

## The Kinetic Empires of Native American Nomads

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Most of us associate nomadic empires with the Huns, Mongols, and other great equestrian powers of central Asia. However, the last blossoming of expansionist nomadic regimes took place not in Asia but in the Americas. One of the consequences of the Columbian Exchange was the rise of powerful equestrian societies in the North and South American grasslands. The most notable among them were the Comanches and Lakotas. Both harnessed equestrian mobility to dominate others, and both shared key characteristics with the better-known Eurasian nomadic powers: stunning geographical reach, extensive hinterlands of extraction, complex systems of dependencies, and dynamic multiculturalism. Such similarities went unnoticed for a long time, obscured by lingering notions of militarily formidable but organizationally shallow American Indian societies. Recent studies have challenged such notions, revealing sophisticated social organizations capable of sustaining enduring power regimes and imperial formations.

### The Rise of the Comanches

In the seventeenth century, the Comanches did not exist as a distinct society, and there was little in their condition to suggest an imperial future. They were part of the Uto-Aztecan-speaking Shoshones, who hunted bison on foot in the central Great Plains, transporting their possessions with dog travois (a structure made of two trailing poles joined by a frame or a net). Later in the century an unknown disease struck the Shoshones, apparently splitting them in two. The *Namunuu* (Real People), a contingent that would become the Comanches, traced the Rocky Mountains down to the Colorado Plateau, where they encountered the Utes, another Uto-Aztecan group, and forged an alliance with them. Then the *Namunuu* encountered horses—strange, otherworldly beasts that shifted the parameters of what was possible.<sup>1</sup>

These were Spanish horses that had spread northward from central Mexico with Spanish colonialism. The settlers had built substantial herds in New Mexico, the

<sup>1</sup> Wallace and Hoebel 1954, 6–11.

northernmost Spanish colony, and, desperate to retain their military edge, they had managed to limit native access to the animals. That changed abruptly in 1680, when the Pueblo Indians rose against their overlords, banished them from New Mexico, and seized most of their steeds. Much of that horse wealth soon spread among the neighboring Indians through trading and raiding. Descendants of desert-bred African Barbs, the animals thrived on the semiarid plateaus and grasslands around New Mexico, allowing the Indians to fit them into their societies with remarkable speed. The *Nu'munuu* called them “magic dogs,” which captures the magnitude of the change. As omnivores, dogs competed with their masters for food, whereas horses converted the cellulose-rich—and humanly indigestible—grasses into immediately exploitable muscle power, providing their owners an empowering shortcut to the vast pool of thermodynamic energy deposited in grasses.<sup>2</sup>

By the early eighteenth century, the Utes and the *Nu'munuu* had accumulated enough horses to stage mounted raids into New Mexico, where Spaniards ruled once more, having overpowered the fractious Pueblo insurgents. Spaniards came to know the *Nu'munuu* as the “Comanches,” a corruption of Ute word *kumantsi*, “anyone who want to fight me all the time,” and the name stuck. By the 1730s, Comanches and Utes had pushed from the Rocky Mountains into the southern Great Plains, where they could access the Rio Grande-bound New Mexico across its length. But the expansion into the grasslands also brought the Comanche-Ute coalition on a collision course with various plains Apache tribes that had dominated New Mexico’s borderlands for generations.<sup>3</sup>

The next three decades were a formative period for the Comanches. Together with the Utes, they reinvented themselves as equestrian plains nomads who moved, hunted, and waged war on horseback. The equestrian shift enabled Comanches to track and kill the bison with unprecedented efficiency and to store more food, and this fueled a rapid population growth. It also made them more acquisitive and aggressive. They now needed reliable access to river valleys and bottomlands where they could find the vital resources—low-saline water, high-calorie riparian grasses, and shelter against the elements—that sustained their burgeoning horse herds. Such bottomlands were not only few and far between; they were also crowded. Like Comanches, Apache tribes had adopted horses, but many of them had chosen to pursue hybrid economies that mixed mounted hunting with riverbed irrigation farming. The result was a bitter and escalating clash over crucial riverine microenvironments, which both groups needed for survival. From one riverbed to another, Comanches and their Ute allies pushed deeper into the grasslands, shoving the Apaches into the surrounding mountains and deserts.

By mid-century, the Comanche-Ute coalition controlled much of the southern Great Plains. But it was on this cusp of regional dominance that the partnership collapsed. The Utes, who had preserved ties to their Rocky Mountain homelands

<sup>2</sup> Hämmäläinen 2003, 835–837; Marriott and Rachlin 1975, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Blackhawk 2006, 35–44.

through annual migrations, seemed to have recoiled at the prospect of a steppe hegemony. They dismantled the alliance and retreated into the mountains and plateaus in the west, while the Comanches committed themselves to the life of the plains and expelled the remaining Apache groups to the west and south. In 1763, when the Treaty of Paris divided North America into neat Spanish and British halves along the Mississippi Valley, the Comanche domain, *Comanchería*, encompassed a vast section of the projected Spanish half. Comanches dominated the short and mixed grass plains from the Arkansas River to the Texas scrublands, some quarter of a million of miles in all, the largest indigenous realm in the Americas by far.<sup>4</sup>

Because of its sheer size, *Comanchería* was both central and isolated. It had a European colony on three of its flanks—New Mexico in the west, Texas in the south, and Louisiana in the east—each a potential source of crucial technology, foodstuffs, and allies. But few long-distance trade routes reached into the heart of *Comanchería*, converging instead in ancient commercial centers along the Rio Grande, Missouri, and lower Arkansas and Red rivers. While this gave the Comanches a measure of protection against European pathogens—trade corridors were also disease corridors—it also left them without reliable access to guns and iron. Possibly numbering as many as 15,000, the Comanches were now the largest Plains Indian society, but they were technologically disadvantaged. *Comanchería* was a vast and populous backwater, as fragile as it was formidable. It was a one-dimensional raid-and-plunder regime that lacked the thick political arrangements that pacify borders, and it was surrounded by dozens of native groups, many of them displaced by the Comanches and craving to return to their homelands. The border conflicts recurrently swept back into *Comanchería* where Comanches suffered devastating losses in the hands of better-armed colonial and native enemies.<sup>5</sup>

*Comanchería* was also politically fragmented. Comanches had expanded across the southern plains not as a monolith, but as highly individualistic and relatively egalitarian kinship groups, and that is also how they occupied *Comanchería* once it took its shape. Their basic political unit was a *ranchería*, a local band of extended families held together by real and fictive kinship ties. *Rancherías* were led jointly by *paraibos* (band leaders) and councils of adult men, and they made autonomous decisions about membership, camp movements, and small-scale raiding and trading. There may have been as many as 200 of them.<sup>6</sup>

## Imperial Power

That was the situation in the 1750s and early 1760s. In the 1770s, however, the scattered Comanche *rancherías* began to coalesce around broader political ambitions. They

<sup>4</sup> Anderson 1999, 105–127; Hämäläinen 2008, 30–67, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Kavanagh 1996, 79–129.

<sup>6</sup> Kavanagh 1996, 28–56.

tightened their bonds and began to bend the bordering societies under their will, seeking arrangements that could sustain their fragile existence on the plains. This was the beginning of the extra-territorial phase of their ascent, and it would transform them from a regional into an imperial power. It was a largely improvised expansion that stemmed from a basic need to make lives and land secure; there was no vision of a kind of divinely ordained hegemonic future that animated many nomad expansions in Asia.

Yet, the Comanche empire was not some accidental outcome of countless small moves aimed at meeting immediate needs. As their foreign political ambitions grew, Comanches began to develop more centralized political institutions. Local *rancherías* intensified their collaboration and assumed more distinct political identities as divisions or tribes. By the late eighteenth century, Comanchería was the domain of three divisions. The Yamparikas (Yap Eaters) ruled in the north, the Jupes (People of Timber) in the middle, and the Kotsotekas (Buffalo Eaters) in the south, each featuring elected head chiefs and grand councils, which made consensus-based decisions on community-wide issues. Periodically, moreover, Comanche tribes came together into massive interdivisional meetings, where vital political matters—such as treaties with colonial powers—were exposed to public scrutiny and sanction. Although intermittent, such gatherings diffused internal strife and held the local particles in a common orbit. Gradually, they gave rise to a horizontally integrated confederacy capable of concerted foreign political action.<sup>7</sup>

The main arena of that action was the Spanish Southwest and its main instrument was the mounted raid. There was no typical Comanche raid. The size of Comanche raiding parties varied from a few to hundreds of warriors, and their objectives ranged from sheer pillaging to extortion, from personal military glory to tribal vengeance for slain kin. From the 1760s onward, Comanches struck the Spanish settlements with incessant guerrilla attacks, forcing a massive transfer of property and wealth from New Spain into Comanchería. They raided all across New Mexico's eastern frontier and they engulfed Texas, a small cluster of missions and settlements, in violence. They took horses, mules, and captives and ransacked food caches. They spread terror and drained vast areas of resources. Powerless against the high-speed attacks, New Mexico and Texas adopted a defensive stance and turned inward. At the edge of the Great Plains, northern New Spain's first line of defense had begun to cave in.<sup>8</sup>

While exposing Spanish New Mexico and Texas to systematic exploitation, Comanches also expanded their repertoires of power. They blended raiding and terror with diplomacy and trading into a flexible economy of violence that opened multiple access points into New Spain's vast resources. They rejected the Spanish notion of undivided sovereignty and broke New Mexico and Texas into their component parts: colonial towns, presidios, missions, ranches, haciendas, and Indian

<sup>7</sup> Foster 1991, 31–74; Hämäläinen 2008, 102–106, 269–283.

<sup>8</sup> John 1975, 309–312; Barr 2007, 229–246.



villages. They pillaged horses and captives in one section of the frontier, destroyed fields and livestock in another, and traded bison products for corn in a third, pitting their interests against one another. Large areas of New Mexico became desolate, while others prospered. Taos, a major trading village in northeastern New Mexico, became a virtual Comanche satellite, where Comanches found ready markets even as their war parties were draining the rest of the colony. Spanish officials in Santa Fe and San Antonio were powerless against this raid-and-trade strategy, a mobile variation of divide-and-rule policy, and they struggled to preserve a modicum of order on their frontiers. They began to receive regular Comanche delegations and placated them with gifts—clothing, metal, even guns—hoping to buy at least short periods of peace that could salvage the colonies. It was a humiliating role reversal for the Spaniards, who saw the arrangement as a perverse display of a barbarian cultural ascendancy over New Spain.<sup>9</sup>

The massive inflow of wealth allowed the Comanches to transform themselves into a trading power. *Comanchería* was bustling with horses, and the bordering native societies began to see it less as a threat than a resource. They sought diplomatic and commercial ties with Comanches, who responded by sponsoring trade gatherings on their borders. Major trade centers rose along the upper Arkansas, middle Red, and upper Trinity rivers, attracting trade convoys from several native nations as well as from New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana (which in 1762 became a Spanish colony). By the late eighteenth century, *Comanchería* had become a trade pump that funneled horses northward among numerous nomadic native societies and eastward among native farmers and European settlers. Isolated newcomers just a generation ago, Comanches were now trading from a position of considerable strength. A long growing season and abundant grass cover made *Comanchería* one of the world's great natural equine habitats, but farther north longer and colder winters put severe limits on animal husbandry, creating permanent deficit regions where would-be equestrians had to rely on imported animals. By meeting that need, Comanches generated a robust counterflow of guns, powder, iron tools, cloth, corn, squash, and other essentials that kept them healthy, protected, and powerful.

It was one of the great exchange systems in the Western Hemisphere. Spanning from Mesoamerica to the Canadian plains and anchored in *Comanchería*, a key pivot in the hemispheric equine flow, it was comparable to the intercontinental Mongol trade network that disseminated goods and ideas across vast distances, shaped societies and cultures, and integrated Eurasia. By raiding Spanish horse herds in New Mexico and Texas—herds that Spaniards had to periodically supplement from Mexico lest they be depleted—and by siphoning a good portion of that animal wealth northward, Comanches sponsored the rise of several equestrian societies across the North American grasslands, steering the region's history on a distinctive new path: the Great Plains became the domain of powerful equestrian nomads who defied the expansion of the United States deep into the industrial era.

<sup>9</sup> Hämmäläinen 2008, 80–88, 97–100.

And just as Mongol influence stabilized large sections of Eurasia under the Pax Mongolica, so too did the Comanche stranglehold on horse trade foster political pacification. Desperate to keep the trade channels open, native groups attached themselves on the Comanche orbit as allies. Except for sporadic Apache and Osage incursions, the Comanches, the richest horse-owners in North America, were shielded from horse raiding. Comanchería became one of the safest places in early America.<sup>10</sup>

### Greater Comanchería

By the late eighteenth century, Spanish New Mexico and Texas had become captive territories in the shadow of Comanchería, whose population may have neared 40,000. But a Spanish countermove was already underway. Steered by the energetic Carlos III, New Spain made a concerted effort to stabilize its crumbling northern frontier. More money and men were sent to New Mexico and Texas, and northern New Spain was placed under a new administrative colossus, the Commandancy General of the Interior Provinces of the North. The Bourbon Reforms also marked a shift toward a pragmatic, fine-grained Indian policy that was geared to reverse the humiliating situation in the north. Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez presented a detailed formula on how to pacify the seemingly unstoppable nomads in his famous 1786 *Instructions for the Governing the Interior Provinces of New Spain*. Realizing that the urban-based Spanish Empire could never be brought into the nomadic Comanchería, he set out to bring the Comanches into the Spanish Empire. The alchemy of commerce, he proposed, would turn the Comanches into loyal proxies who “go to war . . . in our behalf” while “voluntarily embracing our religion and vassalage.”<sup>11</sup> Trade, diplomacy, and largesse would do what war could not: pin down the nomads. And so the Spanish officials in Santa Fe and San Antonio began to lavish Comanche leaders with gifts, aiming to unite the many Comanche bands behind strong leaders who in turn would be closely tied to—and dependent upon—the Spanish colonial apparatus.

On the surface, the policy was a stunning success. The Comanches who had nearly destroyed New Mexico and Texas in the 1770s now visited Santa Fe and San Antonio regularly, collecting gifts and pledging loyalty to their “father” the Spanish king. But this was merely a surface. Despite the shared metaphors of familial obedience, the two parties held different understandings of the alliance. Spaniards considered Comanchería an appendix of the Spanish Empire, but Comanches understood their realm as an expansive network of relationships that could embrace anyone willing to adhere to its customs and protocols. The Spaniards had

<sup>10</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 70–73, 90–100; Allsen 1997; See also Kradin, “The Mongol Empire and the Unification of Eurasia,” Chapter 18 in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 102; Weber 1992, 215–225; Gálvez 1951, 41.

done exactly that. They had expressed largesse, caring for Comanche needs, which, through the logic of reciprocity, gave them access to Comanchería's human and material resources. But access did not mean control. Spanish colonies were but one facet of Comanche foreign policy, which in the early nineteenth century grew increasingly ambitious. Before long, the Spaniards were again struggling to maintain a meaningful imperial presence on Comanchería's borders.<sup>12</sup>

The Comanches reached the pinnacle of their power in the early nineteenth century. In the east, a succession of new commercial opportunities opened as American expansion kept funneling people westward. Violating the 1806 border agreement between Spain and the United States, itinerant American traders pushed into Comanchería, drawn by its superior horses that fetched high prices in the emerging cotton kingdom. In exchange, they offered powder, bullets, and state-of-the-art muskets. Eventually, American merchants dotted Comanchería's eastern border with permanent posts, where Comanches found ready markets not only for horses, but also for bison robes. Even the thousands of removed Southern Indians who were settled in Indian Territory near Comanchería's northwestern border proved more a resource than a threat. Discouraged by the agricultural prospects in the sub-humid climate, many immigrant nations shifted into bison hunting, for which they needed horses. A vigorous borderlands trade developed between Comanchería and Indian Territory. Tens of thousands of horses moved westward in exchange for grain, powder, lead, and US government-issued rifles. Even the once-formidable Osages, now pressed between Indian Territory and the flourishing Comanchería, sought peace with the Comanches and became middlemen between American and Comanche markets. Comanchería's eastern flank had become a trade pump comparable to its plains-facing northern flank.<sup>13</sup>

All this unnerved the Spanish Texans. Comanches were gravitating toward eastern wealth and pulling away from the alliance with Spain. Regular gifts kept the alliance alive, but when the chronically underfunded Texas began to struggle with gift distributions after 1800, Comanches responded with violence. They raided the colony to punish the Spaniards for their stinginess—and to pilfer horses to fuel their escalating eastern trade. Desperate to preserve peace, Spanish officials made every effort to keep up the gift-giving institution, which transformed into a blatant tribute arrangement. Texas was locked into a painful dynamic that lasted for half a century—through the Spanish and Mexican eras and through the era of the Texas Republic into the US era. Comanches kept the peace with the province when gifts were available, and raided it for horses when they were not. It was an enduring relationship of violence and exploitation, and it endured precisely because the violence was aimed at exploitation, not destruction. Comanche raiders rarely stripped settlements or ranches of horses, for doing so would have compromised their capacity to raise more animals.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 107–140.

<sup>13</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 141–180.

<sup>14</sup> Delay 2008, 13–60; Hämäläinen 2008, 182–201, 213–219.

Meanwhile in New Mexico developments followed a drastically different path. Comanches kept an unbroken peace with the province throughout the Spanish era, trading and collecting gifts, sharing meals with Spaniards, and socializing with the Pueblo Indians. It was an obscene scene to Spain's imperial administrators, who viewed it against the violence that was swallowing up Texas. Yet they could ill-afford to use force; New Mexico's peace with Comanches was too precious to be risked by applying wholesale pressure on Comanchería. Instead, Spanish officials reimagined the Comanches. They began to make a clear distinction between Western Comanches, the Comanche bands living near and in peace with New Mexico, and Eastern Comanches, the Comanche bands that were raiding Texas. There were good and bad Comanches, and the two deserved to be treated differently. This perceived dual sovereignty of the Comanches was a convenient half-truth that allowed the Spanish officials to maintain face and preserve their alliance with the Comanche nation that was slowly consuming an entire Spanish colony. But it also marked a genuine and momentous shift in Spanish imperial policy. The Bourbon Reforms were based on Enlightenment-era notions of rational space—neat territorial blocs bounded by geometrical frontiers. In the far north, however, Spanish administrators began to see nations and empires as composite entities made of distinct nodes and connectable pieces. Without realizing it, they were adopting the nomads' view of the world.

A Spanish myth insisted that a Spanish battlefield victory in 1786 had subdued the Comanches, compelling them to live in peace with New Mexico. It had not. Peace with New Mexico was policy. Comanches *chose* to live in peace with New Mexico, because the colony had restructured itself to accommodate their needs. Spaniards had opened all New Mexico's settlements to their trade and they had granted them a preferential status among the many native groups living around the colony. Guns and horses, the bedrock of Spain's military power in the New World, now flowed freely into Comanchería. Then there were the gifts, the regular distributions of weapons, staffs of office, and other luxuries that were meant to tie Comanche leaders to Spanish policymakers and Hispanize the Comanches. They did not. Instead, the reverse happened.<sup>15</sup>

As Comanchería grew more powerful and prosperous, New Mexico too fell under its cultural influence. Several eastern borderland villages and the strategically critical Taos region geared their economies toward Comanchería and developed close kinship relations with Comanches, impregnating the nominally Spanish space with a strong Comanche imprint. Comanche language and aesthetics gained popularity, and farming gave way to hunting. Eventually, loyalties blurred. In 1794, Governor Fernando de la Concha discovered that royal authority was becoming alarmingly frail among eastern New Mexicans who "desire to live without subjection and in a complete liberty, in imitation of the wild tribes which they see nearby." Concha was not alone in his concerns. Other Spanish officials found similar

<sup>15</sup> Kavanagh 1996, 133–192; Hämmäläinen 2008, 108–112, 201–209.

character flaws—indolence, aversion to farming, and even separatism—in their subjects and attributed them to an eagerness to imitate the Comanches.<sup>16</sup> It was a sobering realization: local face-to-face interactions, not grand policies dictated in imperial headquarters, now determined the contours of authority and sovereignty in New Mexico. Looking eastward, they found it difficult to pinpoint where New Mexico ended and Comanchería began.

New Mexico's drift toward Comanchería runs against conventional assumptions about Indians, colonists, and the arrows of influence. But it becomes less surprising when placed in a broader context. The early-nineteenth-century Comanchería was a transnational nexus that radiated prestige and power, pulling surrounding societies in its sphere. Dwarfed by its commercial reach and dependent on it for horse supply, several bordering native societies gravitated toward it. They learned Comanche language, adhered to Comanche codes of behavior, and adopted aspects of Comanche culture, from religious ceremonies to clothing and hairstyles. Eventually, large numbers of Wichitas, Caddos, Kiowas, and Arapahoes immigrated into Comanchería, seduced by its wealth and safety. They became, in contemporary language, "vassals" and "subordinates" of the Comanches, who "teach them their own martial habits and help to improve their condition," "finally amalgamating them into their nation." Historical momentum was turning Comanchería into a multiethnic imperial realm whose sphere of influence was permeating the Southwest. New Mexicans were but one of many people caught in the thrust.<sup>17</sup>

By the late 1810s, the Spanish Far North was crumbling under Comanche pressure. Its colonial space had splintered into distinct nodes, which were attached to Comanchería by a constantly shifting web of coercion, exploitation, and dependency. Colonial officials put up a brave face and kept dispatching confident reports back to Mexico City, but the gravity of the situation was not lost on foreign visitors: "The Comanches have made themselves so redoubtable to the Spaniards," wrote one, "that the governors of the different provinces of the frontiers have found it necessary to treat separately with them. Often they are at war with one province and at peace with another; and returning, loaded with spoil, from massacring and pillaging the frontiers of one province, driving before them horses and frequently even prisoners whom they have made, they come into another to receive presents, taking only the precaution of leaving a part of the spoil, above all the prisoners, at some distance from the establishments."<sup>18</sup>

Yet, viewed from the imperial headquarters in Mexico City, Comanche operations were still confined. Texas and New Mexico had fallen under Comanche influence, but the rest of New Spain was safe from Comanche violence. That was the situation the Republic of Mexico inherited from the collapsed Spanish Empire in 1821, and it failed to sustain it. In the far north, the Spanish Empire had left behind

<sup>16</sup> Worcester 1949, 244; Brooks 2002, 193–207.

<sup>17</sup> Gregg 1954, 437; McLean 1977, 428; Jackson 2000, 30; Sánchez 1926, 263.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas 1929, 62.

a hybrid space where nomadic and settler spaces coexisted and overlapped. But the architects of the Mexican republic, galvanized by national ambitions, departed from Spain's pragmatic piecemeal approach and imagined a republic of universal citizenship into which ethnic identities could dissolve. Christianity would stamp out indigenous localism, farming would extinguish nomadism, and trade would replace tribute payments.<sup>19</sup>

It was a policy that promptly alienated almost all Indians in the far north. Comanche raiding escalated immediately, engulfing Texas and ending the long peace between Comanchería and New Mexico. Soon Comanche war parties pushed south to the Rio Grande and beyond. By the 1830s they were active in western Chihuahua, central Coahuila, and northern Nuevo León, and by the 1840s a grid of well-trodden war trails covered nine Mexican departments. The trails converged at Bolsón de Mapimí, a lightly populated desert plateau in western Coahuila, from where Comanches staged raids that carried them all the way into the Mexican tropics, a thousand miles south of Comanchería's center. Bolsón became a semi-permanent settlement colony, a neo-Comanchería in the heart of northern Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

Several powerful forces fueled this explosive escalation of raiding. The raids were in part punitive expeditions aimed at forcing the Mexican Republic into the tributary mold of old and, as such, they worked. Reluctantly, Mexican officials resumed gift distributions in Texas and New Mexico, resigning themselves to the Spanish custom of buying peace from nomads. The arrangement was, in the words of one Mexican reformer-colonizer, "an insult and degradation to the honor of the nation." "Millions of *pesos* are being spent on . . . impossible truces" and "good will is won with numerous presents at the expense of the people whom they continuously insult, murder, and despoil of their property."<sup>21</sup> Those debased people were the Mexican citizens living south of the Rio Grande. The tribute policy shielded Texas and New Mexico against Comanche raids by redirecting them further south into other Mexican departments. Northern Mexico now became a raiding hinterland, where Comanches obtained much of the animal wealth that lubricated their thriving trade with the Americans and their native allies in the north.

The Mexico-bound raiding parties also brought back masses of human captives. Comanches had raided captives for generations on their borderlands, but the 1820s and 1830s saw a dramatic escalation of the practice. Comanches needed captives to tend their growing horse herds, which in the early nineteenth century comprised some 150,000 animals, and they needed extra hands to process bison hides—an arduous and labor-intensive chore—for export. This increasing demand for labor coincided with a sudden decline in Comanche population. Between 1799 and 1816, the Comanches were struck by three smallpox epidemics, which plunged their numbers on a lower plateau and pushed them to augment

<sup>19</sup> Hale 1968, 215–247.

<sup>20</sup> Delay 2008, 61–138; Hämäläinen 2008, 219–232.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly and Hatcher 1929, 331.



their diminished labor force with captive bodies. By the 1830s, they had become large-scale slaveholders, the unfree component of their population probably exceeding 10 percent, or some 2,000 people. The majority of the captives were women and children, who could be put to work as horse herders, hide tanners, and menial workers. Many captive women were eventually married into Comanche families, and they became mothers of children who were recognized as full-fledged members of the Comanche nation.<sup>22</sup>

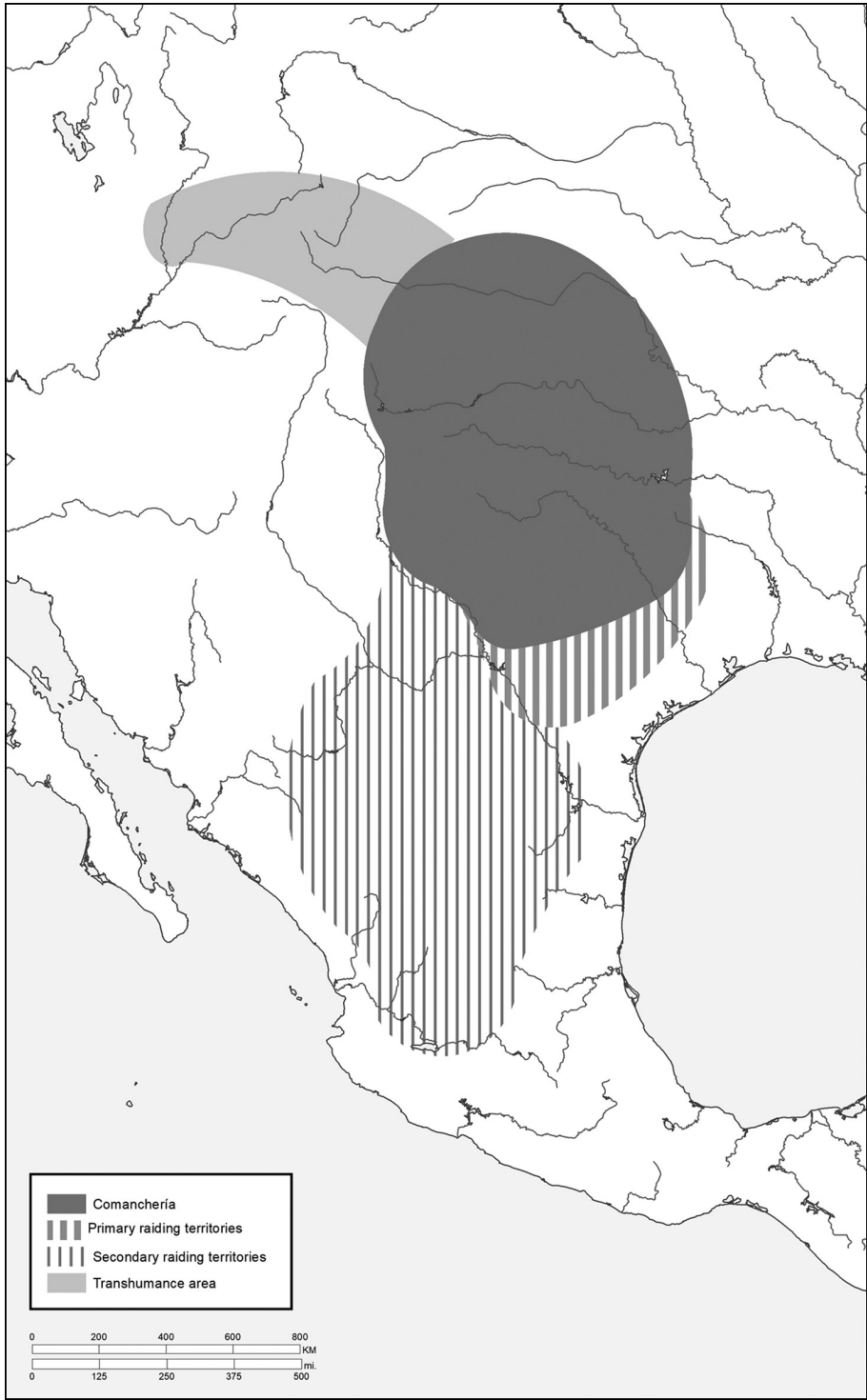
Comanche raiding in northern Mexico was thus an economic enterprise, but over time it came to double as an ecological strategy. In the 1830s Comanchería's bison began to show signs of stress: the mass-scale production of buffalo hides for American markets, coupled with grazing competition from growing Comanche horse herds, had started to take a toll. Mexico-bound raids helped stabilize the situation. The raids carried off large numbers of people out of Comanchería for long periods of time, serving as a kind of ecological relief valve. Comanche war parties regularly consisted of hundreds of warriors, who would spend months at a time on Mexican soil, moving from one settlement to another in the search of horses and captives. All along they lived off the land, stealing cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats and extracting meat and bread in urban centers, while their horses foraged on Mexican grass along the war trails that at times bulged into two-mile-wide highways. More abstractly, raiding was a means to appropriate foreign natural resources. Each mature horse taken from Mexico saved millions of calories of plant energy that would have gone into raising an animal from birth in Comanchería—and Comanches probably stole tens of thousands of animals below the Rio Grande. All this—Comanche war parties consuming vast quantities of Mexican stock, food, and grass; Mexicans absorbing a major portion of the ecological costs of Comanche pastoralism—allowed Comanches to preserve their own natural resources and keep Comanchería booming.<sup>23</sup>

And boom it did. The Comanche empire in its peak years in the 1830s and early 1840s was a prodigious entity with a hemispheric reach. Its core area in the southern Great Plains was a prosperous and socially stratified imperial realm that absorbed wealth, ideas, technology, and people—both free and unfree—from surrounding areas. It was a seat of a sprawling alliance system and a thriving trade network whose tentacles reached deep into North America's heartland. It blended and imposed cultural practices on others and it was powered by a dynamic pastoral economy that depended on coerced labor. In the south, Comanches had reduced much of northern Mexico to a vast raiding hinterland from which they could mine crucial resources with recurrent seasonal invasions. In a stunning reversal of usual historical roles, this established an essentially colonial relationship between an indigenous and a settler society. Comanches, one observer stated in 1837, treated the

<sup>22</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 223, 240, 250–259; Brooks 2002, 180–193; Rivaya-Martínez 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Delay 2008, 126–217, 313–340; Hämäläinen 2010, 201–204.





**Map 38.1.** The Kinetic Empires of Native American Nomads.

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Mexicans as “their *stockkeepers* . . . out of which nation they procure slaves.” “They declare,” wrote another, “that they only spare the whole nation [of Mexicans] from destruction because they answer to supply them with horses.”<sup>24</sup>

## Kinetic Empire

Like all viable empires, the Comanche empire was built on enduring relationships of hierarchy and difference. It commanded a distinct core territory and an extensive periphery of subordinated peoples, and it offered multiple social places for outsiders who could be slotted in as junior allies, tributary dependents, captive slaves, or naturalized Comanches. Yet, the Comanche empire was a distinctly fluid and amorphous entity, built around a shifting tribal confederation rather than a state. Comanches desired power, wealth, and deference, but they did not seek direct control of foreign territories or people. For them, access transcended rule, which shaped the regime they built: it was impressive in scope, but spatially fragmented and full of holes.

The Comanche empire presents an ontological dilemma: What are we to make of a regime that behaved like an empire without really looking like one? One option would be to follow scholars who have labeled expansionist nomadic regimes as shadow, mirror, or quasi empires. Such formulations focus on the structural linkages between mobile and sedentary regimes and assert that nomadic regimes needed exploitable agrarian states to materialize in the first place and remained structurally dependent on them, even when they overshadowed them.<sup>25</sup> This dual unity is an important insight, and it captures something about the intimate and torturous relationship between Comanchería and its adjacent colonial outposts. Yet, regardless of the prefix, the available definitions conceal as much as they reveal. They accept state-based territorial empires as paradigmatic and define nomadic regimes against them, focusing less on what they are than what they are not. They are, at their core, negative definitions that reduce nomadic empires to secondary historical phenomena: too parasitical, too imitative, and organizationally too hollow to achieve the self-sufficiency of primary empires.

Along with many other nomadic empires, the Comanche regime might be best understood as a *kinetic empire*.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps more fully than any other known imperial formation, the Comanche empire was built on mobility. Mobility defined its foreign policy, which revolved around long-distance mounted raids, border incursions, transnational diplomatic missions, semi-permanent trade fairs, and seasonal expansions that doubled as pastoral migrations. Reliance on grass and bison tethered Comanches to the plains, but equestrian mobility allowed them to

<sup>24</sup> Winfrey and Day 1966, 24; Muir 1988, 110.

<sup>25</sup> Jagchid and Symons 1989; Barfield 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Hämäläinen 2013.

project power far beyond them. It compressed time and distance and brought remote resources near while keeping violence afar, allowing them to create a variegated imperial geography: Comanchería's sheltered prosperity and its expansive raiding hinterlands were two sides of the same imperial coin.

Comanches ranged widely but ruled lightly. They wanted resources and loyalty, not unconditional submission or likeness, and they were highly selective conquerors. Their ascendancy rested not on sweeping territorial control but on a capacity to connect vital economic and ecological nodes—trade corridors, grassy river valleys, grain-producing peasant villages, tribute-paying colonial capitals—which allowed them to harness resources without controlling societies. Portability was the key. Above all, Comanches sought loot with legs: horses and humans that could transport themselves from distant lands into Comanchería. Comanches moved constantly through space, seeking trade, tribute, plunder, and pastures, and it was that mobile action that demarcated the limits of their power and jurisdiction. Theirs was a malleable regime that thrived on partial territorial control, porous borders, and tangled sovereignties.

Mobility and mutability also marked Comanchería's internal composition. The Comanches were a network society in which power worked horizontally rather than vertically, binding people together through intimate ties of loyalty and kinship. From those attachments rose a supple confederacy that balanced a centralizing pulse with inherent localism. The Comanche confederacy was not a corporate polity—it had no fixed center or bureaucracy—but rather a recurring political process, which saw its component parts gathering seasonally together into massive meetings, only to disperse again into the depths of Comanchería. Grand councils decided on general peace and general war, while individual *rancherías* were free to arrange their mutual relations, camp movements, and small-scale raiding as they saw fit. Comanchería was a human kaleidoscope where bands, families, and individuals moved around constantly, arranging themselves into various constellations as circumstances demanded. *Rancherías* merged and dissolved, divisions vanished and arose, and Comanchería itself endured as a shape-shifting polity with many faces.<sup>27</sup>

Such pliability actually helped stitch the larger Comanche community together, for the constant movement of people created a thick lattice of kinship ties that transcended local and divisional identities. The contrast to nearby agricultural regimes was striking, which was not lost on Spanish officials, whose own imperial project was repeatedly encumbered by stifling bureaucracies and defiant subject people.<sup>28</sup> Malleability also gave the Comanches tremendous staying power. They could expand their sphere of operations with remarkable speed when new opportunities arose, and they could withdraw from acquired positions with equal swiftness when facing reversals. It was a quality that set them apart from territorial

<sup>27</sup> Kavanagh 1996, 478–491; Betty 2002; Hämmäläinen 2008, 259–291.

<sup>28</sup> Worcester 1949.

empires, which almost invariably have held on to their frontiers even when doing so endangered the entire system. The Comanche empire expanded and contracted throughout its existence as Comanche *rancherías* and divisions responded to commercial openings, military challenges, epidemics, droughts, and other unexpected changes.

That is also how it collapsed. The Comanche empire reached its zenith in the late 1840s and then quickly disintegrated. The Comanche economy had teetered on the edge of Comanchería's carrying capacity for decades, and the onset of an intense and prolonged drought pushed it beyond the threshold of sustainability. The dry spell devastated the bison herds—already reeling under market hunting—and caused widespread starvation in Comanchería. This in turn exposed the Comanches to diseases, pushing their population into a steep decline.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Comanchería was starting to crumble, the United States declared war on Mexico and won a decisive victory—a victory the Comanches had inadvertently made possible by destabilizing and weakening northern Mexico with systematic raiding. In 1848 Comanchería was engulfed by an Anglo-American empire whose border now extended to the Rio Grande. And while the United States boxed Comanchería in, Texas, now a US state, thrust its burgeoning ranching economy deep into Comanche home territory. Struggling to simply stay alive, Comanches retreated into the heart of Comanchería and made themselves small. When the American Civil War erupted in 1861, they were refugees in their own country. They had stopped collecting tribute and had withdrawn from northern Mexico, and their trade had ground to a halt. That was the end of their empire. Theirs had been an action-based regime with a light institutional edifice, and when the action ceased, so too did the regime, instantaneously.

And then, just as quickly, the Comanches returned. The end of the US Civil War in 1865 left the defeated Confederate Texas weakened and vulnerable. Its frontier settlements suffered from an acute shortage of workers, and soon there were millions of free-roaming cattle in the state. Then the drought passed, slowing down the bison's decline. Comanches began to recover and resumed large-scale raiding across Texas. A treaty with the United States in 1867 only deepened the confusion: federal officials believed that Comanches had agreed to settle on a reservation, but Comanches used the reservation as a seasonal supply base to collect federal annuity goods that helped them sustain nomadic existence on the plains. Before long they were stealing cattle and horses not only in Texas but also in Indian Territory, New Mexico, and the central plains. They were becoming full-fledged pastoralists, who relied on animal husbandry to survive, and they were expanding once again.<sup>30</sup>

The resurgence posed a direct challenge to the American vision for the Southwest as an industrial hinterland. The US Army launched a total war in Comanchería,

<sup>29</sup> Flores 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Delay 2008, 297–310; Hämäläinen 2008, 292–330.

attacking winter camps, killing horses, and burning lodges and food caches. In the soldiers' wake, professional bison hunting outfits descended into Comanche hunting grounds, killing hundreds of thousands of animals. The bison numbers plummeted, and Comanches began to starve. By 1875 nearly all of them had moved into a reservation. There remained only about 1,700 of them.<sup>31</sup>

### Lakota Ascendancy

The Comanche regime was the most powerful indigenous empire in the post-1600 Americas and the largest and most enduring nomadic imperial formation in the Western Hemisphere. But it was not one of a kind. Its closest equivalent was built by the Lakota Sioux, who in the early nineteenth century conquered the northern Great Plains, where their expansion briefly reached imperial dimensions.

In the late seventeenth century, the Lakotas were part of the great Sioux alliance, whose homelands stretched from Lake Superior to the upper Mississippi River. The Sioux alliance consisted of seven tribes, *oyâtes*, which clustered into four broad divisions: the Dakotas were in the east, the Yanktons and Yanktonais in the middle, and the Lakotas in the west. Crisscrossing kinship ties bonded the tribes into a loose coalition, *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ*, which could mobilize vast numbers of warriors against common enemies. Internal trade was crucial to the allied Sioux, whose borders were lined with powerful native societies who had better access to European markets and guns and who capitalized on their firepower to isolate the Sioux. In the early eighteenth century, the Dakotas made a concerted effort to build ties with French traders in the Great Lakes region, and they relied on the Lakotas to supply them with beaver pelts that could be exchanged for firearms and iron in the east. In return, Lakotas received guns, enough to expand their trapping grounds westward. To sustain themselves in their lengthening western sojourns, they relied more and more on the bison, which became their mainstay.<sup>32</sup>

During the early eighteenth century, Lakotas extended their operations across the prairies all the way to the Missouri River. In the process, they dispossessed several native societies while transforming themselves into full-time bison hunters. They acquired some horses—intertribal trade on the western grasslands had propelled the equine frontier far to the north and east—but used the animals only for transportation. They were growing in numbers, but at the Missouri River their expansion ground to a halt. The fertile middle Missouri Valley was the domain of the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, who occupied dozens of fortified villages on both sides of the valley, their corn fields stretching up and down the riverbed. The villagers were also well connected to the Canadian fur trade and the plains horse and bison trade circuits, which gave them an edge over the Lakotas. They fought on

<sup>31</sup> Hämäläinen 2008, 330–341.

<sup>32</sup> DeMallie 2001, 718–731.

horseback with guns, keeping them out. Desperate to win access to the river and its wealth, some Lakota bands became tillers under the villagers' tutelage.<sup>33</sup>

A sprawling smallpox epidemic between 1775 and 1782 was a turning point. The disease devastated the densely populated villages but moved less effectively among the mobile and scattered Lakotas. Once the pestilence had run its course, killing up to two-thirds of the villagers, Lakotas pushed into the Missouri Valley. They drove the remaining Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras to the north, and they forced the Omahas, Otoes, Poncas, Missouris, and Iowas to abandon their riverine villages for semi-nomadic life in the west. The conquest made them the dominant power in the middle Missouri Valley. It gave them access to the plains trade networks, which supplied them with large numbers of horses, and it gave them control over the Missouri's many tributaries, where they found grass, water, and shelter to support their growing herds. The conquest also put them in a position to dominate the American fur trade, which developed rapidly in the Missouri Valley after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Lakotas now found themselves at the intersection of two sprawling technological frontiers: a northeastward moving horse frontier and a southwestward moving gun frontier. Soon most of their bands were fully mounted and well-armed, hunting and fighting on horseback with aplomb.<sup>34</sup>

The American fur trade revolved around bison robes, which in turn drove the Lakotas to expand again. Human and hunting pressure pushed the bison herds westward, and the Lakotas followed. They struck the people in their way—the Pawnees, Kiowas, Crows, and Shoshones—with incessant raids, forcing them to give ground. Through countless little invasions, each band making autonomous decisions about war and camp movements but all responding to broadly similar strategic concerns, the Lakotas extended their reach across the northern plains. With each shift, their commitment to nomadic hunting life grew deeper, and gradually incursions turned into conquests. Around 1825, the Lakotas forged an alliance with the Arapahoes and Cheyennes, solidifying their military hegemony west of the Missouri River. They seized the Black Hills, a pine-covered elevation rising from the grasslands, which became the focal point of their spiritual existence.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1830s, Lakota territory covered the grasslands west and south of the Missouri River, north of the Platte River, and east of the Powder River. Like Comanchería, it was a politically stratified multiethnic realm that cast a long shadow over the surrounding regions. At its center stood the Black Hills, a major commercial hub and a gathering place where Lakotas and their allies came together to trade and reaffirm their bonds. From there, Lakotas commanded a vast domain that reflected the decentralized nature of their polity: its seven fires—the Brulés, Oglalas, Minneconjous, Two Kettles, Sans Arcs, Sicasapas, and Hunkpapas—were widely dispersed, each dominating a distinct section of the realm. And in their

<sup>33</sup> Anderson 1980; White 1978, 321–324.

<sup>34</sup> Fenn 2014, 154–173; Secoy 1952, 73–77; Wishart 1994, 43; DeMallie 2001, 731–732.

<sup>35</sup> Gump 1994, 41–44; Bray 1994, 177–184.

midst lived thousands of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Poncas, and others whom Lakotas had embraced through intermarriage and *wólakhota*, permanent bonds of peace. But the relationships were not necessarily symmetrical. Cheyennes and Arapahoes maintained an uneasy alliance with the various Lakota bands, sometimes joining them in war, sometimes competing with them over hunting privileges, and sometimes serving as trading middlemen to horse-rich Comanchería. Poncas seem to have joined Lakotas to avoid annihilation.<sup>36</sup>

Like Comanches, Lakotas managed a complex system of hierarchies and dependencies on their far-flung borders. In the western high plains, they raided the Crows and Shoshones systematically for horses and captives, and in the south, across the Platte River watershed, they kept the Pawnees, Otoes, Poncas, and Omahas in a state of siege, raiding them for horses and grain and forcing them to limit their hunting operations. While extending their reach deep to the west and south, Lakotas remained a dominant presence along the Missouri Valley. Their massive hunting grounds enabled them to control much of the hide and robe supply for the fur trade, which induced the Americans to bestow special privileges upon them: preferential access to trade, prestige items, high-quality guns, and even vaccines. Their command of bison ranges also gave Lakotas power over the Missouri Indians. They confined the Arikaras in their riverine villages, preventing effective hunting, and then forced them to pay vast quantities of garden produce for their meat and hides, treating them, as one observer put it, as “a kind of serf who cultivates for them and who, as they say, takes, for them, the role of women.” Secure in their new home territory, many Lakota bands traveled each spring far to the east to the James River, where they reunited with their Yankton and Yanktonai relatives and exchanged horses and bison products for guns and other manufactured goods.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike any other plains society, the Lakotas grew in numbers in the early nineteenth century. Abundant food supply, a vast territory, a decentralized social organization, and regular vaccines gave them a strong measure of protection against the disease outbreaks that periodically ravaged the interior. In 1837 and 1838 a virulent smallpox epidemic killed tens of thousands of Indians across the northern plains but, once again, the disease touched only lightly the Lakotas, whose main camps were far away from the Missouri Valley, the principal disease corridor. By the end of the decade, the Lakota population exceeded 11,000, more than the combined number of all native groups living on their borders.<sup>38</sup>

Like the Comanches in the south, the Lakotas now dominated a large section of the North American interior, relying on equestrian mobility to open access points to surrounding societies, to integrate places and people, and to forge distinct zones of exchange and exploitation. Their power rested not on direct control of others but on a capacity, underwritten by military superiority, to do certain things—raid, extort,

<sup>36</sup> DeMallie 1994, 130–131; Ostler 2004, 12–25; Moore 1996, 87–97.

<sup>37</sup> White 1978, 326–339; Wishart 1994, 48, 53; Abel 1939, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Bray 1994, 170–178.



intimidate, and kill—over and over again, year after year, and across vast distances. This gave Lakota power politics a seemingly fickle character; call it on-and-off-again imperialism. Spectacular foreign political action, punctuated with ominous lulls, allowed the Lakotas to achieve what sedentary empires have achieved through institutional face-to-face control: harness resources, create dependencies, enforce boundaries, and inspire awe.

Mobility and flexibility also defined the internal makeup of the Lakota society. Ecological and foreign political imperatives compelled the dozens of Lakota bands, *thiyóšpayes*, to live far apart from one another: each had its own riverine niche to sustain itself through the winter, each defended its domain against enemy incursions, and each was led by a leader, *ithánčhans*, and an informal council of adult males. But that spatial decentralization was balanced with a strong centripetal tradition. *Thiyóšpayes* cooperated in raiding, hunting, and trading, and occasionally coalesced into tribes to wage war and conduct diplomacy. The focal point of the Lakota annual cycle was the Sun Dance, which saw dozens of *thiyóšpayes* joining in large tribal and intertribal camps. These great summer gatherings doubled as political councils where *ithánčhans* discussed and decided on matters of mutual importance, all deliberations following time-honored conventions. For a few intensive weeks, large clusters of Lakotas worshipped and hunted together, married across band and tribal boundaries, and forged new kinship ties through the *hunká* adoption ceremony, reaffirming their identity as one kindred community of peace and friendship. Each grouping and regrouping, whether large or small, was a socially charged occasion where not only individuals but vast kinship networks came together and interlocked. The Lakota nation was a headless nation—there was no principal ruler or decision-making body—but the constant shape-shifting through mobility and kinship infused its constituent groups with a sense of common purpose and unity. It sustained a composite imperial polity that balanced factionalism with periodic centralization in ways that allowed coordinated decision-making on a national level without hindering strategic flexibility on the local level.<sup>39</sup>

That sense of unity became critically important when the United States' westward expansion gained momentum. In the early nineteenth century, Lakota and American interests had largely complemented one another, but at mid-century they began to collide. Escalating overland migration along the Platte River disturbed bison herds and resulted in violent clashes between settlers and Lakotas. At the same time, the bison ecology across the northern plains began to falter under the prolonged market hunting, which in turn intensified inter-tribal rivalries over bison ranges. In response to these challenges, Lakotas adopted an increasingly territorial approach to space. They forced the Pawnees, Crows, and Blackfeet to retreat, claiming vast tracts of land in the south and west by the right of conquest, and

<sup>39</sup> DeMallie 1994; Gump 1994, 38–40, 50–52.

they forced the United States to recognize their territorial sovereignty in a series of treaties in the 1850s and 1860s.

The upshot was that the Lakotas continued to expand well into the late nineteenth century, even as their power structure grew increasingly hollow. Measured exploitative raiding gave way to unforgiving territorial warfare, which enlarged their hunting grounds but also removed exploitable societies from their borders. At the same time, the fur trade continued to decline with the bison herds, eroding the cord that had held Lakotas and Americans on a common orbit. Lakota tribes united behind a policy of banning all land cessions to the United States and tightened their bonds with other native groups, assembling a coalition that included Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Yanktonai Sioux, and Santee Sioux refugees from Minnesota. A massive indigenous bloc emerged in the heart of the continent, stalling railroad construction and settlement and pushing Washington, D.C., to step up its military pressure. Relying on their superior mobility and ability to shape-shift, the Lakotas and their allies withdrew into the depths of the high plains, emerging only to collect rations and guns at government agencies, to raid trespassing immigrants, and to defend their borders against punitive US incursions. These tactics yielded several decisive military victories, the last of which, at the Little Bighorn in 1876, proved too decisive.<sup>40</sup>

The disaster of the Little Bighorn galvanized the United States' resolve to subjugate the Lakotas. In 1876 the Lakotas were a formidable independent power, able to keep an emerging industrial behemoth at bay; a year later, following a brutal US Army winter campaign, they were starving and incapacitated. A treaty, signed by a small Lakota minority under military duress, transferred seven million acres, including the Black Hills, to the United States, and established permanent reservations for the Lakota tribes.<sup>41</sup> Their nomadic—and briefly imperial—existence on the plains had come to an abrupt end.

## Conclusion

The study of horse-borne Native American imperial formations is fairly new. The Comanche and Lakota regimes have drawn most attention, and they now embody the notion of the nomadic indigenous imperial formations that emerged in the Americas after the arrival of Europeans and their animals. There were compelling similarities between the two—both were shape-shifting kinetic regimes that relied on distinctly nodal imperial imposition—but there were also pronounced differences. Comanches dominated the southern Great Plains for over a century by forging a layered system of dependencies that allowed them to extend their power

<sup>40</sup> White 1978, 339–342; Bray 1994, 179–181; Gibbon 2003, 113–117.

<sup>41</sup> Ostler, 2010, 98–101.

beyond their homelands into distant regions without occupying them. Lakotas dominated the northern plains for half a century by rearranging the region's human geography to serve their interests, but their imperial formation was lighter and less sweeping than that of Comanches, and it was extinguished in mid-surge. The composition of this chapter reflects these differences, with most of the attention devoted to the Comanche empire.

But Comanches and Lakotas were not the only Native Americans to capitalize on equestrian mobility to extend their influence and power over vast distances. Two cases warrant special attention.

In a vast belt of mountains, deserts, scrublands, and grasslands stretching across what today are southern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and northern Mexico, several Apache groups (many of them driven out from the North American grasslands by the Comanches) ranged widely, evading Spanish imperial designs through a highly mobile way of life. Descending from their mountainous homelands, Apache war parties fanned southward through elongated raiding corridors to plunder agricultural Indians and Spanish settlements for livestock, crops, and captives. The wide-ranging Apache bands absorbed large numbers of people from rival native groups into their ranks and reduced the Spanish presence in northern Sonora and Nueva Vizcaya to a narrow strip of presidios, ranches, and mines that stood isolated in the midst of what the Spaniards called *gran apachería*. A century later, the Apache field of action spanned nearly a thousand miles from the Sonoran Desert to the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>42</sup>

Nearly a continent away, in what today is south-central Chile, a similar biome-spanning regime arose in the early seventeenth century. There the Araucanians, a populous multiethnic people, mustered light cavalry units to keep Spanish colonists out of their homelands below the Río Biobío. Mobile warfare, a decentralized social structure, and hard terrain—swamps, thick tropical forests, and high elevation—frustrated Spanish colonizing efforts, and the Araucanians remained an independent power well into the nineteenth century. Other native peoples sought refuge among them and adopted their language and aspects of their culture, fostering a sweeping process of Araucanization that lasted for generations. In the late seventeenth century, Araucanian-speakers pushed eastward across the Andes into the grass-rich Argentine pampa, where they began systematic pillaging of Spanish frontier settlements. By the late eighteenth century, Araucanian-speakers dominated a territory 10 times larger than their original Chilean homeland. Many of their leaders grew spectacularly wealthy by driving stolen livestock from the pampa to Chilean markets.<sup>43</sup>

Like the Comanches and Lakotas, the Apaches and Araucanians spread out to dominate vast expanses through horse transport, equestrian raiding, border

<sup>42</sup> Spicer 1962, 236–239; Delay 2008, 215.

<sup>43</sup> Weber 2005, 54–65; Mandrini and Ortelli 1995.

trade, and cultural dissemination. However, unlike the Comanches and Lakotas, neither developed unifying institutions—such as multidivisional councils—that could have fostered political cohesion in vastly expanded geographical settings. At the peak of their influence, Apache and Araucanian domains were shared by several independent tribes, many of them major regional powers in their own right. These were realms of weak and overlapping sovereignties where different groups nurtured kinship ties and formed short-term alliances for warfare and diplomacy while retaining distinct political identities. Based on current scholarship, it is possible to speak of expanding Apache and Araucanian *worlds* but not of Apache or Araucanian imperial regimes.<sup>44</sup>

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