'Deserts' notes the role of Indians in U.S.-Mexican war

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In 1846, Waddy Thompson, U.S. minister to Mexico, was certain that the Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches and Navajos "must recede before us." And so should Mexico. Too lazy to cultivate the soil and too cowardly to resist Indian raids, "mongrel" Mexican men did not have "much more physical strength" than Anglo-Saxon women. They had no valid claim on territories in the southern plains of North America.

In "War of a Thousand Deserts," Brian DeLay, a professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder, tells the fascinating — and long-forgotten — story of the savage, interethnic conflict between independent tribes, Mexicans, Texans and norteamericanos. The "unconquerable, indigenous peoples," he argues, "held the keys to the imperiled and still imaginary domain in the North" — and an understanding of the causes, course, and consequences of the U.S.-Mexican War.

An imaginative and resourceful researcher, DeLay struggles with a "frightening and maddening" challenge: the absence of documents written by lost indios barbaros. The "silence of the enemy," of course, allowed Mexicans to describe the Indians as barbarians, with "no politics, no overall plan, only foul hearts that took pleasure in the murder and ruination of helpless families."

Drawing on contemporary accounts by Mexicans and Texans, DeLay provides a sophisticated, speculative, and controversial account of the motivations of Indians. Although economic considerations were central, he writes, the "character and scale of the damage" inflicted on Mexicans by warriors who risked coming home with fewer horses, mules and prisoners suggests that Indians raided for revenge as much as for plunder.

The Indians, DeLay declares, were not fighting for their land or for the safety of their families or in defense of their culture. They weren't resisting Mexican colonialism.

The war of los salvajes turned northern Mexico "into a fragmented landscape of deserts," poorer, emptier, less secure and more divided than it had been in the 1830s. It made it easier, according to DeLay, for Americans to think it legitimate to "seize half of a troubled neighboring republic through war." The Texas Creation Myth they designed, he indicates, posited that Americans had come as invited guests to protect Mexico from the Indians, who were more than equal to them in combat.

"Our way," the New York Morning News announced, "lies not over trampled nations, but through desert wastes."

With the end of the Mexican War, Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches and Navajos coordinated raids in northern Mexico. Raids became less frequent and less ambitious, however, as cholera swept through the southern plains and Texas Rangers attacked Indian villages. In the cruelest irony of all, independent Indians were undone by the Civil War, which created one of the most effective armies in the world.

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Associate Images:
WAR OF A THOUSAND DESERTS
Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War By Brian DeLay Yale University Press, $35

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Return to Story