AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE SANTA FE TRAIL

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**PREFACE**

The axiom that the winners interpret history rings true when it comes to the Santa Fe Trail and its enduring legacy. This extent of this problem became exceedingly clear to me on August, 18, 2008, as I drove westward on U.S. 56, a stretch of highway in southeastern Kansas near where animal-powered wagons once hauled people and goods over this famous trail that connected Missouri and New Mexico. I was en route to four surviving landmarks along the trail’s route. Although I was crossing the southern periphery of lands once claimed by my Pawnee ancestors, the overcast skies, along with my critical reflections about the horrors of the past and the dramatic changes in the land, added to a gloomy feeling that had overtaken me earlier that day. In addition to considering the legacy of colonialism, I thought about the vast array of stereotypical misrepresentations found in the Euroamericans’ intellectual thoughts and popular culture that cast the Pawnees, Comanches, Cheyennes, Kiowas, Arapahos, and other Indigenous peoples whose lands was penetrated by the trail, as backward, warlike savages who had nothing better to do than raid lumbering trains, taking innocent lives and plundering without remorse.

It was as if the ideology of manifest destiny has taken on a new life. What historians, in conjunction with scholars from other academic disciplines, and popular culture have done is to tell a story of Indian relations with the trail that is woefully lacking, superficial, damaging, and often devoid of reality. With notable exceptions, their collective views about this history closely parallels that of those individuals whose written descriptions of their experiences on the trail tell the story of civilization beset by savagery.

My first stop on this journey of discovery was at the site of Fort Zarah, an installation constructed by U.S. soldiers in 1864 to protect trail traffic from Indians. Abandoned five years later, settlers looking for building materials literally dismantled the post’s buildings. In the twentieth-century, the state of Kansas constructed a roadside park on the site. On that August day, green grass, trees, and a few picnic tables covered that few acres of land. A large marker erected by the Kansas Historical Society and State Highway Commission on the property, reads:

In 1825 the Federal government surveyed the Santa Fe trail, [a] trade route from western Missouri to Santa Fe. Treaties with the Kansas and Osage Indians safeguarded the eastern end of the road but Plains Tribes continues to make raids. Fort Zarah was one of a chain of forts built on the trail to protect wagon trains and guard settlers. It was established in 1864 by Gen. Samuel R. Curtis and named for his son, Maj. H. Zarah Curtis, who had been killed in the Baxter Springs massacre, October 6, 1863. The fort was built of sandstone quarried in near-by bluffs.

Fort Zarah was successfully defended against an attack by 100 Kiowas on October 2, 1868. It was abandoned in 1869.

The marker’s narrative reflects an enduring problem with the trail’s history; that is, nineteenth-century discourses depicting Indians as a threat to the country’s economic and political development continue to be displayed publicly. It did not offer the slightest hint at the harm that the trail brought Indians or why Kiowas had attacked the fort. Moreover, it did not suggest that Indians relations with the trail did not always involve violent conflict.

After spending about twenty minutes there, I drove a few miles farther along same road to Pawnee Rock. Seemingly surrounded by endless acres of flat farmland, this sandstone formation had once been an important landmark for several generations of trail travelers. Before then, it was part of a vitally important life-sustaining cultural landscape for Indian nations. in part because of its position within the heartland of buffalo country. Various manmade objects, including a twenty-foot high obelisk monument, an observation platform, and a series of historical markers, stand atop of this outcropping. One of the sign states that the Pawnees left their towns in Nebraska and Kansas during the summer to hunt during the peak time of travel on the trail, but that

Because the trail travelers and the Indians usually left each other alone, outright fighting was unusual. Tensions erupted only eighteen times in a twenty-nine-year period from 1822 and 1851. Most of the fights were within twenty miles from this site.

Signs spread over the bluff’s surface, which had been reduced in height by the quarrying activities of Euroamerican settlers, contain descriptions of the bluff given by such noted travelers as George C. Sibley, Josiah Gregg, and Susan Magoffin. Artistic depictions on the signs include the images of a mounted “Pawnee chief,” mounted Indian buffalo hunters, and moving wagon trains. Words on the obelisk monument, apparently written at an earlier date than the historical signs, honor “the brave men and women who passing over the old Santa Fe Trail, endured the hardships of frontier life, and blazed the path of civilization for posterity.” Interestingly, none of the signs mention what happened to the Indigenous peoples who once thrived in that area. It was as if they simple vanished.

Further down the road is the Santa Fe Trail Center. Inside of the building, a placard notes that the Wichita Indians had resided in that area when Coronado’s expedition visited there in 1541. Blurbs on a wall sign provide more historical depth than did the historical markers at Fort Zarah and Pawnee Rock. One states: “Relationships between Plains Indians and traders ranged from cooperation to conflict. At least one tribe, the Wyandots, invested in the trade. But the introduction of diseases and alcohol, and coercion to sign treaties giving up their historic homelands threatened Indians’ very existence.” It also declares: “In the mid-1860s, the U.S. army began a series of campaigns to place Plains tribes on reservations.” Aside from this sprinkling of information, the exhibit’s curator(s) showed no apparent inclination to deal with matters involving the depopulation, subjugation, and displacement of Indians with substantive details. Rather, the facility’s exhibits devote more space to archaeology than the dynamics of nineteenth-century Indian relations with the trail.

From there I drove on Kansas Highway 156 to Fort Larned, a restored U.S. army post consisting of nine restored buildings standing near the banks of the Pawnee River, once called Pawnee Fork, under National Park Service (NPS) management. The roadside sign pointing to the facility includes a metal image of a mounted cavalryman. After parking, I snapped photographs of the metal images of four U.S. infantrymen standing across the access road at the edge of a field. I then walked toward the fort, which was partially visible through the tall verdant trees lining the river. Not knowing what to expect from a river that bears the name of my people, I was shocked by what I saw. Standing atop of the cement bridge that spanned the river, I stared in disbelief at the putrid, green, and stagnant water. Before pesticides became widely used by farmers, it had been crystal clear stream.

Inside of the visitor’s center, I spoke to a NPS park ranger, briefly mentioning that my visit was part of my research about Indian relations with the trail and that the NPS was the sponsor of the project. Echoing what appeared to be a well-rehearsed refrain, he declared that the U.S. army had founded the post as protection from destructive Indian raids. Challenging his use of coded language that essentially described Indians in stereotypical terms, I asked him if it was possible that the destructive impacts of Euroamerican encroachments had precipitated the warfare. He responded by shifting his discussion to the Indian practice of taking Euroamerican captives without noting that Euroamericans often took and mistreated Indian captives. From there, I toured the facility. In addition to offering information about the post’s history through wall signs, paintings, and NPS personnel, the center also provides a slideshow about the fort’s history, much of which centers on U.S. military campaigns against Indians from an uncritical viewpoint.

On that August day, it was as if I had entered a place that time had forgotten. My visits to these four historical sites reinforced what I had learned from the research component of this project that involved reading hundreds of published primary and secondary materials. Today, contemporary sources continue to express the trail’s history in a distorted fashion that often relies on both coded and overt language derived from nineteenth-century discourses of conquest used to rationalize U.S. expansion into Indian lands. The outcome of this collective exercise in colonial history is evident. Repetitive recitals of this history through books, roadside markers, oral presentations, and popular culture expressions objectify Indians as “savage” threats while denying the destructive consequences of U.S. expansionistic policies and settlement. Stated another way, written history about the trail is marred by conscious and protracted attempts to absolve Euroamericans of culpability for their acts of aggression that had such a detrimental impact on Indian life. Equally problematic is that this history rarely tells how much of the trail’s history involved acts of friendly and cooperative interaction between Indians and non-Indians, including Mexicans and Euroamericans.

Fortunately, NPS personnel who recognize the shortcomings about the trail’s historiography regarding Indians have taken an important step to remedy the problem by funding this project. Most of the resulting research was conducted at Arizona State University (ASU) from 2002 to 2008. I also took three trips to the University of New Mexico to examine sources held there in its non-circulating special collection. A Wassaja grant from the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation also supported part of this research.

This project could not have been completed without the assistance of others. I wish to thank the graduate and undergraduate students who assisted me with the arduous research component. They include Sarah Manning, Joseph Sarcinella III (Lakota), Gordon Adams (Pawnee), Lorraine Billy (White Mountain Apache), Ashley Cassidy, Maylynn Riding In (Pawnee/Santa Ana Pueblo), and Annabelle Bowen (Diné/Seneca). I wish to also acknowledge the staff at ASU’s Hayden Library who willingly shared their extensive knowledge of the primary and secondary sources in the special collections department with project research assistants and myself. Especially helpful were Robert Spindler, Head, Archives and Special Collections; Dr. Christine Marin, Archivist; Michael Lotstein, Assistant Archivist; Milly Kowalski; Patricia Etter, Librarian; Joyce Martin, Librarian; Sue McNamara, and Roann Monson. At the University of New Mexico, Ann M. Massmann of the Center for Southwest Studies in Zimmerman Library also provided invaluable assistance.

It is hope that NPS personnel will use this study to provide the public a more accurate understanding about the range of human interaction that occurred between Indians and non-Indians on the trail and that the trail, which was part of a larger process of imperialism, had severe and lingering consequences for several dozens of Indian nations whose ancestors were uprooted to make way for U.S. settlement.

**CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

This research examines Indian relations with the Santa Fe Trail. Founded in the early 1820s by Euroamericans on the tracks of Indian trails and driven by the lure of lucrative trading opportunities with Mexico’s northern province of New Mexico, the trail quickly grew into a major commercial thoroughfare that transported merchandise, livestock, and people across nearly nine hundred miles of terrain. The trail was the first Euroamerican road to penetrate the Great Plains, passing though Indian country.

In the 1820s, the landscape where the trail ran was inhabited, claimed, or used by a rich diversity of Indigenous peoples from nearly a dozen different Indian nations. Over the next fifty or so years, Indians from numerous Indian nations would interacted in a variety of contexts, ranging from cooperation to warfare, with trail travelers who began their journey’s both in the United States and Mexico. Before railway cars replaced lumbering caravans of oxen-driven wagons as the primary carrier of goods and people through this region, the U.S. military would gradually established a firm foothold in the contested land despite recurring Indian expressions of opposition and acts of armed resistance to the invasion. By the late 1860s, U.S. territorial expansion would see to it that there would be no Indian lands or peoples left along the trail. The survivors of this campaign of ethnic cleansing were placed on reservations in Wyoming, New Mexico, and Oklahoma.

Before this campaign ran its course, impacted Indian nations made decisions about whether to cooperate, capitulate, retreat, resist, or collaborate with the intruders. Indians who had been removed to the eastern edge of the plains and placed in Kansas from the 1820s to the 1840s generally followed a policy of accommodation with the U.S. government and trail travelers, while Plains Indians usually had a tense if not volatile relationship with the trail and U.S. and Mexican governments.

Taking a board temporal and spatial approach to examine elements of this history, this study focuses on patterns of contact that developed through Indian contacts with Euromericans, Spaniards, and Mexicans both before and after the trail’s establishment. A premise of this study is that geopolitical, environmental, and demographic conditions influenced how Indians interacted with the trail. The geographic focus of this research extends beyond the narrow swath that linked New Mexico and Missouri to include surrounding Indigenous peoples. Causing ripples that spanned outward from its epicenter, the trail was part of a process of territorial expansion that unleashed dramatic political forces that spread over a wide region. Moreover, the trail was part of a process of colonial expansionism.

Historiography is another principal concern of this study. An annotated bibliography with near fifteen hundred entries is an important outcome. As the trail’s history unfolded, U.S. society created an ever-increasing body of primary and secondary literature based largely on stereotypical misrepresentations telling how brave and adventurous pioneers triumphed over Indian savagery. This discourse has had an astounding longevity with profound consequences. It allows for hegemonic forces that lack accountability to Indigenous peoples to control the dialogue. Some of literature belittles Indians as infantile brutes who needed the guiding hand of Euroamerican enlightenment to deliver them from the depths of their violent cultural depravity. Echoing this value judgment, scholars have told the story of the Santa Fe Trail by drawing on the language of racism. In doing so, they use masks of Indian inferiority and white American superiority to disguise the harsh and oppressive treatment meted out by U.S. society.

The purpose of this study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of American Indian relations with the trail. It seeks to accomplish this goal by compiling an extensive annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources and a calendar of contact. The third and final outcome is a critical assessment of the trail’s impact on four Indian nations.

My research has uncovered at least ten relatively unknown facts that are important to this study. A first fact is that the trail cut through lands belonging to at least twelve distinct Indian nations. Oriented in an east-to-west direction, these nations are the Osages, Kaws, Pawnees, Comanches, Kiowas, Plains [or Kiowa] Apaches, Utes, Jicarilla Apaches, and Pecos Pueblo. The culturally and linguistically related Osages and Kaws [or Kansa] claimed lands that stretched from what became Missouri westward onto the plains. Since the late 1700s, peoples of both of these nations had hunted extensively along the Arkansas River, where the trail would run. Pawnee lands extended southward from near the Missouri River to at least the Arkansas River. With their towns situated along the Platte, Loup, and Republican rivers, they regularly hunted within the southern range of their territory. Comanche territory, often called Comanchería, reached southward from the Arkansas River to southern Texas. Kiowa, along with their Plains Apache allies, had moved from the Black Hills to the Arkansas River in the early 1800s. Ute lands extended from the Rockies into southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Jicarilla Apache lands covered an area that included southern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, as well as parts of the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. Located on the banks of the Pecos River in New Mexico, Pecos Pueblo was the only permanent town along the trail’s route. Indians of this region often struggled among themselves over control of these lands.

Three other peoples arrived within a few years of the trail’s inception. Cheyennes and Arapahos, who migrated southward along the eastern slope of the Rockies, established a homeland on the north side of the upper Arkansas River valley. In 1826, Shawnees pushed out Missouri by Euroamerican pressure began to reestablish their lives on a reservation in eastern Kansas bisected by the trail. Other Shawnees removed from Ohio would join them within a few years.

A second fact is that the thirteen nations had their own languages, histories, and customs. Despite this diversity, it is possible to categorize them in three broad groupings based on shared cultural characteristics. The first group consists of town-dwelling Osages, Kaws, and Pawnees who had integrated horses into their cultures and sustained themselves by blending agriculture and hunting with trading. Living in towns situated along waterways, they raised crops of corns, beans, pumpkins, and squash near their towns while conducting activities involving extended buffalo hunts about half of each year. They procured buffalo for food, ceremonial purposes, and materials with which to manufacture clothing, utensils, and tent covers. Deer and elk were other important sources of protein and hides. Each of them engaged in varying degrees of trade with foreigners and other Indians. Another trait of this group is that although they had treaty relations with the U.S. government, they lived free of foreign domination. Although they experienced episodes of conflict with Euroamericans, none of them ever warred against the U.S. government.

Consisting of Comanches, Kiowas, Kiowa Apaches, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Utes, and Jicarilla Apaches, the second group led highly mobile lives, often referred to as nomadism in scholarly jargon, made feasible by the integration of horses into their cultures. Living free of foreign domination, each of them subsisted by extensive buffalo hunting and trading. They exchanged hides, furs, and horses for firearms, metal utensils, and other manufactured items. For most of them, their relations with the U.S. government vacillated from peace to warfare. For Indians, warfare was the least common form of interaction with trail travelers and the U.S. government, but in the end it was the most harmful. The extent of warfare varied from one nation to the next. Cheyennes managed to avoid warfare with the U.S. government, and the trail, until the late 1850s, but years of intermittent conflict with Euroamericans raged until the 1870s when the cumulative effects of warfare ultimately broke their ability to resist. On the other hand, concerted Comanche resistance probably started in 1829, when the first U.S. troops performed escort duty on the trail, and continued sporadically until the mid 1870s then they too suffered military defeated. For all members of this group during those times of warfare, it was their mobility, knowledge of the terrain, and expertise in guerilla warfare that frustrated U.S. forces and trail travelers.

Shawnees and Pecos made up the third group. The Shawnees are actually part of a larger cluster of Indians nations, or elements of them, that had been displaced by U.S. expansion and removed from their Great Lake and old Northwest Territories land to reservations in eastern Kansas. They are the Delawares, Wyandots, Kickapoos, Potawatomis, Miamis, Sauk [Sacs], Foxes, Chippewa, Peorias, Piankeshaws, Weas, Illinois, Ottawas, Senecas, Iroquois, and Munsees. To the south in Oklahoma, Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, many of whom had survived the infamous “trails of tears” death marches, lived within the boundaries of their respective territories. These were town-dwelling peoples whose traditional economics consisted of a mix of hunting, agricultural production, and trading. Some such as Wyandots, Cherokees, and Chickasaws [or elements of them], at the urging of Christian missionaries, had embarked on the path of accommodation and acculturation, while the more traditional Shawnees and Delawares sought to carry on the customary life of their ancestors. Facing devastation at the hands of the U.S. colonizers, these later peoples adopted a policy of accommodation in their relations with the U.S. government. They agreed to move west in large part to preserve their sovereignty, but, by the time of their removal, they had effectively lost their independence. In Kansas, they increasingly lived under the domination U.S. officials and missionaries.

Situation near the banks of the Pecos River since about the year 1300, the trail passed neared the pueblo. The town was a multistory complex with 700 rooms laid out in a quadrangle shape. A mixture of planting, hunting, and trade sustained its inhabitants. Located on the western fringe of the plains, their town had for many years been an important trading center that brought Plains Indians, Pueblos, Apaches, and others there for the purpose of trade. Regarding their political status, they had fallen under Spanish domination in the early 1600s. But by 1821, they had suffered sharp population losses from recurring epidemics and warfare. In 1838, the seventeen survivors abandoned their homes and moved westward into the Jemez Mountains, where the inhabitants of Jemez Pueblo accepted and incorporated them into Jemez society. After that, the decaying old pueblo on the Pecos became an important trail landmark that was subjected to Euroamerican mythology about the origins of the pueblo.

A third fact is that, despite these cultural differences, those in all four groupings shared common assumptions regarding the sacredness of their universe, their place on Mother Earth, and their symbiotic relationship with the plants and animals on which they depended for subsistence. They believed that the Creator had endowed bears, buffalos, deer, beavers, and other animals with healing knowledge and power that could be conveyed to them through dreams, visions, and supernatural encounters. Animals could not be taken for food without an offering of thanks to their spirits. Those Plains Indians in groups one and two discussed above claimed ownership over the vast herds of buffalo on the plains. The land that sustained them, along with their place on it, occupied a place of preeminence in their respective spiritual lives, ceremonialism, and worldviews.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In their separate ways, each of them communicated with the earth, flora, fauna, and universe through prayers, songs, dances, symbolic offerings, and ceremonies. They gave meaning to their surroundings in their respective languages. Referring to how the Osages, or Children of the Middle Waters, established a spiritual connection with the land, animals, and their Creator, *Wah’Kon-Tah*, Osage scholar John Joseph Mathews, wrote:

But when they came, this was one of first things they did; they gave all these animals and birds and insects names because they would use them as symbols, and transmute their special power which *Wah’Kon-Tah* had give them, and had not given the Children of the Middle Waters. The Children would transmute these power through the agency of prayer-song, and use them vicariously, making them a part of their own bodies and spirit, even charging them with their dreams and their fears and their urges, so that the symbols might give back to them that with which they had been charged.[[2]](#endnote-2)

A fourth fact is that the nineteenth-century United States, even before its sending military support to the trail traffic in 1829 , had chosen to become an imperialistic nation that relied on such methods as warfare, diplomacy, coercion, deception, and bribery in its dealings with Indians. Following their revolutionary war, Euroamericans, carrying a heightened sense of privilege and greed for lands belonging to others, began an aggressive movement of territorial expansion that essentially uprooted and displaced thousands of Indigenous landowners for almost a century. The vanguard of advancing settlers reached the banks of the Mississippi River in the early 1800s and the West Coast by the mid 1840s. Along the way, U.S. officials instigated a successful imperialistic war against Mexico. Indians from many different nations in the way ultimately fell under the weight of expansion, becoming subjected to foreign domination.

A fifth fact is that the trail played an overt role in diminishing the inherent sovereignty of affected Indian nations. From time immemorial, over the ages and throughout time, Indian nations had exercised inherent powers of self-government over their lands and peoples as well as outsiders within their lands. Emanating from their respective creation stories and cultural experiences rooted deeply in the history of this continent, Indians nations, before their subjugation under colonial domination, governed themselves in accordance with their respective beliefs, values, and customs. They viewed the passing of uninvited travelers through their lands as trespassing, an offense punishable by the confiscation of the intruders’ personal property, corporal punishment, and death in the case of defiance to an order to leave. At the least, they expected gifts, or tolls, for the right to passage, which were oftentimes, but not always, provided.

It must be pointed out that members of U.S. and Mexican societies willfully violated Indian sovereignty by failing to obtain prior consent from the appropriate Indian nations before embarking on their journeys. This problem was partially, if not belatedly, resolved in 1825 when U.S. commissioners obtained right-of-way treaties with two of Indian nations whose lands touched the trail, but no further attempt was taken to acquired such approval from other Indian stakeholders until years later. An unresolved problem of sovereignty was the harm that interlopers created by conducting ruthless hunting activities, a common infraction of Indian law that led to recurring incidents of conflict. By the early 1830s, those Indians whose livelihood depended on these animals had begun to feel the consequences of the slaughter and disruptions of the herds. Their complaints mostly fell on deaf ears.

Most Euroamericans expressed contempt for the idea of Indians having authority over them. Although early nineteenth-century U.S. officials recognized the sovereignty of Indigenous nations and dealt with them on a government-to-government basis, they usually viewed the Indians’ use of force against Euroamericans as acts of criminality. Responding to calls from traders and western politicians for protection, U.S. policymakers gradually amassed a strong military presence throughout the region to control Indians, a term meaning to infringe on the Indians’ sovereignty. In 1827, the U.S. army established Cantonment Leavenworth just north of the trail in eastern Kansas to protect the trail and maintain peace among Indian nations. Two years later, amid reports of increasing Indian opposition to the flow of traffic, U.S. officials sent troops to escort caravans en route to Santa Fe. Other troops were assigned to escort caravans at different times over the years. By the mid 1860s, when Indian resistance on the trail had been reduced to five Indian nations – Comanches, Kiowas, Plains Apaches, Cheyennes, and Arapahos – ­­­the U.S. army garrisoned numerous cavalry and infantry units at Forts Leavenworth, Zarah, Larned, Dodge, Lyon, and Union. Additionally, Forts Harker, Riley, and Wallace stood north of the trail in Kansas.

Focusing their attention on the interrelated objectives of squashing Indian sovereignty, acquiring new lands around the trail, and terminating Indian resistance, U.S. policymakers turned to the familiar pattern of negotiating removal treaties and subjecting Indians to assimilation programs. When these efforts failed, the U.S. military took the field.

A sixth fact is that Euroamericans in Missouri as well as Mexicans [as did the Spaniards before them] in New Mexico recognized the risk of trespassing on Indian country. For this reason, in 1821 William Becknell, along with his small group of fellow traders, departed Missouri equipped with firearms for protection and hunting. Virtually every other subsequent male trail travelers, whether their journey began in New Mexico or Missouri, carried firearms for the same purposes.

A seventh fact is that to date there have been very few American Indian scholarly expressions about history, and significantly fewer about the Santa Fe Trail. This dearth of Indian perspectives literally meaning that the Euroamericans’ framing of and hegemony over this area of study has gone largely unchallenged. Although the number of American Indian scholars trained in history has grown slowly over the past few decades, academia often loathes our perspectives. Reflecting this point, Dakota scholar Waziyatawin writes, “As an institution of colonialism, the academy has used the veil of objectivity to normalize and codify their own vision of the world, so that other visions may be characterized as subjective.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

An eighth fact is that the governments of the United States and Mexico, as had Spain, based their claims to Indian lands, including the strip through which the trail ran, on the doctrine of discovery, an imperialistic concept found in international law. The discovery doctrine served as a legal premise for European nations to carve vast empires in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Australia as well as to politically subjugate, dispossess, and deny fundamental human rights to Indigenous peoples. Concocted during the fifteen and sixteenth centuries by European political philosophers, clerics, and monarchs, the doctrine was little more than a crass scheme devised to legitimate the European practice of appropriating lands belonging to non-Christians. In keeping with the prevailing rules of imperialism, Western colonizers claimed an exclusive right to acquire title to an vast regions of land inhabited Indigenous peoples. The rules also enabled a “civilized” nation could acquire the discovery claim of another “civilized” nation by purchase, diplomacy, or warfare.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Western colonizers in North America used all of these methods of land transfers. At the conclusion of its bloody revolution that ended in 1783, the United States, with the Treaty of Paris, acquired Great Britain’s claim to lands reaching from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River. In 1803, the United States purchased France’s doctrine of discovery claim to over 800,000 square miles of land for $15,000,000. In 1846, the United States, driven by the notion of manifest destiny, invaded Mexico. The Santa Fe Trail served as a major route that a thousand U.S. troops, along with vast herds of livestock and supply trains, took in their invasion of Mexican. Two years later, victorious United States invaders officially received title to about half of Mexico’s northern land-base. Because of this war, the entirety of the trail fell under the ownership of the U.S. government. Most of this land, however, remained firmly in the hands of the unconquered Indians. From that time forward, those Indigenous peoples having an association with the trail would deal exclusively with U.S. officials in matters of war and peace.

Meanwhile, assertions about the primacy of the doctrine of discovery and U.S. supremacy over Indians gained standing in both U.S. jurisprudence and law. In *Johnson v. McIntosh*, a monumental U.S. Supreme Court opinion reached in 1823, two years after William Becknell’s first journey to Santa Fe, Chief Justice John Marshall drew from the language of Indian savagery and European superiority to declare that European discovery of the Americas diminished the property and political rights of Indians. Accordingly, Indian nations only had an occupancy right to the land that could be extinguished by either conquest or purchase. An associated and contemporaneous supposition, later dubbed manifest destiny, supported the self-serving notion that Anglo Saxons possessed a god-given right to appropriate the lands of Indians and others for the benefit and enjoyment of U.S. society. It must be stressed that these pronouncements were unilaterally conceived instruments of colonialism that lacked meaning without the exertion of power.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Early nineteenth-century U.S. exploratory missions sent to explore the recently purchased lands and acquire information about Indians were political in nature as well. The Corps of Discovery (1804-1806) and Lieutenant Zebulon Pike’s expeditions of 1806 carried flags, weapons, peace medals, presents and scripted messages. During meetings with Indian representatives, Lewis, Clark, and Pike informed them that the U.S. government now had political preeminence over them, their lands, and peoples. At several Indian town sites near where the trail would run, Osages, Pawnees, and others heard a brash Pike, speaking through translators, declare that they were now under the authority of the United States and no other nation. Pawnee leaders on the Republican River town, however, emphatically rejected Pike’s preposterous premise, but their views had no bearing because international law and racial ideology denied them a say in such matters. This means that their strength and ability to resist constituted the only effective tool they had for upholding and defending their sovereignty and independence.

A ninth fact is that the displacement and political subjugation of Indian peoples along the trail has had enduring consequences. Legal scholar James Anaya’s characterization of colonialism argues that Western colonizers claimed and occupied Indigenous lands, overpowered the political institutions of Indigenous nations, slaughtered those who resisted, enslaved Indigenous people, and spread deadly disease. He stresses that colonialism continues to harm them. With historically derived racial discriminatory attitudes fostering inequalities and injustice, they suffer socially, economically, and politically from the loss of their lands and resources.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A tenth fact is that a pervasive master narrative tells the trail’s history with nineteenth-century assumptions regarding the alleged inferiority of Indians and the superiority of Euroamericans. This language of racism continues to have a stranglehold on academic writings, historiography, and popular thought. This anti-Indian rhetoric, either explicitly and implicitly, places the trail and its relationship to Indians within the context of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. According to the fanciful narrative of manifest destiny, which is a spinoff of the discovery doctrine, Anglo Saxons [Euroamericans] were divinely sanctioned to spread their civilization from coast to coast. Written histories conceptualized from this perspective identify with the intrepid, heroic, and rugged explorers, trappers, merchants, soldiers, and settlers who overcame human barbarism and harsh environmental obstacles to carve a great nation out of a wilderness. This myth objectifies Indians as savages who delighted in swooping down on non-offending travelers for the sake of extracting blood, scalps, and booty. It misrepresents and denigrates Indians as being unworthy, treacherous, and irrational beings whose depravity and proclivity for violence excluded them from the rights afforded “civilized” nations and peoples.[[7]](#endnote-7) It informed the development of U.S. Indian policy and rationalizes recurring acts of aggression against Indigenous peoples with the misinformation,

The related theme of American exceptionalism espouses an imagined belief, which continues to hold many adherents, stressing that United States history differs from that other “developed” nations. To them, the country has either a moral or divine obligation to spread democracy and liberty throughout the world. As the noted social historian Howard Zinn puts it:

Expanding into another territory, occupying that territory, and dealing harshly with people who resist occupation has been a persistent fact of American history from the first settlements to the present day. And this was often accompanied from very early on with a particular form of American exceptionalism: the idea that American expansion is divinely ordained.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Expressions of American innocence have also come into play in constructing the master narrative. Scholars have asserted that the Christian morality, democratic ideology, universal human rights principles, and aversion to wealth accumulation have encouraged U.S. leaders to take a reluctance stance in its use of power.

The worn and trite paradigm behind this mindset, along with its attendant misconceptions, flawed methodologies, and biased perspectives, has had a disturbing longevity. Of the elements of this genre, the image of the Indian as a warlike savage is perhaps the most enduring, if not damaging. In his seminal study, historian Robert Berkhofer stresses that nineteenth-century imagery of Indian savagery informed the development of U.S. Indian policy.[[9]](#endnote-9) His work, along with others, stands in sharp contrast to a vast body of scholarly works that parrot assumptions found in nineteenth-century popular thought and primary sources, whether expressed in overt or covert language, telling about Indian inferiority and Euroamerican superiority. Coded language in some of these works conveys subtle and sinister meanings. For instance, noted Santa Fe Trail historian William Chalfant in a 1994 book refers to Plains Indians as “warlike nomadic” peoples. To him, Indians responded “to the entry of whites into their country in only the manner they could–by raiding and making war. And so, the Trail witnessed sporadic conflict as the Plains Indians fought to resist and expel the intruders.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Although noting a reason for Indian resistance, he chose to combine two loaded words, warlike and nomad, to describe Plains Indians. Warlike connotes a lowly cultural condition manifested by ruthless, irrational, and senseless violence. Nomad suggests a primitive cultural pattern of vagrants using large tracts of land in mostly a wasteful manner. When combined, these two words signify wanderers who glorified their repetitive acts of violence against a basically peaceful, non-offending, and culturally superior people. The story of the trail is substantially more complex and nuanced than vicious clashes between civilized and savage peoples.

Chalfant’s view mirrors a scholarly norm that uses negative stereotypes to justify the treatment that nineteenth-century Indians received at the hands of brave, deserving, and industrious Euroamericans. Warfare, which Chalfant covers in detail, was indeed a crucial aspect of the trail’s history, but other forms of contact occurred more commonly. Most studies have fallen short when it comes to providing adequate analytical attention to the causes of the warfare, to the wide range of intercultural exchanges that occurred, and to the trail’s impacts on Indian life and culture. Moreover, Indian resistance to the trail’s development was much more complex than Indians carrying a “warlike” gene that sparked acts of bloody conflict. Their interaction stemmed from conscious decisions made in response to certain circumstances and conditions created in part by Euroamerican interlopers, trespassers, policymakers, traders, soldiers, and settlers. The fact is that Indians and trail travelers engaged in nonviolent contact much more frequently than in fighting.

Here lies the problem of Santa Fe Trail historiography. During the early nineteenth century, trail travelers often communicated their experiences on the trail both verbally and in writing. In discussing their interaction with Indians they often drew from a repertoire of stereotypes that had been in existence since the onset of the European invasion of the Americas. Thus, they described Indians in romantic and negative ways. Their stories, while resonating a comfortable plot line for Euroamericans to enjoy, often depicted Indians as warlike, savage, and uncouth beings who blocked the road to America’s progress. Although containing elements of truth about given events, their stories rest squarely on the false premise that Indian savagery, not Euroamerican expansion, was the root cause of conflict. Subsequent generations of scholars usually adopted the same disparaging stereotypes and themes used by trail travelers to describe Indians. These secondary accounts fall squarely within the genre of the master narrative. The durability of the master narrative discourages honest intellectual inquiry.

1. NOTES

   For discussions of commonly held worldviews and briefs, generally see, Duane Champagne, *Social Change and Cultural Continuity among Native Nations* (Lanham, Md., New York, Toronto, and Plymouth, UK: Altamira Press, 2007) and Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs), ed., *Unlearning the Language of Conquest: Scholars Expose Anti-Indianism in America* (Austin; University of Texas Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Joseph Mathews, *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See generally, Robert J. Miller, *Native America Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See generally, Robert A. Williams, Jr. *Like A Loaded Weapon: The Rehnquist Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal History of Racism in America* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. S. James Anaya, *Indigenous Peoples in International Law* 2d ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. James P. Ronda, “Exploring the Explorers; Great Plains Peoples and the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” in *Lewis & Clark and the Indian Country: The Native American Perspective,* edited by Frederick E. Hoxie and Jay T. Nelson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Howard Zinn, “The Power and the Glory: Myths of American Exceptionalism,” *Boston Review of Books* 30 (Summer 2005), http://bostonreview.net/BR30.3/zinn.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Dangerous Passage: The Santa Fe Trail and the Mexican War* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), xviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)