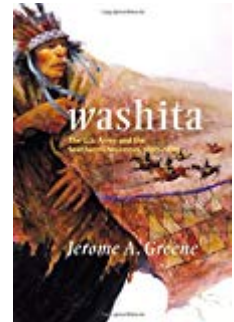


Jerome A. Greene. *Washita: The U. S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xii + 292 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3551-9.



Reviewed by Robert Wooster

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As dawn broke on the chilly morning of November 27, 1868, four separate columns consisting of eleven companies of Seventh Cavalrymen commanded by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and accompanied by a handful of Osage auxiliaries thundered through an Indian encampment near the south bank of the Washita River, Indian Territory. The village, comprising fifty-one lodges, was that of Black Kettle's Southern Cheyennes, long-known for their advocacy of peace with the United States government. Nonetheless, trails left by parties of young men returning from recent raids against whites in the Saline and Solomon River valleys had brought Custer's troopers to this place. In a sharp fight, the soldiers destroyed the village, killed many of its inhabitants (including Black Kettle), and systematically slaughtered its large pony herd. The incident at Washita had, for all intents and purposes, annihilated an independent Cheyenne community, while at the same time confirmed Custer's public reputation as an Indian-fighter.

Jerome A. Greene, a National Park Service historian, has established a solid reputation for bal-

anced, well-researched, and well-written volumes on conflicts between Indians and the United States. Author of definitive studies of the Great Sioux War (1876-1877), the campaign against Joseph and the Nez Perces (1877), and the Powder River expedition (1876), Greene has selected wisely in focusing his most recent efforts on the Washita campaign, which offers fertile fields for fresh interpretations, new research, and systematic investigations of battle sites. Although his resulting *Washita: The U. S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869* offers relatively few surprises, it does provide an authoritative account of a key campaign in the nation's wars against the Indians.

The conflict along the Washita, Greene argues, was an outgrowth of years of tension and misunderstanding between white settlers, the federal government, and the Southern Cheyennes. As such, he initially focuses on events leading up to a previous massacre which had occurred four years earlier at Sand Creek, Colorado. Here, Col. John M. Chivington's Colorado volunteers had indiscriminately butchered at least 150 Cheyenne and Ara-

paho inhabitants of Black Kettle's village. Although Black Kettle escaped, virtually every other Southern Cheyenne leader who had favored peace was slaughtered. As the influence of the more militaristic Dog Soldier society grew, Black Kettle's ability to prevent even young men from his own camp from joining the warpath waned. The Little Arkansas (1865) and Medicine Lodge (1867) treaties did little to stem the growing violence in the Southern Plains. By early fall 1868, over one hundred non-Indians had been killed within twelve months in Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's military Department of the Missouri. Convinced that entire tribes should be punished for the transgressions of individuals, Sheridan had dispatched five hundred soldiers, led by Lt. Col. Alfred Sully, from Fort Dodge, Kansas, in early September.

Sully's inability to inflict a punishing blow against the Cheyennes, explains Greene, only incited a flurry of new raids; more determined than ever to crush Indian military opposition, Sheridan organized a major offensive for the upcoming winter. Custer, freshly returned from several months' suspension from military duty, would launch one column from Camp Supply. Other commands led by Maj. Eugene A. Carr and Maj. Andrew W. Evans would eventually march south and east from Forts Lyon, Colorado, and Bascom, New Mexico. Converging on suspected Indian haunts, commanders of these columns were expected to force the Southern Cheyennes, Arapahos, Comanches, and Kiowa-Apaches to fight.

Custer struck the first major blow at the Washita. Initially proclaimed an unqualified military success, subsequent analysis suggested that it might have been something quite different. Among Custer's thirty-three casualties, for example, were Maj. Joel Elliott and seventeen volunteers, who had been separated from the rest of the command and killed as Indians from other nearby villages rode to the sound of the firing at Black Kettle's camp. Critics of Custer charge that

he should never have left the battlefield without first locating Elliott's command. Acknowledging that the affair helped to explain the intense factionalism within the Seventh Cavalry, Greene concludes that, with reports of large numbers of other Indians approaching his scattered command, "it is difficult to ascertain what more Custer could have done under the circumstances" (p. 188). Even so, reminds Greene, Custer's reputation as the nation's premier Indian warrior was probably undeserved.

The number and nature of Indian casualties has also been unclear. Roughly 250 Cheyennes were encamped at the Washita. Initially reporting 103 warriors killed and fifty-three women and children taken prisoner, Custer later raised the total number of Cheyenne losses to three hundred. Labeling the colonel's estimates "inflated", Greene concludes that Indian reports setting the number of killed at about three dozen seem much more reasonable (p. 136). At least half of these had been women and children, thus leading some to label the affair a massacre, rather than a battle. Not so, insists Greene; although the fighting was "ruthless and remorseless" (p. 191), and did feature the mutilation of several bodies by Osage scouts, "it was not indiscriminate slaughter", as dozens of women and children were taken captive rather than killed (p. 189).

And were Black Kettle and his villagers linked to recent depredations elsewhere? Sheridan certainly believed so, his annual report listing a series of items found in Indian camps that winter. Others noted the discovery of the bodies of a slain white woman, Clara Blinn, and her two-year old son, Willie, found downstream from Black Kettle's village. Greene, however, suggests an alternate explanation. The evidence referred to in Sheridan's report, along with the bodies of the Blinn family, had probably come from one of several Indian villages located nearby. Probably only a "few" of Black Kettle's people had been involved in that year's raids, Greene concludes; moreover,

"the incidents reflected instilled behavioral tenets of Cheyenne society that were beyond Black Kettle's--much less anybody else's--power to modify and thus prevent" (p. 186).

Greene's refusal to issue blanket indictments against Custer, his soldiers, Black Kettle, or the Southern Cheyennes will no doubt frustrate some readers. But the author's measured analysis and sensitivity to clashing cultures probably gets it just about right. Individuals on both sides committed acts that their counterparts could neither countenance nor understand; barring significant shifts in behavior, militaristic elements among American Indian societies were probably destined to clash with immediate expansionists among Whites. Nor did the engagement mark a turning point in American military doctrine, for as Greene points out, the winter campaigns and converging columns against Indian villages featured at Washita had been used earlier. Of course, neither Black Kettle nor his slain Southern Cheyenne followers would be able to offer their own analysis of such judgments.

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