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Northern Navajo Frontier 1860 1900

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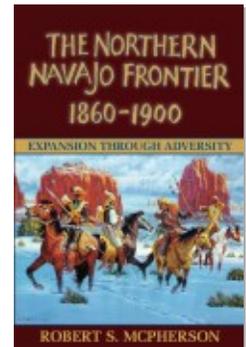
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1 / Setting the Stage

The Navajo tribe is one of the most frequently researched groups of Indians in North America. Anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, and historians have taken turns explaining their views of Navajo history and culture. A recurrent theme throughout is that the U.S. government defeated the Navajos so soundly during the early 1860s that after their return from incarceration at Bosque Redondo, they were a badly shattered and submissive people.¹

The next thirty years saw a marked demographic boom during which the Navajo population doubled. Historians disagree as to the extent of this growth, one author claiming a jump from 15,000 to 30,000 people by the beginning of the twentieth century, another placing the figures at 9,000 in 1868 and 21,000 by 1900.² Regardless of disagreement over the specific numbers, the position taken by many historians is that because of this growth and the rapidly expanding herds of sheep, cattle, and horses, the government beneficently gave more territory to its suffering wards.

While this interpretation is partly accurate, it centers on the role of the government, the legislation that was passed, and the frustrations of the Indian agents who rotated frequently through the Navajo Agency in Fort Defiance, New Mexico. One ethnohistorian, Klara B. Kelly, went so far as to interpret the Navajos' helplessness as part of a major attempt by the United States at "conquest, colonization and national oppression of the Navajo nation, spearheaded by U.S. mercantile and industrial capitalism."³ Thus, she argues that the Navajos were enslaved by economic bondage, having little opportunity for self-determination.

Such views either ignore or severely limit one of the most important actors in this process of land acquisition—the Navajos themselves. Instead of being a downtrodden group of prisoners, defeated militarily in the 1860s and dependent on the U.S. government for protection and guidance in the 1870s and 80s, they were vigorously involved in defending and expanding the borders of their homelands. This was accomplished not through war and as a concerted effort, but by an aggressive defensive policy built on individual action that varied with changing circumstances. Thus, this book focuses on the events and activities in one part of the Navajo borderlands—the northern frontier—where between 1860 and 1900 the Navajos were able to secure a large portion of land that is still a part of the reservation. This expansion was achieved during a period when most Native Americans were losing their lands.

The term *frontier* is used here to describe the unsettled area of the Four Corners region during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines this word as a part of a country that fronts or faces another country. In this instance, the Navajos confronted several “nations” along their borders: (1) the Ute/Paiute factions of southern Utah, southern Colorado, and northern New Mexico; (2) the Mormons with their attempts to carve a Kingdom of God out of the wilderness; and (3) an assortment of gentile, or non-Mormon, groups, including settlers, miners, and cowboys.

The area was truly a “shifting or advancing zone or region” as pioneer settlements, cattle companies, and mining operations moved into the country in tides that ebbed and flowed according to economic trends and government legislation. These Euro-Americans or “Anglos” came into the area because of the qualities of a frontier—“a new and relatively unexploited field that offered scope for large exploitative or developmental activity”—but many were discouraged by confronting the Navajos, who also desired to use the area, but for different reasons. Thus, the Four Corners region was in every sense a “frontier” to both the Indians and the Anglos.

The Navajos' success in obtaining this land is attested by eight boundary changes in their reservation that took place between 1868 and 1905, all of which occurred on this northern frontier (see Map 1). Here, *northern* is roughly defined by drawing an imaginary line from Farmington, New Mexico, through Shiprock to Kayenta, Arizona, and then dipping southwest to the Moenkopi/Tuba City region. The major area of concern is the Four Corners region, where a burst of activity erupted in the last half of the 1800s. The central focus is on southern Utah, the northernmost point of Navajo expansion and an area diverse in both geography and people.

The material is organized in the following manner. Chapter two looks at Ute and Paiute interaction with the Navajos between 1860 and 1880. This is a period about which historians have written a great deal concerning the Bosque Redondo experience, but have generally ignored the experience of those Navajos who remained at large in peripheral areas. Chapter three discusses Mormon expansion along the Little Colorado and San Juan Rivers during which

an aggressive missionary policy by the Latter-day Saints encouraged friendly relations with the Navajos. Although the Mormons achieved some success, they eventually exchanged their religious zeal and helpful approach for the more characteristic attitudes of Euro-American Society, thus encouraging the Navajos and their agents to remove the Mormons from part of the expanding reservation.

But the Mormons were not the only ones to get in trouble. When they entered the Bluff area in 1880, a colorful and cantankerous gentile settler named Henry L. Mitchell was there to greet them. For the next five years, he was involved in continuous strife with his Navajo, Ute, and Mormon neighbors. His troubles form an interesting chronicle of conflict along the San Juan. Of all the gentile settlers in this region, Mitchell was the most vociferous, providing one of the fullest records of problems in this area. These problems are discussed in chapter four.

Chapter five discusses the role of the cattle companies in Utah and the pressure they put on natural resources used by the Indians. Although the cowboys were among the most hated of interlopers to both Utes and Navajos, they nevertheless were not the only ones to overstock the range and slaughter the deer. The Indians, in particular, were heavily involved in the sale of hides to traders, the topic of chapter six. Some trading posts manipulated the Navajos, but the Navajos also took advantage of the stores, flocking to the reservation boundaries to barter their wool, hides, blankets, and silver for commodities. No single institution did more to provide the Navajos with the goods they desired than the trading post, but it also created some difficult problems for the Indian agents. Uncontrolled trade led to conflict, creating an increased demand for clearly defined boundaries and tighter reins on both Navajos and Euro-Americans. The consolidation of the northern Navajo frontier is the subject of chapter seven. The establishment of the subagency at Shiprock in 1903 achieved this goal and made obsolete many of the old ways of solving problems. Navajo clashes with Utes, Mormons, gentile settlers, cowboys, and miners were now relegated to structured civilian organizations like courts and governmental proceedings instead of the military, as had been the case in the 1870s and 80s. This is not to suggest that the courts and the government were not involved earlier, or that the military was no longer involved, but only that a more organized, clearly defined, and peaceful means was established. When this happened, the frontier was closed. Chapter eight summarizes the findings of this study and suggests an interpretation of events based on a Navajo aggressive—defensive policy.

