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Brave Men to Brave Men : Experiencing Honor and Masculinities on a Settler Colonial Borderland

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3 “Brave Men to Brave Men”: Experiencing Honor and Masculinities on a Settler Colonial Borderland

Janne Lahti

Abstract

This chapter reframes US-Indigenous wars by using masculinities as the principal interpretative tool. Utilizing notions that men define their gender identities in relation to each other as fragile and unstable performances that need constant reaffirming, it zooms in on one specific case: the Geronimo campaign and events leading up to it. It argues that as the Chiricahua Apaches and the white soldiers of the US Army sought to best each other in combat, they channeled and attempted to express culturally appropriate honor notions for making claims to masculinity. They were also forced to reappraise and recalibrate the meanings of those designs when confronted with shame and of being unable to perform. Their efforts to save face culminated in the famous surrender of Geronimo and his following in September 1886 as “brave men to brave men.”

September 3, 1886, Skeleton Canyon, Arizona. Covered in dust and armed to the teeth, two parties of men faced each other in a tense meeting under the scorching Southwest borderlands sun following a 16-month spell of continuous chasing and hiding. The Chiricahua Apache Geronimo had mere 13 exhausted fighters at his side. The American general Nelson Miles, in turn, had kept flirting with epic failure as the main accomplishment of the nearly 5,000 men under his command so far consisted of futile exertions in defeating Geronimo’s handful of men. Saddled with heavy expectations, Miles’s actions had been followed closely by both the press as well as his superiors in Washington, who expect Miles to destroy or capture Geronimo and his men. Unable to do this, Miles has instead felt compelled to engineer a peace offering.

Miles hesitates meeting Geronimo face-to-face. He seeks to avoid the potential career suicide that another last-minute escape by Geronimo’s Chiricahuas would bring to him personally and the public disgrace it would cast on his white soldiers, placed under the spotlight by Washington after the army’s operations with Apache recruits had failed the previous spring. If Miles dreads experiencing emasculating failure, Geronimo also has reached Skeleton Canyon fearful that he would be ashamed in front of other men. He desperately wants to avoid being turned over to white civilian authorities. In that case, he would most likely be publicly disgraced and hanged, and decapitated or his corpse placed on display, as had happened to eminent Apache fighters in the past. If he were to experience such a dishonorable fate, he would have no peace in the afterlife. Geronimo wants to find an honorable way out, something that would allow him and his Chiricahuas to retain not only their lives, but also their sense as men. Whether he realizes it or not, Miles is in the search for much of the same thing – for a solution that would enable him and his white soldiers to feel honorable and manly again. Neither man can afford to lose face or risk appearing weak or fearful. Yet neither is willing to give the other what he wants: promise of remaining in Arizona or an unconditional surrender. They need to reach an agreement, in Miles’s words, “like brave men to brave men.”¹ These proud fighters seek to measure up not only in their own eyes, but to prove in front of other men that they were still honorable and powerful men.

This essay uses honor and masculinities as interpretative lenses for providing a reinterpretation of the seemingly familiar narrative of the last US-Apache wars. It approaches masculinity as a lived experience intimately bound with honor notions; honor being vital as a source of masculine guidelines for navigating between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and for making claims for masculinity.² This essay utilizes gender theorist Michael Kimmell’s notions that men experience their gender identities in relation to other men as fragile and unstable performances that need constant reaffirming.³ Thus masculinity is dynamic and relational. In colonial situations of violence and conquest, masculinity can be empowering, but also vulnerable if the performance

cannot be sustained when challenged by other, possibly more powerful, men. As the Chiricahua Apaches and the white soldiers of the US Army fought against each other in the 1880s Southwest borderlands, they experienced the conflict and made sense of their own roles in it through culturally specific notions of honor and masculinity. When confronted with shame and of being unable to perform, both groups reacted by trying to uphold familiar notions of gender behavior, while being also forced to reappraise and recalibrate their conceptions. Their efforts to save face and to retain/regain their sense as men culminated in the famous surrender of Geronimo and his following in September 1886 as “brave men to brave men.”

Historian Andrew Isenberg hits the mark when writing that Western historians have displayed “a longstanding interpretation of the frontier as a proving-ground of masculinity,” while historian Sherry Smith exposed the army as a laboratory suitable for gender analysis already some two decades ago.⁴ Yet, there remains a visible disconnection. The histories of “Indian wars,” as they are commonly known, have traditionally occupied a place in the collective consciousness of historians (and the public) as a clash of cultures that primarily stemmed from contrasting economies and land use, or from greed and exploitation, and that are best understood and studied through race. This easily leads to a tunnel vision where race trumps all other analytical apparatuses and where gender remains underutilized as an interpretative tool working alongside, intercutting, and blending with race. This essay maps one way to intersect gender and racial analysis when stressing the relational aspects of honor and masculinities as lived experience. And while it zooms in on a single theater of conflict and reframes a seemingly familiar story – the last US-Apache wars – this investigation suggests that gendered interpretations could be applied more broadly to benefit the increasingly multivocal and intricate understandings of US-Indigenous violence in the American West. Rather than unequivocal or static codes, honor and masculinities in these conflicts proved highly exposed, dynamic, and fluctuating. They came loaded with different connotations in different cultures, and they were shaped by multiple interpretations by individuals and groups who constantly reevaluated their own against other men’s performance.

Brands of Masculinities

That Miles and Geronimo had ended up in such a situation at Skeleton Canyon can be traced to the intensification of settler colonialism on Chiricahua lands: in the valleys and mountain ranges between Tucson, Arizona, and Rio Grande in New Mexico. By 1883, three transcontinental rail lines cut the settler colonial borderlands of Arizona and New Mexico while just three years before there had been none. One of these lines, the Southern Pacific Railroad, went right through Chiricahua homes. Outside investment and thousands of white prospectors congregated in Tombstone and Silver City, both at the heart of the Chiricahua range, while cattle ranching was also on the rise.⁵ These developments put increased pressure on the federal government to crush Chiricahua sovereignty, take their lands, and replace the Apaches with white settlers. Also, it did little to lessen this urgency that the government already had under its control practically all Indigenous peoples across the continent. Generations of fighting against the Indians were coming to a close, yet the Chiricahuas stubbornly retained their independence and challenged US authority. It was for the US Army to end the war. As national attention focused more on these borderlands, so did the army’s fumbling began to look increasingly embarrassing; a mere handful of Chiricahua fighters could not be defeated by thousands of soldiers, who instead found themselves frequently outmatched by these Apache raiders.

Calling themselves Inde or N’de (people), Chiricahua Apaches were split into fluid social units that for generations had held their own against Indigenous and Hispanic competition, shaping a powerful military culture that intimately tied raiding, honor, and masculinity. Chiricahua boys growing up came to view violence as a normal condition of life and learned early on that for reaching full manhood, there existed few alternatives to the community-driven, highly

disciplined, and methodically executed fighter training and lifestyle.⁶ Performed under the supervision of veteran fighters, this preparation involved wrestling and simulated fights to advance muscle strength and coordination as well as plenty of running, climbing, and swimming to build endurance. Apaches typically had thousands of hours of training under their belts when they reached their *dihoke* trials, a crucial rite of passage. Only by excelling in four raids did a youngster prove he was a man. Interviewed by anthropologist Morris Opler, one Chiricahua man recollected how he advised his son that “You run to that mountain and come back. That will make you strong.” Underlining the significance of physical training, this father wanted his son to be his own man: “My son, you know no one is your friend” in the world, except “your legs are your friends; your brain is your friend.” The son should become an athletic, self-reliant, and independent raider: “You must beat the enemy ... before they beat you ... then all the people will be proud of you. Then you are the only man.”⁷

Adult Chiricahua men identified themselves as raiders with a strong sense of personal freedom. One of the greater shames to fall on a man was being labeled selfish, indolent, incompetent, or cowardly by his family and peers, and the other was being humiliated by his enemies. These notions of honor and masculinity contributed to raiding methods that underscored individual skill, mobility, avoidance of casualties, and the element of surprise. Usually hitting relatively isolated targets (miners, ranches, freight wagons, stage coaches, and other travelers), the Chiricahuas strived for a psychological and military edge over other men – whether Hispanic, Indigenous, or Anglo – and developed a ferocious, ultra-masculine reputation across the Southwest borderlands. In the process, they also turned the goods (weapons, clothing, and horses) they took from others into signifiers of masculine empowerment. By the 1880s, violence, honor, and masculinity had become so deeply entangled that the usual Chiricahua man could not easily fathom other ways of being a man.

In settler colonial projects, historian Angela Woollacott writes that masculinity was typically grounded on the dominion of white men over both women and non-whites.⁸ This proved incompatible with Chiricahua raider identity. Settler colonialism meant exclusive settler rights to the land and the monopoly of violence for the settler government, accompanied by a demand for the abolition of Apache independence and designs to assimilate the Chiricahua men as farmers living on reservations. It saw discourses where white settler families were imagined as vehicles of proper heterosexual domesticity, where independent, self-made, and self-governing white men represented the lynchpin of the empire and where violence was often integral to definitions of white masculinity. It also linked Indigenous sovereignty and the coexistence of independent Indians and white settlers – such as Mexico’s inability to defeat the Chiricahuas – with powerlessness and dishonor and with shameful race mixing.

For the US Army, settler colonialism carried the very specific expectation that white enlisted men and officers prove themselves as superior men who could dominate and outperform the Apaches in the field of battle. However, the army had a very low standing in the eyes of the American public. Coming from native-born, middle-class backgrounds, officers found that their reputation ranged from notions of elitism to incompetence and brutality. White enlisted men, many of them working-class urbanites and/or recent immigrants from Europe, were widely shunned by the civilian society, historian Peter Guardino remarks. They were seen lacking the character and ability expected of white men, having forfeited a big chunk of their honor and their birthright as free white men by enlisting.⁹ In the Southwest borderlands, the army men sought to overcome their public image. They wanted to count as courageous, brave, and physically capable men, as defenders of “helpless” civilians and liberators who brought the light of American civilization to a peripheral region. Officers also coveted a reputation as respectable gentlemen who embodied genteel manners and middle-class honor. The army’s rigid class division – officers versus enlisted soldiers – made honor harder to attain for the enlisted men. Their days were filled with manual labor instead of military training, which, in turn, handicapped the men as fighters and stained their sense of self. They were also made into servants in officers’ households, being often under the

command of officers' wives and working alongside civilian domestics (men and women) of color.¹⁰ It was no wonder that William Jett, a soldier serving in Arizona, saw himself as a "slave in Uncle Sam's service." Forced to endure plenty of dishonorable drudgery, many soldiers simply deserted, while others tried to recapture their manly vigor by drinking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes.¹¹

In the end, neither the enlisted men's rambunctious pursuit of free time or the officers' quest to be seen as noble gentlemen could hide the fact that, in the 1880s, the army was in the Southwest to defeat the independent Chiricahuas. The soldiers themselves knew it, the press reminded them of it often, and the federal executive in Washington put more pressure on the army to perform. White soldiers needed to demonstrate that they were honorable men by beating the Chiricahuas.

Honor Grows in Difficult Places

In March 1883, a Chiricahua raid started from the Sierra Madre in Mexico and crossed the Arizona border near Fort Huachuca. The raiders struck a charcoal camp and then continued north. Although telegraph lines connected the garrisons near the border, the troops at Forts Huachuca, Grant, and Bowie were slow to respond. Meanwhile, the Chiricahuas hit more miners, prospectors, ranchers, merchants, and civilian packtrains. On March 28, near Silver City, New Mexico, they slayed Judge H. C. McComas and his wife Juanita, captured their son Charlie, and stole everything they could transport. By now, more troops chased them. Yet the Chiricahuas, with their captured booty, slipped back to Mexico practically unharmed.¹²

This raid made the Chiricahuas feel more powerful, while the soldiers, in turn, felt increasingly discouraged. Much to his mortification, General George Crook, the commander of troops in Arizona, was forced to admit that his soldiers had failed even to catch a glimpse of the Chiricahua raiders. The taking of Charlie McComas, who was never seen again in spite of an extensive search, gained plenty of national attention and became a nasty reminder of the soldiers' weakness.¹³ Eastern papers such as the *New York Times* published unflattering headlines, such as this one from April 12: "Horrible Indian Barbarities; Ninety-Three Persons Killed By Apaches – Many Bodies Mangled."¹⁴

Crook was keenly aware of the complicated and shifting linkages between honor, masculinity, and violence. For one, he warned his superiors in Washington that "with all the interests at stake we cannot afford to fight" the Chiricahuas anymore. He saw that a prolonged war could severely deter the region's progress, discourage potential settlers, and keep away outside investment.¹⁵ Crook reached a conclusion that proved difficult for many in the army to digest: white soldiers were no match for the Chiricahuas in the fast-moving borderlands warfare. Instead of hiding his personal views, Crook made them known. He wrote how the Chiricahuas "understand this business [borderlands war] better than we [white soldiers] do," and that the Chiricahua "is more than equal of the white man" who "cannot compete on equal terms with an enemy [Chiricahuas] whose individuality under all circumstances is perfect." Even after Geronimo's surrender, Crook kept on insisting that "regular [white] troops have always failed on our side of the boundary line."¹⁶

Crook saw that the army needed to hire more Apaches and pursue the surrender of independent Chiricahuas rather than their military destruction. Aims outweighed the means. Yet Crook still had several thousand white troops under his command. Relegated to secondary tasks, these men guarded waterholes, mountain passes, and mines. Few of them liked this duty one bit or found any honor in it. But their grumblings barely mattered at first as in May–June 1883 Crook stormed the Sierra Madre in a much-publicized effort. The force that located the Chiricahua Apache hideout, hit their camp, and persuaded them to come to the reservation at San Carlos, Arizona, was composed of 193 Apache recruits and only 42 white enlisted men. As 1884 dawned, it seemed

that the army had won the war: practically all Chiricahuas lived at San Carlos under federal management.¹⁷

Crook's intention was never to provide the Chiricahuas tools to reinforce their prevalent raider identity. He rather wanted to harness Apache masculinity to work for the army's cause and thought that this would disintegrate the Chiricahuas. Yet, the continued possibilities for army enlistment in 1884 and 1885 enabled many Chiricahuas to keep experiencing their preferred gender identity even after coming to San Carlos.¹⁸ For many of them, reservation life quickly turned sour as federal agents dictated a new division of labor: Chiricahua men should become farmers and women paragons of domesticity following the ideals of the Victorian era. The government also shamed the Chiricahua men's honor in front of their family and kin by hearing the complaints of Apache wives over suspicions of domestic abuse and by arresting several Chiricahua men as a result of these secret hearings. More humiliation resulted from the government's attempt to put a stop to Chiricahua men's drinking. The reservation agent jailed men on suspicion of drunkenness and destroyed alcohol supply and manufacturing equipment. Feeling that they were treated like unruly children, Chiricahua men voiced their complaints, but quickly found that their side of the story did not interest the reservation authorities. Some of the protestors were intimidated and jailed. Some were even sentenced in closed courts for imprisonment at Alcatraz on San Francisco Bay.¹⁹

Geronimo, a veteran fighter who had steadily climbed to a prominent position among his people in the 1870s, detested what reservation life was doing to the Chiricahua men. He hated the policies and loathed the army, refusing enlistment. He also constantly feared personal emasculation on another front – of being handed over to trial in Arizona civil courts, where he would be made to answer as an individual for his raiding. In that case, Geronimo believed he would be publicly humiliated, paraded on the streets, and thus rendered symbolically impotent and helpless before being hanged. Then his body would probably be placed on public display or, worse, decapitated as had happened when soldiers killed his old friend Mangas Coloradas in 1863. In neither case would he find peace in afterlife because of his cowardly fate and debased death. He was determined to do his all to avoid such an ignominious fate. Later in life, as Geronimo dictated his memoirs as a prisoner of war, he disclosed that he left the reservation in 1885 because he judged it “more manly to die on the warpath than to be killed in prison.” In his eyes, freedom and raiding equaled being a man. He knew this decision would bring him many enemies. “We were reckless of our lives, because we felt that every man's hand was against us... we gave no quarter to anyone and asked no favors,” Geronimo remembered.²⁰

By 1885, only a minority of Chiricahuas adhered to Geronimo's version of being a man. Even some of those who followed him acknowledged that they, like a Chiricahua noted, were “doomed” but “preferred death to slavery and imprisonment.”²¹ Other Chiricahuas reappraised their ideals of honor and masculinity. Many desired to remain fighters and saw army recruitment as the best option to that end. Thus on May 17, 1885, an estimated 35–42 Chiricahua men bolted San Carlos with Geronimo, while more than 50 immediately joined the army, many more enlisting later. Both options – soldiering and independence as raiders – enabled Chiricahua men to escape American control on the reservation and to behave honorably and make claims for masculinity. They could gain material wealth (raiding booty or salary in the military) to support their families in times of desperate poverty. It helped that the army allowed its Apache recruits considerable freedom. The Chiricahua enlistees did not have to wear uniforms and they could operate in their own racially segregated companies so freely (although nominally under the command of white junior officers) that they were able to imagine they were their own men on a raid again. In 1885, the main offensive thrust against the free Chiricahuas consisted of two mobile units canvassing northern Mexico, each with approximately 100 Apaches and a company, approximately 30–50 men, of picked white cavalry. These fast-moving commands were set to trace enemy hideouts, strike at every opportunity, and apply uninterrupted pressure. Even these picked white cavalrymen were

discarded by the year's end, as they were judged to hamper the movement of the Chiricahua recruits.²²

Between June and October 1885, these two mobile units clashed with the Chiricahuas on five occasions. Still, it was evident that final victory could evade the troops indefinitely as the war took new forms. Constantly on the watch, the independent Chiricahuas hid in Mexico, dispersed to tiny factions (5–10 fighters), and created scattered trails almost impossible to follow. Worried that the conflict could drag on for years, Crook's objective was to make the Chiricahuas to surrender by assuring their lives would be spared and that they would simply be removed from the Southwest to live elsewhere for a limited period of time and then allowed to return.²³

Then, in November 1885, the Chiricahuas launched another much-publicized lightning raid north of the border. One small party emptied the ranches of southern New Mexico of livestock while another moved toward San Carlos in search of ammunition, material wealth, and revenge. The raiders went on for several weeks, traversing hundreds of miles, killing an estimated 38 people, and stealing 250 horses. The army once again proved powerless to stop or even hurt the raiders. And the white soldiers were again demeaned in the press, including national papers such as *New York Times*.²⁴ The conclusion: it seemed as if the soldiers were destined to be permanently outperformed by more powerful men. They failed as men.

Private Lawrence Jerome's narration illustrates the white soldiers' emotions and experiences in the field:

The hostiles [Chiricahuas] did not stop to give us a fight, but lead us a chase over the very roughest country ... on a merry chase for two weeks or more, doubling and twisting along the backbone of the various mountains, occasionally descending into valleys to make a killing of some defenseless Mexican miner or rancher, and to kill a beef and to steal fresh horses ... At times we were so close to them that we found their camp fires still burning; again they would lead us by a considerable number of miles. There was no way of heading them, as their direction and destination were unknown; all we had to do was to patiently follow on the signs they left in their wake.²⁵

Others felt just as demoralized and disgusted due to their inactivity. After just three weeks in Arizona, the cavalry officer John Bigelow wrote in his journal that while he thirsted for honor, he "also realized that laurels were scarce along Indian [Chiricahua] trails, and that they grew in difficult places."²⁶ Bigelow and his troopers were forced to spend months on a futile lookout for the Chiricahuas at the Tempest and Mowry mines in southern Arizona. Neither Bigelow nor Jerome ever saw Geronimo or his Chiricahuas. In this they were joined by thousands of their peers who felt certain that this killing of time as well as the chasing of shadows was below them and that it came with zero honor and loads of shame. Many soldiers saw that it was the parched sandy deserts, perilous canyons, and jagged mountain ranges that advantaged the Chiricahuas. The terrain was to blame, being wholly unsuited for civilized men. Soldiers also penned venomous texts about the Chiricahuas trying to disgrace their enemies as unworthy adversaries and as representatives of a lowly form of uncontrolled and overtly aggressive masculinity. The Chiricahuas were depicted as brutes and murderers, as men capable only of carnage and destruction.²⁷

While white army men applied the pen to distance Chiricahua masculinity from their own ideals and from honor, on the ground the army's humiliation continued. After Apache recruits managed to get the free Chiricahuas to talk terms in Mexico on March 1886, Crook, instructed by Washington to demand unconditional surrender, instead accepted stipulations under which the Chiricahuas would go east for two years imprisonment after which they would return to San Carlos. While most Chiricahuas surrendered and were soon shipped to Florida as prisoners of war, a small following under Geronimo ran away. Not only did the commanding general of the army Phil Sheridan refute Crook's terms by wire from Washington, but he directly questioned

Crook's reliance on Apache recruits. This latest fiasco was all Sheridan and the rest of the top brass in Washington would tolerate. They had been skeptic about relying so heavily on Apache recruits for quite some time already, thinking it amounted to a direct affront on the honor of the white troops and the whole settler empire.²⁸ Apache recruits needed to go. Sheridan directed Crook to make more use of the thousands of white soldiers he commanded. Crook felt disgusted and possibly sensed that his own manhood was being questioned by his superiors as they censored his methods. Yet, he had no intention of trusting white soldiers. Instead, he first assured Sheridan – who was no longer interested in hearing this – that Apache recruits offered the path to victory. Then he selected to test his mandate – whether he was still seen as a trusty and capable man – by asking to be relieved of his command if his superiors judged his methods improper. Crook's request was granted without delay.²⁹

The Best Athletes in Our Service

Crook gone by April 1886, the army looked for other options for honor and victory. General Nelson A. Miles, Crook's replacement, received orders from Washington that "the most vigorous operations looking to the destruction or capture of the hostiles [are to] be ceaselessly carried on." He was also told of the "necessity of making active and prominent use of the regular troops of your command."³⁰ In short, Miles was to reestablish army honor by crushing the free Chiricahuas and use white soldiers to accomplish that. There should be no negotiations. These new orders cast the conflict as a performance where the masculinity and honor of white soldiers stood on the line. Needing to appear dynamic and decisive, Miles went to action. He fired most Apaches, assigned infantrymen to key mountain passes, ranches, and other strategic locations, and organized cavalry into light scouting parties expected to be in constant readiness to bring down the Chiricahuas. Miles demanded that commands in the field be active, vigilant, and innovative.³¹ His trump card was a hand-picked force of white soldiers led by Captain Henry Lawton. This special force included soldiers who, in the words of army surgeon Leonard Wood, "believed the right sort of white men could eventually break these Indians up." Wood was one of those selected. These men and their mission represented an experiment, Miles noted, to "ascertain if the best athletes in our service could not equal in activity and endurance the Apache warriors."³² Finally, after years of disgrace and failure, here would be the renaissance for the white soldiers, an opportunity to show they could, if given the opportunity, outperform the Chiricahuas and prove their worth as men. A highly ambitious man, who dreamt of the White House and of upstaging his rival Crook, Miles displayed signs of nervousness early on. He knew very well that the Chiricahuas had humiliated the soldiers repeatedly in the past. In a private letter, Miles felt apprehensive that "this is the most difficult task I have ever undertaken." The "troops are very much discouraged" and "thoroughly disheartened, so much so that they "appeared to have very little hope of ultimate success," he wrote. Then the *New York Times* ran another set of articles highly ruinous to the army's reputation. It described, for example, how Geronimo's bloodthirsty men now killed all whites they saw and that the settlers lived in constant terror. As the Chiricahuas continued their raids canceling all hopes of a quick army victory, Miles became more and more apprehensive that emasculating failure awaited him.³³

Crossing the border, Lawton's men pursued the Chiricahuas through the summer in northern Mexico. For much of the time, they had little idea where their targets were. Often they were lost themselves. Traversing on horseback a terrain where horses simply could not cope, Lawton's cavalymen ruined their mounts within a week. From thereon, they were forced to abandon those horses still fit enough at their supply camp. Next, the white soldiers attempted advancing on foot over stony cacti-abounding ridges, volcanic rock, hot sand, and steep rugged canyons. It did not take long until the men's strength and clothing were nothing but a memory. Reduced to their underwear, the heat sapped the troops and as rainy season started in July, torrential rains regularly

soaked the men battling a shortage of tents, shelter, and overcoats. Heat and rain also prevented much needed rest. Mescal, in turn, “could be had cheaply, too cheaply, in fact” from local villages, Lieutenant James Parker noted. He added that “this and the immorality of the [Mexican] women, who made up for their lack of beauty by their generosity, caused disorders” among the soldiers. Their bodies also battled various types of vermin resulting from uncleanness. Then, there were the fevers and aches because of tarantula bites. Many also experienced nearly incapacitating bouts of diarrhea. As a result, keeping up a forceful chase or upholding a soldierly appearance proved impossible. Temporarily succumbing to exposure, Lawton himself reportedly had to be carried on travois as he was unable to ride or walk.³⁴

Nearly wiped out and mostly clueless about Geronimo’s whereabouts, the majority of Lawton’s white soldiers had to be replaced by a new batch from north of the border. Soon, the newcomers went through the same ordeal where their bodies and minds were effectively ripped to pieces as they tried to catch the Chiricahuas. According to Parker, who entered Lawton’s camp south of Nacori, Sonora, on August 3, 1886, Lawton was in “a pessimistic mood” as “his command was pretty nearly used up.” After trying vainly to overtake Geronimo, the command had lost touch with the Apaches for several weeks. Most men were again sick and more than a few had turned “gaunt and lean” having lost as much as 30–40 pounds of their weight. Surgeon Wood, with his blistered skin and tattered clothing of flannel drawers, an old blue blouse, a pair of moccasins, and a hat without any crown, had trouble convincing the Hispanic and Anglo civilians he encountered in Sonora that he and his men were actually white American soldiers, representatives of a supposedly superior masculinity.³⁵

That white soldiers proved an epic failure became painfully obvious to Miles as the summer wore on. Lawton’s sole strike against a Chiricahua camp was the only, yet less than remarkable, success. His force killed or captured no Chiricahuas. Miles wrote to his wife Mary how he felt very tired and anxious, and that he had trouble sleeping. Desperate to find a way out, Miles began to push for the removal of all reservation Chiricahuas from the borderlands. He also went against his orders from Washington by recruiting in secret two Chiricahua peace emissaries from San Carlos and sending them to find and open talks with Geronimo’s group.³⁶

After gaining intelligence that the Chiricahuas were at Fronteras, Sonora, Miles’s peace delegation, headed by the Chiricahuas Kayitah and Martine and Lieutenant Charles Gatewood, located Geronimo in the Teras Mountains near the big bend of the Bavispe River. Geronimo’s men were by then mentally exhausted. Raiding kept them away from family members in the reservation, while hiding and running as a daily routine for months on end became unbearable. In his memoirs, Geronimo noted that “there seemed to be no other course to pursue” than to talk about surrendering.³⁷ Geronimo first insisted they return to San Carlos, get exemption from punishment, and collect rations. The only thing Gatewood had to offer was a move to Florida. It was not until after the lieutenant made the announcement that all reservation Chiricahuas were sent to Florida that Geronimo’s men, apprehending that their honorable options were limited, elected to meet Miles at Skeleton Canyon.³⁸

Sensing that his own and the army’s honor stood on the line, the jittery Miles sent feverish telegrams to Lawton, whose men had joined the negotiators. On August 29, Miles wrote to his wife from Fort Bowie, a short distance away from Skeleton Canyon, “I do not know whether I will go or not ... I will not unless I am pretty sure they are sure to surrender ... they [Geronimo and his men] are very unreliable.” Meanwhile, escorting Geronimo and his men, the exasperated Lawton replied to Miles that Geronimo’s Chiricahuas rode on their own, were highly suspicious, fully armed, and in control of the situation. Any attempt to use force would cause the Apaches to flee and thus spark new, and potentially even more embarrassing, wars. Even when Lawton told Miles that the Chiricahuas appeared sincere on their intent to give up if Miles only met them face-to-face, the general could not hide his nervousness. On September 2, after seeing no other way out of the situation, he wrote that “I will go down this morning to see the hostiles under Geronimo ... I have very little faith in their sincerity and do not anticipate any good results.” Meant to lower

expectations and protect his honor in case of a fiasco, Miles dispatched this message not only to his wife but up the chain of command. Meanwhile, Lawton's soldiers and Geronimo's Chiricahuas, both parties armed to the teeth, waited nervously in their separate camps. Rumors circulated that some of the soldiers planned to jump the Apaches. On September 3, just hours before Miles reached Skeleton Canyon, Lawton, sick of the waiting and the uncertainty, wrote in a letter to his fellow officer, "I hope we are near the end, but God knows."³⁹

When Miles and Geronimo finally met face-to-face, all the tension of the buildup melted away as they showed respect for each other and proved eager to find an honorable accord. "We made the treaty, and bound each other with an oath," Geronimo remembered. Miles promised him amnesty, land, cattle, and clothing if "I will quit the warpath and live at peace hereafter." They agreed that all Chiricahua lives would be spared, all past deeds forgiven, and that Geronimo's men would be united with their families in the east, starting a new, peaceful, life there.⁴⁰

That the end to the US-Apache wars had been achieved through diplomacy would not be seen as the kind of manly, crushing, victory Miles was ordered to procure. Soon, Miles was mired with telegrams, Washington being under the impression that the Chiricahuas had surrendered unconditionally. President Grover Cleveland sought to boost his popularity by handing Geronimo over to civilian courts for trial and hanging. Only weeks afterwards, as Miles tardily informed his superiors – and after Sheridan ordered Geronimo, whom Miles had put on a train to Florida, interviewed in Texas – did it become known that Miles and Geronimo had met like two equals, and that they had agreed upon amnesty and removal in exchange for capitulation.⁴¹

The fact was that white soldiers had not destroyed the Chiricahuas or even forced them to surrender. The two groups of men had, for a fleeting moment, performed like brave men to brave men at Skeleton Canyon. Yet, it would not last. Soon, Miles did his best to distance himself from the edgy, restless, and annoyed wreck of a man he had been all summer. Neither did Lawton much care to dwell on the shameful failures of his men. Highly conscious of the implications and significance of their mission, and hungry for honor, both Miles and Lawton produced empowering narratives where white soldiers had acted as the dominant men subjugating the inferior Chiricahuas. Already on September 7, 1886, Miles boasted in a letter to his wife how "I am making a clean sweep of the hostile Apaches out of this country," thus bringing "relief and security to thousands of homes that they have never felt before." In his mind and in his own words, Miles had managed "a brilliant ending of a difficult problem."⁴² For his part, Lawton assured the readers of his published report that his command was made up "purely" of white soldiers and that it had displayed great grit by marching a staggering 3,041 miles that summer. Through "persistent and untiring labor," Lawton scripted, his men had demonstrated "that our soldiers can operate in any country the Indians may choose a refuge, and not only cope with them on their own ground, but exhaust and subdue them." During the victory parade in Tucson, Miles was celebrated as the champion of men. Here the story was much the same: the Chiricahuas had been "subjugated" by "prominent use of the regular troops." His white masculine fantasy gained more steam as Miles made white soldiers the only "brave men" around: the Apaches "fought until the bulk of their ammunition was exhausted" and that the soldiers "pursued" the Chiricahuas "for more than 2,000 miles" until the Apaches became "worn down and disheartened." Then, Miles continued, Geronimo's party "sue[d] for mercy from the gallant officers and soldiers, who, despite every hardship and adverse circumstance, have achieved the success their endurance and fortitude so richly deserved."⁴³

A decade and a half later, Miles, an accomplished commander in the Civil War and the Sioux wars, the man who had captured Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and who served as the commanding general of the army after 1895, gave the five months he chased the Chiricahuas more space in his memoirs than to any other episode of his life. It was no coincidence. Miles was still determined to prove his own and his soldiers' superior masculinity by rewriting the facts. He, for example, claimed how the efforts of Lawton and himself had not merely reestablished the fractured and damaged army reputation, but that it was the white soldiers who had saved settler

colonialism in the Southwest. He also depicted Lawton as a superior man whose strength embodied white military masculinity at its finest. Lawton was

as fine specimen of a man as could be found ... well proportioned, straight, active, agile, [and] full of energy ... [his] bone, muscle, sinew, and nerve power was of the finest texture. It was said that he could at that time [1886] take up an ordinary man and throw him [like] a rod

Miles wrote

Surely, this Lawton of Miles's imagination could outperform any man. Rather than being drained, sick, clueless, or drunk, in Miles's depiction Lawton's troops possessed extraordinary "fidelity," "endurance," and "tenacity of purpose." These white men simply dominated the Chiricahuas.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In reality, the government made all the Chiricahuas, including those who had served in the army in 1885 and 1886, prisoners of war for 27 years. Suffering cultural onslaught, diseases, poverty, and general hopelessness, many Apaches died in the damp Florida and Alabama climate where they were made to live. Feeling cheated and emasculated, Geronimo later regretted many times his decision in 1886, when he had been fooled into thinking Miles would treat him as a brave man. "I do not believe that I have ever violated that treaty [at Skeleton Canyon]; but General Miles never fulfilled his promises," Geronimo recollected.⁴⁵ He died from pneumonia in Oklahoma in 1909. He was still a prisoner of war. Meanwhile, Miles lived well-off and basked in eastern social circles among other cultured gentlemen. He succumbed to a heart-attack in 1925 while watching a circus performance with his grandkids in Washington.

The last US-Apache wars demonstrate how gender was experienced by fighting men in a settler colonial context that placed demands for the subjugation of independent Indians and relied on racial hierarchies between men. Seeking to outmatch and dominate other men, the army and the Chiricahuas understood their situation, evaluated their options, and saw their strengths and shortcomings through a gendered lens. Gender was not experienced in any sort of formulaic manner. Instead, honor and masculinities remained subject to shifting formulations and carried different meanings for different peoples in different situations. If reservation life exposed the Chiricahua men to potential emasculation, they made various plans to reclaim it: some joined the army, whereas others yearned for life as free raiders. And when the army's inability to defeat a numerically and, supposedly, culturally inferior enemy brought mostly shame, the army sampled a myriad of remedies to reestablish its honor. It "othered" the enemy and the landscapes. It hired more Apaches, hoping to use Apache recruits to recover the army's damaged honor. Then, it reevaluated and changed course. Thinking the use of Apaches as inefficient and damaging to white military masculinities, the army command opted to spotlight the white troops in order to show they were the dominant men. When that looked more and more unlikely to happen, Miles wanted to hide the army's shortcomings and failures and devised a diplomatic option.

No longer fighters but farmers living in captivity thousands of miles from home at the mercy of the federal government, Geronimo and the Chiricahuas experienced humiliation and the evaporation of their raider masculinity. Following Skeleton Canyon, Miles went on a mission of masculine redemption. He used words as though they were bullets targeting all the scorn and humiliation the soldiers had been subjected to in the past. If we were to follow sociologist Aaron Belkin's proposal that when the American soldier is constructed as tough, masculine, and dominant, this reinforces an impression of the military as strong, effective, honorable, and fair, and of American hegemony as civilized, just, and legitimate, then Miles's writings make it appear that he and Lawton had in fact saved the US settler colonial empire in the borderlands.⁴⁶ In their texts, white military masculinity had outperformed the Chiricahuas, thus claiming exclusive

honor and showing its dominant position over other men. Or at least that was the version that Miles and his men liked everyone to believe. Brave men indeed!

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¹ Nelson A. Miles to Mary Miles (his wife), October 4, 1886, Sherman Miles Manuscript (in possession of the author, courtesy of Prof. Robert Wooster). See also Geronimo, *His Own Story*, ed. Frederick Turner (1906; reprint, New York: Meridian, 1996), 135–136.

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⁴⁰ Geronimo, *His Own Story*, 136–138.

⁴¹ See the government correspondence in “Surrender of Geronimo.”

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⁴⁴ Miles, *Personal Recollections*, 487–488. While Miles fell short of the White House, he did become the Commanding General of the Army, as, in essence, did Leonard Wood who gained the position of Joint-Chief-of-Staff. Lawton was a general when killed in the Philippines in 1899.

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