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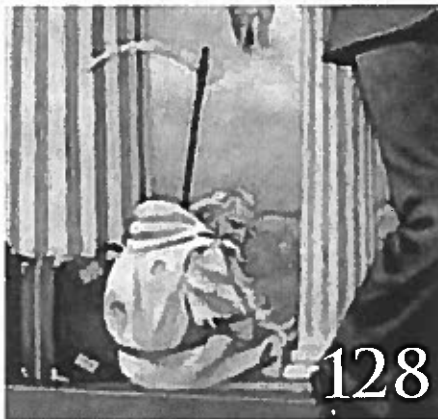
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## The Comanches and Us

*Anna Simons*

Not so long ago history was the soft social science of choice in national security circles, and members of the military deemed military history especially important. Then came the end of the Cold War, which unleashed new genres of disorder. Since 9/11, and especially the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. government has turned increasingly to anthropologists to help soldiers and policymakers figure out how to win friends, influence people and subdue foes abroad. But despite the many insights anthropologists can offer regarding clans, tribes, warlords and other non-state actors of a non-Western sort, history remains a necessary corrective.

Historians traffic in characters and plots. They appreciate the extent to which timing, location and personality matter. Gifted historians know what to do with coincidences, disjunctions and wrinkles in time. In contrast, we anthropologists eschew the importance of contingency and inadvertence. We pay virtually no attention to timing. We purposely overlook the effects specific individuals can have. The gold we dig for lies in patterns and typologies instead.

Patterns and typologies can elucidate a lot. But no matter how much we anthropologists may think we do a better job of decoding other peoples' motivations—which we might at the societal level—we still treat humans more like predictable atoms than willful Adams and Eves. Worse, because we focus on the physics rather than the chemistry of human interaction, we have a disciplinary tendency to airbrush away most of the very stuff that explains why our subjects *specifically* act as they do. Here is where history's approach to context remains vitally important, a particularly vivid example of which can be found in Brian DeLay's recent history of our southern borderlands.

DeLay displays all the sophistication any anthropologist could ask for when he writes about Comanches and Kiowas—and Spaniards, Mexicans, Tejanos and others on the southern plains in the 1830s and 1840s. A Harvard-trained historian currently teaching at the University of Colorado-Boulder, his thesis in *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* is a bold one: Comanche incursions south of the Rio Grande inadvertently paved the way for U.S. victory in the Mexican War, and hence decisively shaped both countries' destinies.

To defend this proposition DeLay must explain who the Comanches were and how they became such a formidable force in the first place. They did so, he shows us, by winding up in the best possible location for raising horses at a time when horses represented wealth to Indians and non-Indians alike. DeLay has to make sense of ever-shifting inter-tribal alliances and enmities involving Lipan Apaches, Utes, Osages, Wichitas, Cheyennes and others. He likewise has to take into account who's up and who's down politically on both sides of the border—for example, Santa Anna goes from being President of Mexico to being exiled to being President again. At the same time, DeLay has to convey to readers how all these fragmented and kaleidoscopic forces impact on one another. This means he has to track more than just important personages; he also has to pay attention to fluctuating numbers across various populations—including buffalo, the Comanches' game animal of choice.

When one considers what historians of DeLay's caliber have to juggle, it makes sense that those seeking a silver bullet for cross-cultural encounters would favor anthropology. Anthropology edits away the multitude of confusing contingencies that explain how Comanches became Comanches and instead cuts to the structural chase. Anthropologists would likely use the history DeLay relates to say that under one set of conditions, the Comanches spin themselves into a virtuous spiral—they hunt buffalo

when everyone can use buffalo meat and buffalo hides, and they raise horses when everyone values horses. Under another set of conditions the overhunted buffalo disappear, epidemics that the Comanches had previously escaped ravage the population, power dissipates, and the cycle turns vicious.

If the local ecology matters, so do events in the wider neighborhood. But anthropologists might also generalize well beyond the Comanches, and see this history as just another instance of the frictions and opportunities that migrations cause, with the Comanches (initially known as the Numunu) entering the southern plains because they weren't strong enough to stand their ground elsewhere, just as Lakota (Sioux) were pushed onto the northern plains once Ojibwa (Chippewa) could outgun them in the northern Midwest.

For both groups these migrations turned out to be fortuitous, at least for a while, and we can understand that because a broader reading into other peoples' history reveals similar patterns. For instance, the Zulu in South Africa were an obscure Nguni clan before

the British presence on the South African coast combined with a few other factors, like temporarily empty space and two strong personalities (Dingiswayo and Shaka Zulu), to propel them to regional dominance. Much the same can be said for the Turkana, who rose to prominence in northern Kenya thanks to disruptive events well beyond Turkana land. Then there's the Al-Wahhab-Al-Saud convergence in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia to consider, which, whatever else it did, privileged one set of tribes over others and did much to shape the political contours of the Persian Gulf as they exist today.

These days more Americans are likely to be familiar with the Wahhab-Saud connection and the significance of the oil/wealth/terrorism nexus than with any American Indian or African examples. Certainly, few Americans will likely be aware that tens of thousands of Comanches inhabited a domain known as Co-

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**War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids  
and the U.S.-Mexican War**

*by Brian DeLay*

Yale University Press, 496 pp., \$35

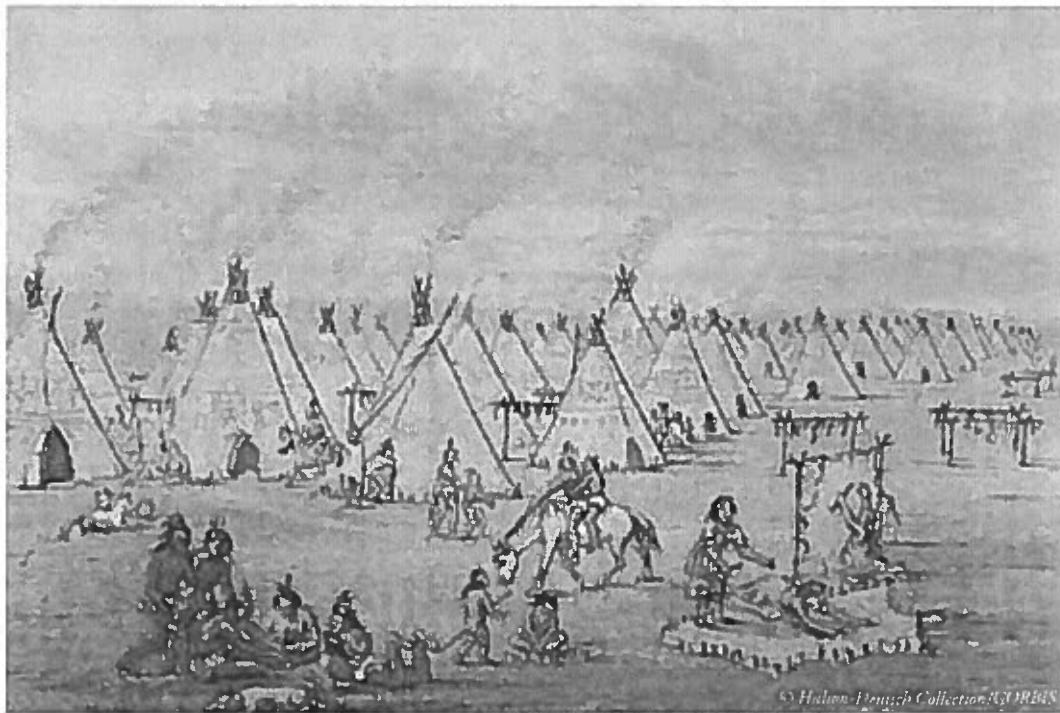
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**The Comanche Empire**

*by Pekka Hämäläinen*

Yale University Press, 512 pp., \$35

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Engraving of a Comanche village by George Catlin, 1844

mancheria that at its height stretched from Kansas southward into Zacatecas, or that Comanches commanded a disproportionate amount of wealth (horses) and terror in their day. Pekka Hämmäläinen, author of *The Comanche Empire*, means to set this record straight.

Hämmäläinen, an associate professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, wants us to appreciate the Comanches as “an interregional power with imperial presence.” His thesis is that “without fully recognizing it, the Spaniards, French, Mexicans, and Anglo-Americans were all restrained and overshadowed in the continent’s center” by this “indigenous empire.” Hämmäläinen pulls no punches: Mexico lost half its land base thanks to turmoil the Comanches stirred up. “Ultimately, the rise of the Comanche empire helps explain why Mexico’s Far North is today the American Southwest.”

Well, sort of. Comanche raiders did turn northern Mexico into “a thousand deserts”, as both he and DeLay make clear. But there were lots of actors in this drama, chief among them those pesky vectors critical to assembling history: timing, the effect of specific individuals and positioning. Northern Mexicans tried to warn authorities in Mexico City of impending doom

prior to 1848. As DeLay notes, they “argued passionately that their war against *los barbaros* could have consequences for the entire republic; that, like their Spanish predecessors, Mexico’s leaders should invest in the frontier to safeguard the country as a whole.” Unfortunately, authorities in the capital stayed disengaged until the mid-1840s, by which time their eventual response fell into the familiar category of “too little, too late.”

But was this a Comanche success or a Mexican failure? On the one hand, the Mexican government dismissed threats it didn’t consider significant, applying a certain logic as it did so. The borderlands were by definition a periphery and represented a buffer. Spain used them to thwart encroachment by other empires; Mexico retained them to protect greater wealth further south. So long as substantive population centers remained safe, this strategy must have seemed reasonable. On the other hand, Comanche depredations did raise serious social contract questions. As DeLay points out, there were

fundamental ambiguities in the Mexican national project. What were the rightful obligations and expectations of *mexicanos*? What constituted a *national crisis*? or a *national en-*

emy? What was the proper relationship of the national government to the states?

Mexicans had not sufficiently worked through these issues between independence in 1821 and the troubles of the 1840s. Centralists still bickered with federalists, and presidents rotated in and out of office thanks to elections and coups of various and sundry descriptions. Given so much churn and volatility, it is little wonder that the political elite in Mexico City preferred holding onto power close to the center rather than projecting it along the country's frontiers. Unfortunately, this permitted the Comanches to intensify their raiding.

It was this confluence—between bad timing and unfortunate positioning for northern Mexico and excellent timing and superb positioning for Comanches—that granted the United States an opening. This is a classic instance of inadvertence, though Americans at the time would have scoffed at the notion they were the beneficiaries of any such thing. Rather, as DeLay explains, “between 1836 and 1846, Americans formed a mental picture of the Mexican north as a place of enormous potential that the Mexicans had patently failed to redeem from independent Indians.” DeLay cites the Texas Creation Myth as “an important preliminary” to this attitude:

American settlers had been invited to redeem Texas from Indians in return for land and the blessings of good government. Texans insisted that they had lived up to their end of the bargain. They had, through great sacrifices and hardship, expelled the Indians and ‘made the desert smile.’ Thus, as one writer put it, ‘the lands of Texas, although nominally given, were in fact really and dearly bought.’ Mexico, on the other hand, had not delivered good government.

Such a 19<sup>th</sup>-century justification for the first war to be fought by Americans on foreign soil merits a brief pause, not just because liberation remains a slippery concept—liberate *what* for *whom*?—but because there are other ways to use this particular slice of history as a foil. It turns out that the history of the U.S. encounter with the Comanches and other Indian tribes is

not so distant and unrelated to current dilemmas as may at first seem.

For instance, the Indians who raided Mexico and turned *rancherías* into “deserts” received free passage through Texas. Doesn't that, in a weird way, make the United States circa the 1840s analogous to Pakistan today—with Texas as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Comanches as the Taliban? Well, again, sort of. But on closer examination this parallel doesn't really hold, not when a different set of comparisons come screaming off the page as soon as DeLay describes the U.S. occupation of northern Mexico:

[B]y the winter of 1846–47 the character of the occupation had changed. In response to a rebellion and some minor guerrilla activity, U.S. forces started disarming towns and villages, terrorizing Mexicans, and destroying settlements. In short, they adopted tactics that left many northern Mexicans even more vulnerable to their Indian enemies than before.

It's hard to read this and not think about recent operations in which the United States has once again been an occupying force.

A fainter echo of the present intrudes when one reflects that, just 13 years prior to the U.S. invasion of Mexico, Andrew Jackson tried to buy “Texas, most of New Mexico, the lower Rio Grande, and northern California.” James Polk himself made a similar offer, making quite clear that the U.S. desire to acquire parts of Mexico had been percolating for some time. What the Comanches' War of a Thousand Deserts did was finally enable Americans to realize these ambitions. Or as Hämäläinen bluntly insists: the Comanches (the terrorists of the day?) were key.

To be clear, Hämäläinen never once mentions terrorists or any set of contemporary non-state actors. But some readers might be drawn to make these comparisons themselves because Hämäläinen talks about the Comanches in such 21<sup>st</sup>-century terms. For instance, he places a heavy emphasis on what he calls the Comanches' “adaptive fluency.” For close to 400 pages he attributes Comanche power politics to their possession of a clear strategic vision. He is adamant they were not mere situational

opportunists. Yet his own extensive evidence tends to undermine this claim. As he so thoroughly demonstrates, Comanches made and broke alliances whenever it proved beneficial. They worked with or against the Spaniards and their Indian allies, with or against the French and their Indian allies, with or against the Mexicans and their Indian allies, and with or against the Americans and *their* Indian allies. (Describing all these switches back and forth is one reason Hämäläinen's book is so long.)

Such behavior was hardly unique to the Comanches. Numerous Indian tribes excelled at playing both ends against the middle whenever they encountered foreign rivals (including other tribes). But none confronted so many lucrative possibilities as the Comanches. Thanks to their pivotal location, the Spaniards, French, Mexicans and Americans all vied to secure the Comanches' good will, understanding that it was better to trade with them than have to work against them. As Hämäläinen reminds us, too, captives seized by the Comanches often preferred to remain Comanche, while lots of other Indians voluntarily became Comanches. That in and of itself is a testament to how much soft power they projected. Given their mobility and affluence, they represented the acme of Plains Indian life.

For more than a century the Comanches managed to keep ends (autonomy and a superlative lifestyle), ways (raiding and trading) and means (guns, horses and tribesmen) aligned; in this sense, they were indeed strategically astute. Yet no matter how adaptive they were to changing circumstances on their way up, they failed to make adjustments and avoid a precipitous fall. In truth, few groups successfully manage to adapt their way around impending doom. For the Comanches to have done so would have required real strategic vision and a different sense of timing. It would also have required a certain kind of leader who, in turn, would have needed a receptive audience. The catch-22 in the Comanche case is that no leader emerged who could turn the tribe into something other than what it was at a time when being Comanche promised so much license.

Tellingly, Hämäläinen credits specific Comanche leaders with shrewd diplomacy, but he

treats none as particularly singular. From an anthropological perspective this is congruent with the type of acephalous, or decentralized, society the Comanches were: lots of Indians, but no absolute chiefs. In this regard, they resemble many other nomadic peoples who typically come together and fall back apart depending on external circumstances. Indeed, most anthropologists would probably explain the Comanches' initial fusion and ultimate fission in these sociological terms. By contrast, historians might prefer to highlight specifically what did and did not occur. For instance, the sun, the moon and the stars never aligned to produce the right kind of seminal individual or individuals in time to spare the Comanches such a sharp decline. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive explanations. Instead, they simply point to the difference in orientation between concentrating on more or less predictable social structure versus contingency and inadvertence.

In the end, what *War of a Thousand Deserts* and *The Comanche Empire* offer is a sobering reminder of just how complicated all cross-cultural encounters become, and a pointed rejoinder that, although American Indians are the one set of non-Westerners we Americans should know most about, we clearly don't. If we don't appreciate such a long, fraught history with once-independent people here, how can we possibly expect to do better in our relationships with non-Westerners outside the United States?

Ironically—but then, American Indian history is full of ironies—there may be a silver lining in this history of chronic neglect. Because most Americans know so little about the impact of specific Indian tribes at specific turning points in our national history, it should be possible to get people to read (or watch footage) about the familiar present and, in the course of introducing them to the unfamiliar past, get them also to appreciate differences between *us* and *them*. What would make such an exercise doubly useful is that nothing humbles or elucidates quite like discovering how much more there is to a story that you think you already know. Nor is anything likely to build cross-cultural sensibilities faster—something

desperately needed by American soldiers and diplomats about to deploy abroad, never mind the political leaders responsible for sending them into the cross-cultural breach in the first place.

Another reason why such an exercise is worth engaging in is that it is one thing to be taught to pay attention to local social structure and customs. It is quite another to be reminded how history in cross-cultural encounters actually gets made, as individuals with distinct personalities and perspectives interact (or don't interact) depending on timing and good sense. In fact, that may be the ultimate structural lesson that *War of a Thousand Deserts* and *The Comanche Empire* teach. ☪

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