

PART III

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AMERICANS AND THE WORLD

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16

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

BRIAN DELAY

One of nineteenth-century North America's most consequential international events took place during the hot summer of 1840, on the Arkansas River. Representatives of half a dozen sovereign nations met for a summit to bury old grievances and commit to a future of peace and commerce. Over the next several days, thousands of men, women, and children arrived to celebrate the diplomatic breakthrough, settling into noisy, joyful camps for miles along a wide bottom of the Arkansas. Southern Cheyennes and Arapahos waded south across the river to accept hundreds of horses as presents from their former enemies. The next morning Kiowas, Kiowa Apaches, Yamparikas, and Kotsotekas (two of the four nations of the Comanche confederacy) made the trip in reverse to receive guns, ammunition, and other coveted manufactured goods. Dignitaries sat down to a meal sweetened with molasses from New Orleans and reflected on the dividends of their diplomacy. Alliance between the preeminent powers of the central and southern plains brought security to a vast portion of the mid-continent and created a dynamic commercial zone encompassing thousands of square miles. The Great Peace of 1840 would have far-reaching consequences for the continent's international system.

No one in Washington, DC noticed. The State Department offered no comment or analysis, nor did the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Congress convened no hearings, President Martin Van Buren made no mention of it in his annual message, and the nation's newspapers ran not a single story about the Great Peace. If a major American geopolitical event happened and no one in Washington knew or cared, could it really have been a major American geopolitical event?

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BRIAN DELAY

Until recently the answer from diplomatic historians was an implicit but unambiguous *no*. While a few argued that US relations with Indians were foreign relations, on the whole the field made little conceptual space for Indigenous-state relations and none for relations between Native polities. But today, to grasp how the world shaped America and America shaped the world, historians are venturing into contexts where the US government was marginal or altogether absent. Nowhere is this analytic move more overdue than in nineteenth-century North America, where state-centrism has led historians of American foreign relations to ignore a complex and deeply important international system.

In 1820 the United States enjoyed practical control over about a third of the area now covered by the contiguous states. While undeniably North America's emerging hegemon, the United States was still one power in an international system comprised mostly of Indigenous polities.<sup>1</sup> White observers often lumped them together into a single conceptual category, Indians. But a profound gulf of foreignness separated most Indigenous polities from one another. Consider language. The Puebloan peoples of present-day New Mexico and Arizona spoke tongues from four different language families. Seven language families were represented on the plains. Indigenous Californians, living in one of the most linguistically diverse places in world history, spoke between sixty-four and eighty mutually unintelligible languages. Indigenous cosmologies frequently posited separate acts of creation. Native communities often called themselves some version of "the people" or "the humans," consigning aliens to entirely different categories. All told, the differences dividing North American polities make Europeans look blandly homogeneous by comparison. Divided and different, Indigenous polities were nonetheless bound together in a shared international system.

Students of America and the world ought to care about that system. Westward expansion is an elemental fact of American history. To understand it we have to attend not only to the dynamics between the state, settler colonists, and Native people, but also to relations between Native polities. US expansion was not a long struggle with "the Indians"; it was a century-long, coercive engagement with a system comprised of hundreds of distinct, independent

<sup>1</sup> My conception of the international system draws upon exponents of the English School of international relations. They argued that international systems existed around the world since antiquity, and that they need not feature sovereign nation-states. Even the most open-minded writers in this tradition struggle to fully escape Eurocentrism, framing different kinds of societies in evolutionary terms and classifying relationships between band-organized polities as "pre-international systems." But the English School's insights can be fruitfully applied to nineteenth-century North America. For an overview, see Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford, 2000).

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

polities. These polities slowed settler colonialism, channeled it to some places and away from others, and extracted compromises that still have great significance today. And ultimately, US expansion depended on the studied exploitation of competition within this system. International relations between Indigenous polities therefore merit attention because they shaped a fundamental process in American history. But the deeper reason the topic matters is that it is American history. As historians of the United States and the world move further away from older definitions of the field, focused on English-speakers connected to state power, relations among the country's many peoples can finally be put at the center of the nineteenth-century story where they belong.

This chapter defines the rudimentary features of Native North America's international system between 1820–1900; offers examples of how diplomacy, commerce, and warfare connected sovereign peoples within that system; and surveys its transformations during conquest and the early reservation era. By 1820 Indigenous polities in eastern North America were more preoccupied with the US government than with each other, so this chapter will focus mostly (but not exclusively) on the trans-Mississippi West.

### Polity, Process, and Purpose

North America's international system had already undergone vast transformations for millennia prior to European contact. The great antiquity of the system, stark regional differences in ecology and resources, the scrambling, compounding transformations unleashed by the Columbian exchange, and the feverish competition that these transformations encouraged all contributed to great variety and dynamism in the continent's Indigenous political cultures. Meaningful analysis of Native politics requires attending closely to particular contexts, and to culturally specific processes of formulating and acting upon collective goals. Generalizations are likely to break down on close inspection. But especially in a short overview, generalizations are unavoidable if we wish to begin to understand the relevant units of North America's international system, their modes of decision-making and interaction, and the threats, opportunities, and resources that put the system in motion.

#### *Polity*

What, then, were the entities in Native North America that engaged in international relations? Policy toward outsiders could be forged and executed in four expanding contexts: residence group, band, tribe, and confederacy. Residence groups stayed together most of the year and were the primary



Map 16.1: Indigenous polities mentioned in text, c. 1830.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

political units in Native life. Most important decisions, particularly those concerning internal relations, labor, and seasonal movement, were made by residence groups. In resource-poor regions, such groups could be as small as a childless couple or a nuclear family. Typically, they consisted of anywhere from a dozen or even hundreds of people living in mobile extended families or fixed villages. Neighboring residence groups frequently identified as a larger community, a band. Band-level cooperation could be seasonal for non-sedentary peoples like Utes, or situational (activated when dealing with outsiders, for example), for groups of aligned villages, like the Yakima of present-day Washington State.

Language, kinship, descent groups, shared values, and a common sense of history, territory, and the sacred connected individuals across residence groups and bands. Rules about marriage encouraged and sustained these connections. Cheyennes of the central plains, for example, organized residence around the female line. Like some other plains societies, they practiced strict exogamy, forcing young men out from the band of their birth; maintained male soldier societies that recruited men from across the bands; and held a sacred, integrative annual gathering known as the Sun Dance. By forging purposeful political communities beyond residence groups or bands, Native peoples constituted tribes.

Sometimes, multiple tribes loosely coordinated foreign policy as confederacies. The most populous peoples on the plains around 1820 were divided into separate, closely confederated tribes. Comanches formed a confederacy comprised of 10–12,000 people who spoke the same language, divided into four closely-aligned tribes with overlapping territories. There were three tribes in the Blackfoot Confederacy that dominated the north-western plains with a total population of 30–45,000. The Sioux, with a rough population of 20–30,000, consisted of numerous tribes organized into three broad divisions: Santee (eastern), Yankton-Yanktonai (middle), and Lakota (western). Shared history, culture, and language obviously facilitated confederation, but, when interests aligned, alien peoples in California, the Columbia Plateau, the southern plains, and elsewhere established durable confederacies, too. Some of the most storied Indigenous confederations were temporary, born out of emergencies and catalyzed by prophetic leadership. The best known were anticolonial movements: Metacom's War (1675), the Pueblo Revolt (1680), Pontiac's War (1763), and the Pan-Indian movement inspired by Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh in the 1810s. Crisis confederation marked the climax of the Plains Wars later in the century.

*Process*

Within and across residence groups, bands, tribes, and confederacies, Indigenous peoples formulated and enforced foreign policy in numerous ways. Horticultural polities in particular often maintained elaborate political cultures. The five bands of the Osages, for example, each had two chiefs of identical power who governed internal relations with the help of ten lieutenants chosen from specific clans. But paramount authority and decisions about war and peace belonged to a council of "little old men," who, through a demanding training regime, had mastered a corpus of ritual knowledge. As with most peoples of the Pacific Northwest, Suquamish, Puyallup, and other Southern Coast Salish villages consisted of elites, commoners, and the enslaved. Kinship, trade, and carefully orchestrated ceremonies like the Potlatch bound villages together. But village heads managed relations with outsiders.

Institutional complexity and formal hierarchy were not preconditions to regional power. Apaches were divided into five tribes (Jicarilla, Lipan, Mescalero, Chiricahua, and Western Apache), each further subdivided into named bands with overlapping territories. Yet the five tribes did not confederate. Indeed, tribes and even bands mattered far less to Apache political life than they did to most populous Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless Apaches used their resolutely local political culture to dominate a huge swath of the present-day US-Mexican borderlands for centuries after contact. Apaches managed this through decentralization and through the passive but potent benefits of non-aggression. Solidarities of language, kinship, shared history, culture, and values could occasionally inspire collective action. But most of the time these affinities simply inspired confidence that Apaches would not hurt each other. That confidence produced a zone of peace and trade that enabled tremendous freedom of movement and made it possible for relatively small groups of warriors to execute ambitious plans against outsiders.

Notwithstanding their great variety, most Indigenous polities shared two fundamental characteristics. The first was a profound commitment to personal freedom. Since contact, colonial agents had found themselves baffled and frustrated by the unwillingness of Native leaders to control their own people through physical coercion. This deep aversion to in-group violence (including the violence of involuntary confinement or extradition) encouraged a politics of consensus. Internal disagreements over policy were to be resolved not through executive fiat or bare majoritarian rule, but through laborious consultation, respectful debate, and nonviolent persuasion. Even in

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

societies with robust political offices and relatively elaborate systems of governance, decision-makers had to remain attentive to public opinion. Social hierarchies of various kinds, patron-client dynamics, age and gender roles all exerted soft coercion in political debate and helped make consensus achievable, even routine. But the threat of physical violence seldom played a role.

The commitment to freedom and, by extension, consensus, encouraged the second fundamental characteristic of Indigenous politics: dynamism. The West's most preposterous misconception about Indigenous societies was that they were timeless; that compared to ever-changing Europe, Indians were a "people without history." On the contrary, Native North Americans had gone through revolutionary changes since peopling the Americas, changes that only accelerated after contact. Often those changes resulted in political transformation. In part because few Native polities legitimated the ultimate political backstop of physical coercion, irreconcilable disputes over policy or leadership easily lead to fissure, secession, and the reconstitution of political community.

For dozens of the continent's Indigenous polities, empire compelled political change. Coastal California had undergone wrenching changes by 1820: 70,000 people had been baptized, and the survivors of a half century of ecological and epidemic revolutions crowded into twenty unhealthy missions. Older but subtler colonial compromises prevailed in New Mexico. The tribal polities of the nineteen surviving Pueblo villages in the Upper Rio Grande Valley had long since installed secular "governors" to mediate relations with the Spanish. Religious leaders continued to wield paramount authority in all of the Pueblos, but Spain (and then Mexico, after 1821) effectively commandeered Pueblo foreign policy.

Still absorbing the grim implications of the War of 1812, nearly all Indigenous polities east of the Mississippi had also been forced to make painful concessions to empire. Cherokees shifted power away from families and villages to newly democratic and coercive kinds of tribal governance. They embraced a central government with offices for a principal and deputy chief; a national police force and the legal suppression of private vengeance; a bicameral legislature and a supreme court; and a Constitution formalizing most of these changes in 1827. Like other Indigenous polities east of the Mississippi, Cherokees adapted to colonialism. Their new constitution made no provision for relations with foreign nation-states or Indigenous polities, only for interactions with the US government.<sup>2</sup> But as the coming decades

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Articles 1 and 19 of the 1827 Cherokee Constitution. For a transcript, see <https://tsla.tnsosfiles.com/digital/teva/transcripts/33638.pdf>, accessed January 4, 2021.

BRIAN DELAY

would make clear, even colonized Indigenous polities could be faced with momentous foreign policy dilemmas.

### *Purpose*

Then as now, control over space was the paramount concern in Indigenous foreign policy. Physical security obviously depended on control over space. Collective identities were rooted in places, in landscapes infused with histories of shared struggle, mutual sacrifice, and divine sanction. Native nations had precise understandings of their own territorial boundaries, boundaries they monitored, regulated, and defended. Some Indigenous territorial markers can still be seen today, as with the petroglyphs and bent saplings (now aged and improbably bent trees) that Comanches made in their southern plains' homeland. Foreign visitors required permission, escorts, or sometimes special objects that served as passports conferring and signaling safe passage. Place and boundaries preoccupied Indigenous foreign relations because control over space determined access to resources: inanimate trade goods, animal harvests, domestic animals, and enslaved laborers.

By 1820, a huge range of manufactured commodities pulsed across the continent, over routes ancient and new. Trade routes linked permanent international commercial centers that predated European contact: at The Dalles in present-day Oregon; Zuni and Pecos Pueblos; and Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara villages near the Missouri. Dakotas, Comanches, and Shoshones operated sprawling seasonal trade centers in their home territories. Euro-American firms added more than 140 trade posts to the network during the nineteenth century. Through these routes and hubs flowed metal goods (such as kettles, blades, and tools); textiles; exotic foods and spices; dyes and paints; tobacco; alcohol; and, of greatest strategic importance, firearms and ammunition. Those without steady access to guns, including many peoples of the Great Basin and interior California, remained painfully vulnerable to armed outsiders. In contrast, steady access to firearms conferred terrible advantages. The Blackfoot Confederacy for example made the maintenance of a weapons gap the centerpiece of their foreign policy in the early nineteenth century. They used market power and violence to disrupt arms flows to neighbors and ensure British and American firms gave them privileged access to weapons.

Most Native consumers obtained manufactured goods in return for processed pelts and skins. Beaver and otter pelts continued to be prized in global markets. But because these animal populations are so fragile and prone to collapse, the fur trade produced intense cycles of boom and bust. In the

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

Pacific Northwest, for example, the sea otter trade had ushered in a dizzying generation of prosperity for a handful of coastal Nuu-chah-nulth villages. Flush with trade goods, particularly arms and ammunition, these polities reordered the regional balance of power until otter stocks collapsed by the 1820s. Throughout the mid-continent, bison engendered territorial competition for reasons that still had more to do with basic needs than market pressure. Fully nomadic peoples like Cheyennes relied on bison for most of their calories, clothing, tools, shelter, and trade. They undertook costly, dangerous, prolonged campaigns to invade new hunting territories, displace rivals, and protect hunting grounds. Though subsistence remained the focus early in the century, commercial hunting accelerated with the westward expansion of the US market economy by the 1830s. Few at the time believed the seemingly innumerable bison could ever falter like otter or beaver populations.

Along with manufactured goods and animal harvests, domestic animals injected great energy and competition into North America's international system. Acculturation, market pressure, loss of territory, and faltering deer populations had all encouraged Native adoption of cattle, horses, mules, and pigs east of the Mississippi by 1820. In the Southwest, sheep pastoralism brought Navajos new forms of wealth but also social stratification and bloody grazing conflicts with neighbors. Above all, horses transformed Native life. Indispensable for mobility, defense, war-making, and hunting, by the 1820s horses had also become deeply woven into the social fabric of plains societies. Male status depended on successes in hunting and war that became impossible without horses, and advantageous marriages usually required horses as bride-price. Bitter winters put a climactic ceiling on herd size, making them far larger on the southern plains (where the average Comanche or Kiowa family had perhaps thirty-five horses and mules) than in the north (where most Blackfoot families had fewer than five horses). These regional differences combined with inequalities internal to each society to nurture a plains-wide masculine culture lionizing horse theft. Thefts led to reprisals; and reprisals contributed to war. All the while, the proliferation of horse herds quietly taxed the riverine ecosystems that bison depended on in winter and helped prepare the plains for a mid-century crisis.

Captive labor was a final major source of competition between North America's Indigenous polities. No Native polity was as dependent upon slave labor as, say, South Carolina, where more than half of the population was enslaved. But slavery mattered a great deal in parts of Native North America. The Northwest Coast probably had the continent's most thoroughgoing

system of Indigenous slavery in the early nineteenth century, with bound laborers comprising as much as a quarter of the population. Captives could be taken in war, seized in raids, or purchased in regional markets. On the opposite side of the continent, in 1835 around 8 percent of families owned the 1,592 enslaved people of African descent in Cherokee country.<sup>3</sup> In much of the Great Basin, unarmed Paiutes were frequent victims of slave raids from well-armed and mounted Utes and Shoshones. Nearly all plains peoples acquired captives through war or trade. Even as it fueled conflict, captivity could also facilitate diplomacy, alliance, and international commerce. Captives possessed linguistic skills and cultural knowledge that could be mobilized to shift regional dynamics in mutually advantageous ways. These functions usually fell to women and children, the typical victims of captivity's cruel journey.

### Shocks to the System before 1848

More than a patchwork of polities interacting with immediate neighbors, nineteenth-century North America was a dynamic, integrated system. External shocks had a special power to illuminate systemic connections. While the United States enjoyed limited practical authority in the trans-Mississippi West before 1848, it was undeniably the major source of external shocks. Directly or, more often, indirectly, forces emanating from the United States rearranged basic facts upon which Indigenous foreign relations had been predicated. Nowhere was this more obvious than on the plains, where in the 1830s and 1840s external shocks laid bare systemic connections and enabled two great Indigenous powers to transform the international system from the subarctic to the Tropic of Cancer.

#### *The 1837–1838 Smallpox Epidemic and Lakota Hegemony*

Nothing, not even war, could upend the landscape of power and vulnerability with such sickening speed as epidemic disease. By the 1830s, pockmarked grandparents could recall the great smallpox pandemic half a century earlier, a demographic cataclysm that may have reduced the overall population of the West by a third. Cholera, streptococcal infections, influenza, measles, whooping cough, and malaria also raged through Native societies. Syphilis became endemic in coastal California and parts of the Northwest, leading to

<sup>3</sup> Duane H. King, "Cherokee in the West: History since 1776," in William Sturtevant and Raymond Fogelson, eds., *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, DC, 2004), XIV, 363.

Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900



Map 16.2: Lakota expansion and Comanche raiding campaigns, 1830s–1840s.

plummeting birthrates and dwindling, childless communities. Epidemiological disasters hurt some more than others, presenting opportunities for the comparatively fortunate to move against rivals.

## BRIAN DELAY

Sometime in the middle of May 1837, three Arikara women contracted smallpox aboard the steamboat *St. Peter's* on the Missouri River. The vessel stopped at the Sioux agency, and within a few weeks dying Yankton and Santee Sioux were "scattered into small parties and flying in alarm." On June 19, the steamboat reached Fort Clark. Remarkably, the three Arikaras had survived the worst. They disembarked to seek kin who had recently resettled among the nearby Mandan villages, but they were still contagious. What followed was one of the most nightmarish experiences in the continent's recorded history. "I Keep no a/c of the dead," wrote the numbed clerk at Fort Clark, "as they die so fast it is impossible." On June 25, the *St. Peter's* docked at Fort Union, which had dozens of Native and non-Native occupants. Within two weeks, one dumbstruck observer remarked that "there was such a stench in the fort that it could be smelt at a distance of 300 yards."<sup>4</sup> International connections became death sentences. A luckless group of Blackfoot horse thieves quarreled with infected trappers outside the fort's walls and brought the smallpox back to their families. Soon after, a party of Assiniboine hunters returned to fetch kin inside the fort. Though warned away, they angrily refused to leave until they were shown one of their boys, his face a congealed mask of blisters. They fled, bringing the disease home with them.

The epidemic of 1837–8 produced unimaginable turmoil and despair. The Blackfoot and Assiniboine both seem to have lost as many as two-thirds of their people. The epidemic killed a third of all Hidatsas, half of the Arikaras, and, unforgivingly, nine out of ten Mandans. Overall, the epidemic may have reduced the total population of the northern plains by half. The imagination staggers when trying to work through the implications of such a catastrophe. But the implications for the regional balance of power are easier to grasp; they favored the Sioux.

Though some of their bands suffered grievously, mobility and a dispersed population spared the Sioux from the worst of the epidemic. Moreover, a generation of conquest and expansion gave them particular advantages. By 1837, Oglala and Brulé Sioux had invaded lands southwest of the Missouri River and were thus away from the epidemic's primary path. Meanwhile many Yanktons, Yanktonais, and Tetons, who continued to dominate most of the Missouri trade route, were saved by a special dividend of their position: inoculation. In 1832 doctors sent by the Office of Indian Affairs inoculated

<sup>4</sup> Clyde D. Dollar, "The High Plains Smallpox Epidemic of 1837–38," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (January 1977): 15–38. Quotes are from pages 21 and 29.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

more than 1,000 Sioux against smallpox, but no monies had been appropriated to extend the program north to the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras.

As for these villagers, their prostration before the epidemic was itself connected to ongoing Sioux aggression. Lakotas had been encroaching since the 1780s, when smallpox turned dozens of confident villages on the upper Missouri into a battered, fearful few. Sioux warriors barred villagers from the best hunting grounds; and used diplomacy and violence to limit their external trade. In 1832 Lakotas drove the Arikaras out of the region entirely, forcing them to relocate south near the Skidi Pawnees. It took Arikaras five years before they dared venture back to the Missouri, and by the time they returned the *St. Peter's* was already making its heartbreaking way up the river. The Mandan villages would not have been so thoroughly depopulated if their inhabitants had not been starving or if they had been able to take flight. But Norway rats (like smallpox, another foreign import, from Asia via England and St. Louis) had infested their subterranean corn stores, and watchful Lakotas prevented Mandans from reaching bison or waiting out the epidemic on the plains. Other, more distant enemies also seemed cursed by their rivalry with Sioux. In the autumn of 1837, Skidi Pawnees attacked a band of infected Oglala. The Pawnee returned triumphantly to their village with twenty Oglala captives who were only just beginning to show symptoms. Over the next several weeks, smallpox would kill around 2,500 Pawnees, perhaps a third of their total population.

Lakotas were now poised to consolidate their hegemony over the northern plains. When hungry Omahas, Otoe-Missourias, and Poncas from the prairies ventured onto the plains, Sioux warriors attacked them on their journeys and raided their unguarded villages. All three peoples quit the plains for good. To the southwest, Lakotas completed a decades-long campaign to wrest the Black Hills from rivals. Now much reduced from smallpox and cholera, the once-mighty Crows were forced out of the coveted Laramie plains. Kiowas, Arapahos, and Cheyennes retreated south. Depopulation and a catastrophic military loss to the Sioux in 1839 forced the Skidi Pawnees to abandon the Platte hunting grounds to their hated enemies. Ceaseless conflict with the Sioux left nearly two Pawnee women for every Pawnee man. Further west, Lakotas began to encroach on Ute and Shoshone territory, and in the north, they challenged Métis, Plains Cree, and Assiniboines. Few could resist them.

“The Yankee has always believed in intervention,” enthused one of America’s mid-century boosters, “for he has been everywhere. Where is *not* the Yankee, instead of where is he? He is everywhere.” Yankees, the

BRIAN DELAY

would-be masters of the trans-Mississippi West, among other places, were not the only people on the continent with an expansive, even universal sense of entitlement to space. When Iron Nation, a Brulé chief, was asked by American commissioners where his counterpart Frog lived, he gave an answer that only another hegemon could understand: “Everywhere; wherever he is.”<sup>5</sup>

*External Pressures and the Reconstitution of Comanche  
Foreign Policy*

In the early 1830s, Comanches and their Kiowa and Kiowa Apache allies were hemmed in by audacious enemies. They had longstanding quarrels with Lipan Apaches to the south, and with Utes to the northwest. Their unmatched horse wealth attracted raiders from across the plains. During the late 1820s Southern Cheyennes and Arapahos had helped push the regular Comanche range south of the Arkansas River, and they soon began plundering Comanche and Kiowa herds. Osages did the same from the east, often with spectacular violence. Like some other plains peoples, Kiowas maintained visual accounts of their history painted on bison hides. These *sai-cut* (calendars) memorialized two events each year, one in winter and one in summer, and survive as indispensable records of what Kiowas themselves regarded as important. The summer of 1833, the “summer that they cut off their heads,” refers to an attack when Osage raiders decapitated several Kiowas – men, women, and children – dropping their heads into brass trade buckets for kin to discover later.

As threatening as these old enemies remained, other, even more dangerous newcomers were arriving every day. Before Andrew Jackson’s army forced tens of thousands of Native peoples west of the Mississippi at gunpoint, thousands of others had despaired for their future in the Southeast and migrated west on their own. The mass migrations taxed regional resources and fueled bitter quarrels on the southern plains. By 1830 US newspapers reported “a kind of exterminating war” between Cherokees, Shawnees, Delawares, and others against the Comanches and their allies.<sup>6</sup> In 1832, twenty-nine well-armed Koasati Indians (a division of the Upper Creeks)

<sup>5</sup> Quote of Rev. Mr. Osgood at the Annual Dinner of the New England Society, New York City, December 23, 1851, in *Report of the Annual Dinner of the New England Society in the City of New York; at the Astor House* (New York: George F. Nesbitt and Co, 1852), 20 (emphasis original); Iron Nation quote is in Pekka Hämäläinen, “Reconstructing the Great Plains: The Long Struggle for Sovereignty and Dominance in the Heart of the Continent,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 4 (November 2016): 481–509, p. 499.

<sup>6</sup> *Texas Gazette* (San Felipe de Austin), June 12, 1830.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

fought 150 Comanches, apparently killing or wounding upwards of one-half. A year later another Creek party reportedly brought back seventy scalps from Comanche country.

Surrounded by formidable enemies on multiple frontiers, Comanches found themselves increasingly dependent on Mexicans to their west and south. Neither as generous nor as dangerous as New Spain had been, independent Mexico nonetheless provided trade outlets where Comanches and their allies could exchange dressed skins, bear grease, horses, mules, and captives for agricultural and manufactured goods. As long as they had to fear enemies to their north and east, these markets had to be protected.

Trapped in a status quo of economic decline and territorial insecurity, the southern plains confederacy flipped the regional dynamic by making peace with Native enemies, and enemies of Mexican allies. The transition came in three stages. First, starting in 1834 Comanches, Kiowas, and their Wichita neighbors began making peace with Osages and migrants from the east, including Delawares, Senecas, and Cherokees. The diplomatic negotiations had been brokered partly by the US government, which saw ongoing violence as an impediment to continued removal. Former adversaries offered southern plains Indians conduits into the US market, and in return they could provide the horses and mules necessary to rebuilding lives west of the Mississippi. Within months of this breakthrough, hundreds of Comanche and Kiowa raiders were plundering horses and mules throughout Chihuahua. The diplomatic breakthrough had encouraged these attacks in three ways: by making it safer for southern plains men to leave their families and herds to attend raiding campaigns; by rendering the Mexican trade largely unnecessary; and by opening up a vast new market for the horses and mules that Mexicans possessed in even greater abundance than Comanches themselves.

Campaigns remained confined to Chihuahua, in large part because Mexican Texas still acted as a check against raids below the lower Rio Grande. In Texas, Mexican authorities had the capacity to do what they found practically impossible anywhere else: invade the plains and menace Comanche and Kiowa families where they lived. That capacity vanished in 1836 when Anglo-American separatists defeated a Mexican army and established the Republic of Texas. That precipitated the second major realignment: unafraid of Mexican reprisals, Comanches and Kiowas launched devastating raiding campaigns into the states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Sometimes comprising a thousand mounted men or more, these attacks wrecked the rural economy of northeastern Mexico and brought newfound wealth to the southern plains. But then raids began

BRIAN DELAY

to slack by the late 1830s, as enemies from the central plains made campaigning increasingly dangerous. The Kiowa Calendar testifies to the mounting violence of these years. "The summer that the Cheyenne were massacred" (1837) was followed by the "winter that they dragged the head," and the "summer that the Cheyenne attacked the camp on Wolf River," an attack that claimed hundreds of lives.

Then came the third and final major realignment, the Great Peace of 1840 on the Arkansas River. Over the 1830s, Southern Cheyennes and Arapahos had embraced the commercial hide trade, thanks to their intimate relations with the Bent Brothers, a St. Louis firm that had established a bustling trade post on the Arkansas. Ongoing conflict with Comanches and Kiowas had made it dangerous to hunt bison between the Arkansas and Platte Rivers. Peace meant unmolested access to this region, now bison-rich, and a secure trade for all the horses they could use. As for southern plains Indians, peace brought new market outlets and the security necessary to expand their campaigns into Mexico. From 1840 through 1847, they sent twice as many raiding parties south as in the previous eight years, and dramatically broadened the area of their operations, into the states of Durango, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí.

As northern Mexico sunk into insecurity and deepening poverty, most southern plains Indians experienced peace and prosperity. By the early 1840s Comanches and their allies had nearly eliminated organized threats to their physical security. A violent, harried landscape only a decade before, the southern plains had become a plunderers' bazaar, dotted with new trading outposts at its margins and crisscrossed by Cheyennes, Arapahos, New Mexicans, Osages, Cherokees, Missourians, Creeks, Delawares, Texans, and Shawnees, all bartering for hides processed by southern plains women, and horses, mules, and captives seized from Mexico by southern plains men.

Shocks emanating from the United States powerfully influenced the transformation of Comanche foreign policy, but the lines of causation ran both ways. By inflicting such huge damage on Mexico, Comanches contributed to the poverty, despair, and political fragmentation that facilitated the US conquest in 1846–7. By so dramatically defying a modern nation-state, Comanches handed Anglo-Americans the rhetorical and ideological arguments they needed to frame the dismemberment of Mexico as an act of salvation. In transferring half of Mexico's national territory to the United States, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ushered in a new epoch, when US involvement in the foreign affairs of the West's Indigenous polities ceased to be primarily indirect or accidental.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

### Relations between Indigenous Polities in the Era of American Conquest

In the generation after the US-Mexican War, the shadow of conquest and colonialism fell across every Indigenous polity in the West. The timing and consequences varied place to place, and people to people. But everywhere that the state and its settler colonists charged into Native life, they encountered international relationships that conditioned what happened next.

Some of the most complicated and high-stakes problems in Indigenous foreign policy unfolded in Indian Territory. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act carved the two new territories out of Indian Territory. Native peoples who had earlier been forcibly resettled there from the Midwest, including Shawnees, Delawares, Miamis, Kickapoos, and others, came under immense pressure to move yet again to the newly reduced Indian Territory (approximately present-day Oklahoma). Kaws, Osages, Pawnees, and other prairie villagers were also pressured to sell. Almost all of them did, eventually. Then came delicate negotiations about moving south with the main landowners in Indian Territory – Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and especially Cherokees.

While these painful re-expulsions were still in their early stages, eleven American states seceded from the Union, created their own confederacy, and made formal diplomatic overtures to the main polities in Indian Territory. The Civil War compelled Indigenous people there to side with the Union, or the Confederacy, or claim neutrality. All three choices were disasters. The Civil War reopened wounds from the removal era. Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles divided internally over the war, rearranged into Union and Confederate camps, and battered away at one another with the help of soldiers in blue or gray. Bouts of flight and privation, private vendettas, years of guerrilla warfare, and the occasional formal battle together took a far higher proportional toll in Indian Territory than in the South. A postwar census showed that the Cherokee population had shrunk by a third. The victorious Union government stripped Confederate Creeks and Seminoles of much of their land in Indian Territory. Yet despite it all, in 1870 representatives from throughout Indian Territory met as a general council to petition for a Native American state. Congress refused, but the request was a sign of confederacy's enduring appeal.

Meanwhile, half-a-million overland migrants tore through Native country on their way to the Northwest, California, and Utah. Once they got where they were going, overwhelmed and outgunned Native polities faced the loss of land and property, harassment, attacks, sickness, resource collapse, slave

## BRIAN DELAY

raids, the abduction of their children, and, in California and parts of the Northwest, state-backed genocide. The vast majority of settler colonists only passed through the plains during the 1850s and 1860s. But their hundreds of thousands of ravenous animals degraded the riverine habitats that bison and horses depended on in winter. Already dangerously undermined by habitat destruction and decades of the hide trade, bison populations collapsed around the plains. And in the midst of all these pressures, Native peoples faced recurring epidemics and military campaigns from settler colonists and their government's army. Combined, these interlocked threats put terrific stress on the ties that bound Native polities together.

But there was another, less obvious solvent eating away at Indigenous polities in these painful years: American unreliability. For conflict to be avoided or ended, promises had to be made; promises that Native leaders could try and convince their people to accept through the laborious work of persuasion and consensus building. Yet Americans had earned their reputation for breaking promises. Sometimes they did so through deliberate deception. For example, the Seminole leader Osceola, the Walla Walla chief Piupiumaksmaks, and the great Apache headman Mangas Coloradas were all captured after coming into parlay under a flag of truce. Other key leaders, the Lakota Crazy Horse most infamously, were murdered in captivity.

Americans charged with interacting with Indians seemed structurally incapable of keeping important promises, or of protecting Native people and their interests from other white Americans. Over and over again, solemn treaty terms would be broken in years, or months. Venality, corruption, and incompetence were seldom disqualifying characteristics for the men hired to manage day-to-day Indian relations. When able and honorable Indian agents and military officers tried to stop settler colonists from committing the most outrageous abuses, they were frequently overruled by superiors, territorial politicians, or mob rule. Effective advocates made enemies. Indian agent Jim Neighbors, hated by most Texans because of his evenhanded work on behalf of Comanches, was shot in the back in broad daylight in Belknap in 1859. Known to everyone, his killer never faced trial. On those occasions when white murderers and mass killers did go to court, juries almost always acquitted them. During the spring of 1871 in Arizona Territory, a mixed force of Americans, Mexicans, and O'odhams massacred 144 unarmed Apaches, almost all of them women and children. Only threats from President Ulysses S. Grant compelled territorial authorities to convene a trial. It took nineteen minutes for the jury to find the defendants not guilty.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

Unable to convince followers that white Americans would or could honor promises, many political leaders lost influence. Before mid-century, for example, Southern Cheyenne politics had been dominated by hereditary council chiefs who led individual bands. Serious military activities took place in summer, when the Cheyennes could gather as a tribe and reconvene the soldier societies responsible for war-making. But unlike most enemies, US soldiers often attacked in winter when Cheyenne society was most atomized and vulnerable. Some began to advocate for keeping the military societies together year-round. The collapse of bison on the central plains in the 1860s compounded these calls, because bands became increasingly dependent on raiding to survive. Council Chiefs tried to hold their communities together and usually argued that the Americans had to be accommodated. Contemptuous of the notion that their enemies would negotiate in good faith, men began to peel their families away from existing residence bands and live year-round with their military societies. Their skepticism would be reinforced when Americans massacred dozens of people living peacefully under prominent council chiefs, first in 1864 at Sand Creek and again in 1868 at the Washita River.

Despite these divisive changes in Native politics, confederation remained a common theme in the era of American conquest, whether in aspiration, rumor, or reality. In California, the threat of Pan-Indian responses to the unfolding genocide sent panics through white communities and served as pretexts for still more murdering and enslavement. The ex-mission neophyte Antonio Garra seemed poised to constitute such a Pan-Indian movement in 1851, when he worked to rally Cupeños, Cahuillas, Ipais, Quechans, and Luiseños against white Americans in southern California; but the alliance struggled to cohere and Garra was captured and killed.

Confederation proved more successful on the plains. In the south, Comanches remained closely allied with Kiowas, Kiowa Apaches, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahos. While their massive raiding campaigns had dwindled by the late 1850s, the allies seized new opportunities in the era of Reconstruction. The victorious federal government used its newfound leverage to promise southern plains Indians a large reservation, notwithstanding howls of protests from Texas. The southern plains confederacy enjoyed a brief economic revival plundering hundreds of thousands of cattle from Texas and selling them in New Mexico and Colorado, before the collapse of the bison and a determined military campaign confined the last hungry hold-outs to reservations in 1875.

## BRIAN DELAY

To the north, Lakotas continued to rely on each other, and on their northern Cheyenne and Arapaho allies, even as they fractured over policy. In 1856, one year after the army massacred nearly a hundred conciliatory Sioux at Ash Hollow, Lakota held an exceedingly rare gathering of most of their constituent tribes in hopes of unifying foreign policy. Between 5–10,000 attended, an inspiring show of force that few among them had ever witnessed. One participant later remembered how his people's "hearts felt strong at seeing how numerous they were."<sup>7</sup> The council decided to refuse any more treaties, forbid the construction of roads or the travel of whites through their territory (save traders), and seize new hunting territory from their Crow enemies. These policies prevailed for several years, though a number of band leaders opened negotiations, concluding that continued resistance to the United States would ruin their people.

In 1862, Dakota in Minnesota responded to treaty violations and settler encroachment by killing hundreds of whites. Swift US retaliation culminated in the largest mass execution in American history, pushed refugees into Lakota country, and sparked a general conflict with most Sioux. Soon after, the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho allies at Sand Creek widened the gulf between the defiant and the conciliatory. Militants attacked Lakota who accepted government rations, and they tried to transcend their decentralized political culture. Several thousand attended a ceremony conferring pan-tribal leadership on the holy man Sitting Bull and the warrior leaders Gall and Crazy Horse. The coalition's signal victory at Little Big Horn on the centenary of the Declaration of Independence underscored the enduring potency of Indigenous solidarity, even as it catalyzed the federal determination and resources necessary to confine all plains people to policed reservations.

Coalitions are good evidence that North America remained an international system even after the Civil War, but collaborations are even better evidence. Throughout its century-long conquest of North America, the United States relied upon Indigenous people to help it subdue Indigenous people. Kit Carson famously guided American forces in their devastating campaigns against Navajos in the 1860s, but Pueblos and Utes played more important roles tracking and fighting. When Chief Joseph and several hundred Nez Perce made their astonishing northward flight from the US military in 1877, they discovered to their dismay that Crows with whom they hoped to find shelter were scouting for the Americans. The decentralized Chiricahua Apaches bitterly disagreed over continued resistance, and as a consequence the army could rely on Chiricahua

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jeffery Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and US Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (Cambridge, 2004), 42.

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

scouts in their campaigns against Geronimo and his followers in the 1880s. In no campaign did the United States find more eager Native partners than in its subjugation of the mighty Lakota. Pawnees, Crows, Arikaras, and Shoshones all helped American forces defeat the Sioux. Their warriors played important roles in battle. But above all they helped guide the army to Lakota camps and deny survivors the food and supplies they needed to survive winter. Collaboration could sometimes pay dividends in the form of resources, treaty terms, and even landholdings. But it is also true that all of the Native peoples who helped the US Army defeat its most formidable Indigenous adversary had suffered tremendously at the hands of Lakotas. Their decisions to align with the imperial United States were defiant and vengeful acts of foreign policy.

Though the United States came to exert an irresistible gravitational pull on the continent's international system after the Civil War, rival Indigenous polities continued to contest one another even in the twilight of their independence. Gold miners swarmed Blackfoot country by the 1860s, as mounting conflict, sickness, and deprivation ate away at the confederacy that had long dominated the northwestern plains. In 1869–70 smallpox killed as much as a third of their remaining population. This calamity was quickly followed by a savage winter and a series of failed bison hunts. Then, in a routine act of cruelty and stupidity, American soldiers pursuing a murderer attacked the wrong camp. They killed 173 Blackfoot, seized 500 horses, burned the camp and all its supplies, and released scores of traumatized survivors onto the freezing plains. Tribal leaders successfully argued for forbearance, insisting that it would be madness to fight the army while they still had to fear Lakotas. Instead, that October they turned their pain and their energy upon Crees and Assiniboines who had just invaded Blackfoot territory in a misbegotten attempt to exploit their rivals' misfortunes. On the 25th of that month, Blackfoot warriors killed 200–300 of their old adversaries in a victory that would be remembered for generations.

There were no Indians in Blackfoot country, not even in the 1870s with the hammer-blows of American conquest falling all around. There were only insiders and outsiders, kin, allies, and enemies, moving in solidarity and competition within an unforgiving international system.

### Indigenous Foreign Relations in the Reservation Era

By the early 1880s, the government could use hunger and violence to impose sweeping changes upon Native polities throughout its continental empire.

## BRIAN DELAY

Late nineteenth-century Indian policy's two top priorities, not always compatible, were destroying all forms of Indigenous solidarity that did not conform to Anglo-American gender and family norms and transferring most of the still-substantial Indian estate to white owners.

Congress passed several measures designed to make Native politics more coercive and more compliant to Washington. In 1878, it authorized Indian police forces in the reservations and charged them with enforcing assimilation policy. In 1883, Congress authorized Indian agents to appoint Courts of Indian Offenses. Traditional political and religious leaders were a special focus of the police and courts. Two years later, Congress passed the Major Crimes Act, giving states and territories jurisdiction over certain crimes committed by reservation Indians. Champions of assimilation forced thousands of Native children into boarding schools. In 1887 Congress passed the Dawes Act to shatter tribal land into parcels, allot some to individuals and household heads, and sell the "surplus" to whites. Thirteen years later, total Native landholdings had declined by 43 percent across the country.

Indigenous people adapted to and survived these dark times partly by drawing inspiration, support, and energy across tribal lines. Sometimes the very institutions of assimilation helped them do this. In the late nineteenth century, for example, workers from Indigenous polities across the northern plains journeyed to the Crow Reservation to engage in wage labor on a huge irrigation project called the Crow Irrigation Survey. The United States Indian Service (today's Bureau of Indian Affairs) hired Native Americans first as laborers, and by the 1890s as white collar professionals. Their movement from place to place could encourage cross-tribal relationships and cooperation. Similarly, the searing boarding school experience brought together young people from different tribes and forged relationships that would have personal and political implications in later years. Formal education also equipped more and more Native youth with bilingualism, literacy, numeracy, and other tools that would eventually help their peoples defend collective interests and deepen pan-tribal connections.

More than anything else, pan-tribal religious movements connected Indigenous people throughout America's continental empire in the late nineteenth century. Even as the government suppressed some common sacred rituals, the Sun Dance in particular, other religious movements took their place. Omahas, Poncas, and Pawnees passed the Grass Dance onto the plains. The hallucinogen peyote became the sacrament of a new religious movement that began in Indian Territory in the late nineteenth century. Defying the state, champions like the Comanche leader Quanah Parker and

## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

dedicated missionaries like the Oglala Sam Lone Bear (a former Carlisle student) brought peyotism to dozens of Indigenous peoples across the West.

Above all, the Ghost Dance galvanized a pan-tribal network in the late nineteenth century. Building on prophetic insights revealed to others, in 1889 the Paiute shaman Wovoka began preaching a set of prophecies and reforming practices. The millenarian prophecies looked to an idealized past and to the return of the beloved dead, but the practices and virtues Wovoka proscribed (mutual love, nonviolence, truth-telling, respect for private property, wage labor) mapped out an Indigenous path into modernity and capitalism. For many, the elaborate multi-day dance he taught came to symbolize the movement as a whole, hence its name. The Ghost Dance excited interest from around the country. Native leaders, variously inspired or skeptical, sent representatives hundreds of miles by horseback, coach, and especially rail to interview Wovoka at the Walker River Agency in western Nevada. Over the next year the message spread west to California, south into Arizona, north into Idaho, and then out across the plains and prairies, from Indian Territory into Canada. Literate followers, often former pupils at boarding schools, created an epistolary network requesting and conveying information about the Ghost Dance that linked reservations across the West. While controversial and seldom embraced by majorities anywhere, the movement nonetheless attracted enthusiastic adherents among Cheyennes, Arapahos, Bannocks, Kickapoos, Osages, Utes, Mohaves, Assiniboines, Arikaras, Kiowas, Comanches, Shoshones, Hualapais, Gros Ventres, Wichitas, Apaches, Poncas, and Otoes, among many other peoples.

By the cold, early hours of December 29, 1890, efforts to limit Indigenous mobility had not stopped this international movement; nor had attempts to suppress the dance, harass its advocates, or intercept mail. Not even the 7th Cavalry would manage that, as they trained Hotchkiss guns on hundreds of Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakota Ghost Dancers, camped along Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Though a defining tragedy for the Lakota, that morning's imperial massacre would not end dancing on Indian reservations, break the ancient connection between the sacred and the political, or stop Native leaders and visionaries from innovating through tradition in pursuit of a collective future. Intertribal competition and pan-tribal organizing would outlast the bleak heartbreaks of the Gilded Age and continue to shape Indigenous struggles into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dwindling resources and rebounding populations would create new kinds of problems, incentivizing divisive distinctions, creating newly demanding standards for inclusion, and often pulling communities apart

rather than bringing them together. Yet again and again, forms of pan-tribal solidarity emerged out of efforts to overcome these challenges. Conquest transformed but did not destroy North America's Indigenous international system.

### Bibliographic Essay

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## Foreign Relations between Indigenous Polities, 1820–1900

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