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2010

Review of *War of a Thousand Deserts*

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de la Teja, Jesús F., "Review of *War of a Thousand Deserts*" (2010). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2532.
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Among the challenges that battered Mexico in the decades following independence was raiding from independent Indian groups that increasingly found plunder preferable to peace. In this ambitious and erudite work Brian DeLay argues that it was exhaustion from fighting Comanches, Apaches, and Kiowas among northern Mexicans that largely made for the easy victory of the United States in its 1846-1847 war of conquest against Mexico. As the evidence mounted for American policy makers that the Mexican government was not only unable to develop its northern territories properly but was incapable of defending them, the logic of incorporating Texas into the Union and claiming California and New Mexico became manifest.

Before he gets to addressing the American drift toward war, DeLay covers a lot of interesting ground, bringing a nuanced understanding of Indian culture, particularly Comanche political, economic, and social practices, to bear on the subject of raiding. Along the way he presents evidence that Mexicans were not the cowardly and passive victims of Indian depredations that Texans and Anglo-Americans wanted to portray them as; that the Indians preferred raiding into Mexico because the

ranches and haciendas below the Rio Grande held the kind of wealth, especially animal and human, that most appealed to them; and that the lack of national cohesion in Mexico contributed to the Indian problem because the various jurisdictions could not or would not cooperate to confront the menace in a united fashion.

War of a Thousand Deserts is not without its faults. These include giving too much credit to Spanish colonial Indian policy for the temporary peace of the late eighteenth century and an imbalance in the attention paid to the various Indian peoples. Despite the importance of Apache raiding in northwestern Mexico, the lion's share of attention is given to Comanches, particularly with regard to cultural practices influencing behavior. Although not a failing, readers of this journal will find that the book is primarily about Mexican-Indian interactions south of the Rio Grande, away from the Southern Plains. But these issues do not detract from what is in general a masterful exercise in the reading of a broad range of primary sources to which historians have previously paid scant attention. DeLay tells a fascinating story that will reshape how historians understand and explain the coming of the U.S.-Mexican War and its aftermath.

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