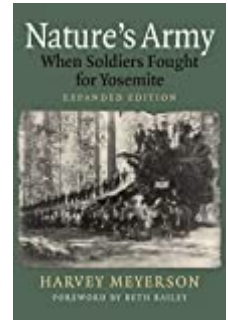


Harvey Meyerson. *Nature's Army: When Soldiers Fought for Yosemite.* Expanded Edition. Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020. 368 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-2950-3.



Reviewed by Robert Lambeth (University of Montana)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Two decades after the publication of Harvey Meyerson's *Nature's Army*, the University Press of Kansas has released an expanded, twentieth anniversary edition to remind scholars of the significance of military history to the course of American national development. With a new foreword written by Kansas University Distinguished Professor of History Beth Bailey and a new preface by the author himself, the book provides a nuanced look into the work of the Fourth US Cavalry in ensuring the protection of Yosemite from 1890 through 1914. Meyerson is an accomplished journalist, historian, and public policy specialist with the Congressional Research Service. Meyerson's examination emphasizes the military's often overlooked contributions to nineteenth-century conservationism and nation-building.

When Kansas University Press first published *Nature's Army* in 2001, military history had still been pigeonholed within the field of US history, often relegated to the study of warfare and campaigns and rarely contextualized within the broader scope of the field. In the foreword to the expan-

ded edition, Bailey explains that, even as late as 2001, "non-military historians ... missed the key roles played by the U.S. military.... They marginalized not only military history, but the role of the military in American history overall" (p. xiv). That marginalization has much to do with the differences between the "Old Army" and the "New Army" and scholars' failure to distinguish the two very different institutions.

Meyerson uses the term "Old Army" to describe the nation's post-revolution continental forces known for westward expansion and the Indian Wars, as opposed to the "New Army," which evolved from the expansionist US Empire that had its genesis in the Spanish-American War. The distinction between the two terms is important in Meyerson's examination, because, as he notes, the Old Army had, by the 1870s, become more invested in nation-building and cultural projects in the US West, while the New Army would find its purpose in expanding the nation's economic influence internationally. "America's [old] army remained focused on a national field of operations," Meyerson

explains, “joined together by a transportation and communications infrastructure that also served as a primary tool for integrating the nation as a whole” (p. 27). It was during the Old Army’s waning years in the 1880s, following the last of the Indian Wars and the carving of the last western territories, when it became invested in projects aimed to create and protect some of the West’s most prestigious national parks, beginning with Yellowstone. Not coincidentally, the policies influenced by the efforts of Captain Abram Epperson “Jug” Wood’s Fourth Cavalry in Yosemite rose in concert with the rise of the conservationist movement and led directly to the creation of the civilian-led National Parks Service in 1916.

Worried about the negative effects of development and the gold rush in central California, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant on June 30, 1864, for the future preservation and public use of Yosemite. However, the grant did not include any language that would enforce its protection and California retained control of the grant. By the 1880s, conservationist John Muir became increasingly concerned about the state of the Yosemite Valley, noting commercial deforestation, livestock overgrazing, squatting, and unregulated tourism. Muir lobbied California’s political leaders to help, but it soon became clear that without the physical presence of the federal government to guarantee its protection, Yosemite would not be preserved as federal policymakers had intended.

Following the example set by the army in the infrastructural development of Yellowstone National Park in 1886, and at the behest of Interior Secretary John Noble and President Benjamin Harrison, Captain Wood’s Fourth Cavalry, Troop I, traveled from Texas to California following Yosemite’s establishment as a national park in 1890. Wood’s task was not only to protect the park’s natural beauty from human destruction but also to begin constructing the rudimentary infrastructure of a regulated national park. By 1899,

grazing was virtually eliminated from Yosemite and a series of improvements had been made to the park by the Fourth Cavalry, including the construction of trails, roads, and bridges, and the active suppression of forest fires. As Meyerson explains, the Fourth Cavalry, in fact, the Old Army’s mission in general, was instilled with a strong sense of “reverent ecological nationalism” (p. 232). Its continental mission, which brought the average cavalryman closer to nature than most anyone else in the nineteenth century, enabled a strong bond between soldiers and their natural environment. Whether they understood it or not, theirs was a war for the environment.

When Americans think of the US cavalry of the Old Army, they almost always think about westward expansion, manifest destiny, and the destruction of Indigenous culture. Meyerson’s examination places the Old Army within the larger context of US political and cultural history, exposing the long-term consequences of its more mundane and lesser-known activities. It was those unacknowledged yet enormously influential nation- and culture-building activities of the Old Army that helped to bridge the continental East and West while incubating an environmentalist impulse, one that is rarely considered when thinking about military history.

Nature’s Army has aged well in the last twenty years. In his preface to the expanded edition, Meyerson reminds us about the military’s role in incubating a nascent environmentalist impulse and in intrinsically shaping the course of national cultural and political development: think racial integration, the New Deal, and the military’s democratic emphasis on civilian leadership. Meyerson’s research still convincingly elucidates the need for scholars of US history to continue to consider the significance of military history within the broader scope of the field.

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