ultimately brought the Comanches, Kiowas and Cheyennes to their knees. In the Red River War of 1874-1875, Major General Phil Sheridan devised a plan in which five columns converged from Forts Concho, Griffin, Sill, Bascom, and Dodge onto the Comanche stronghold – the Llano Estacado. The columns destroyed villages and horse herds as they found them. Within a year, the last hold outs surrendered.16

Adobe Walls shows the inherent messiness of warfare against the Plains Indians, and its divergence from traditional conceptions of warfare in which two armies place units on a battlefield and match strength against strength, intent on destroying the opposing force with decisive offensive strokes and flanking maneuvers. Adobe Walls shows how elements of Indian strategy were being progressively incorporated into U.S. war strategy, a trend that would continue through the world wars. It shows how heroism cannot be defined in “winning.” And most of all, Adobe Walls directly shows the essential strategic components that would later be used to conclude Indian conflicts in the

16 Hutton, Phil Sheridan and His Army, 248-261.
United States’s favor during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This massive Battle of Adobe Walls fought in 1864 truly does deserve a more prominent place in American history.
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