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Review of *Hancock's War: Conflict on the Southern Plains* by William Y. Chalfant

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*Hancock's War: Conflict on the Southern Plains.* By William Y. Chalfant. Foreword by Jerome A. Greene. Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Co., 2010. 540 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95.

Major General Winfield Scott Hancock headed west from Fort Riley in late March of 1867, well prepared to engage the Cheyennes in western Kansas. Seven companies of infantry, eight of cavalry, and an artillery battery accompanied him. A man with political ambitions, he also brought the press along to publicize his efforts. Hancock had neither knowledge nor curiosity about the culture of the people he sought. He wanted to fight them. "I think it would be to our advantage to have these Indians refuse the demands I intend to make, a war with the Cheyennes would answer our purpose."

Traveling the Santa Fe Trail and picking up supplies at forts along the way, Hancock's forces turned west from Fort Larned, heading up Pawnee Creek. On April 13, at a point about fifty miles north of Fort Dodge, the expedition was confronted by several hundred Cheyenne and Oglala warriors. Speaking through the agent and interpreter Edward Wynkoop, the Indians indicated they would be willing to talk, but begged Hancock to keep the soldiers away from their village as their people were fearful of an attack like the one Chivington had perpetrated at Sand Creek in November of 1864. Hancock ignored their concerns and proceeded to the village, which consisted of some three hundred lodges.

Hancock was furious upon arriving to find that the women and children had fled. Such action was “treachery”—they had fled out of a sense of guilt over their many transgressions, and their action was, indeed, a signal of the “commencement of war.” While George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry pursued the Indians, Hancock put the village to the torch, justifying the retaliation that would follow.

The fleeing Indians had a thorough knowledge of the region and easily escaped Custer, who was encumbered by his supply train. After a few days of frustration, Custer led his men east along the Smokey Hill River to Fort Hays where a shortage of supplies kept him out of the field until June. Hancock’s contribution was over at this point, and he returned east.

In June, Custer headed northwest to resupply at Fort Atkinson and scour the forks of the Republican River for Indians to fight, finding them only when they wanted to be found. Custer was unpopular with his men and the unit suffered high rates of desertion, thirty-five men deserting on July 7. When thirteen men walked away in broad daylight, Custer ordered that they be pursued and shot. Three were, one fatally. Strangely, however, his main concern was not desertion or fighting Indians, but arranging for his wife Libbie to join him in the field. Unable to achieve this, he wound up his expedition at Fort Wallace and immediately headed east with seventy-six men, two ambulances, and no permission. When Indians killed one straggler and injured another, he left others to clean up the mess, abandoning his troops at Downer Station and continuing east with the ambulances to his adoring wife. This action, as well as the shooting of the deserters without due process, would result in court-martial and suspension of rank and command for one year.

Hancock pursued his political ambitions, which climaxed with an unsuccessful run for the presidency. He lost to James Garfield in 1880. His expedition of 1867 accomplished nothing. The senseless destruction of the village instigated another summer of violence on

the Great Plains as the Indians continued to resist the relentless advance of roads, rail lines, and settlements. The continuing violence inspired the establishment of a peace commission. In October of 1867, the commission traveled to Medicine Lodge Creek in south-central Kansas where a grand council was held and a shameful swindle perpetrated. Indians, who were misled about the treaty’s provisions and lacked the authority to act for their people anyway, were goaded into making marks on the paper and consigning their people to the reservation.

The late William Chalfant’s excellent book is a tightly written, day-by-day account of both Hancock’s and Custer’s expeditions. His descriptions of the Native people and the tragic situation in which they found themselves are compelling. Although I would have preferred more than the three maps that support the text, this book stands as a fine piece of scholarship, illuminating an important chapter of Great Plains history.

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