Review: 'The Wrath of Cochise: The Bascom Affair and the Origins of the Apache Wars,' by Terry Mort

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Second Lt. George Bascom was "a fine looking fellow" and a gentleman, a white settler of Arizona recalled, "but he was unfortunately a fool." After all, Bascom's decision in 1861 to take hostage members of the family of Apache warrior Cochise to force him to return a 12-year-old boy the Apaches had not, in fact, kidnapped, and then to hang the chief's brother and nephews in retaliation for the torture and murder of the captives the Indians had taken, ignited a war that would devastate the Southwestern frontier.

In "The Wrath of Cochise" (Pegasus Books, 322 pages, $27.95), Terry Mort provides a riveting account of the incident. Drawing on the work of anthropologists as well as historians to reconstruct the culture, way of life and behavioral norms of the Chiricahuas (Apaches) and Army officers trained at West Point, and supplementing established facts with informed speculation, Mort challenges "the formulaic melodrama" in which Indians are portrayed as victims and soldiers as blundering oppressors.

Mort is especially insightful about the complex beliefs of the Chiricahuas, their ongoing engagement with the spirit world, their devotion to family, their reliance on raids against whites and Mexicans and a decentralized social structure that made it difficult to make — and enforce — treaties with them. "Sinners who were sinned against," he indicates, they faced stark choices: To maintain their collective identity they had to fight wars they were almost certain to lose; to survive physically, they had to change utterly and "cease to be themselves."

To Army officers who had been living under primitive conditions in ramshackle forts (each year one out of every 33 soldiers stationed on the frontier died of disease) and with little prospect of advancement, Mort writes, interactions with Indians afforded glimpses, not only into otherness, "but into the heart of darkness." Likely to engage in one Indian battle for every five years of service, some of them might be "weirdly fascinated" by the dress, proud demeanor, elusiveness, ferocity and cruelty of the Indians. Almost to a man, however, they felt that the world would be better off without them.

Many readers may well contest Mort's judgment that Bascom, a young officer who was "authorized and instructed" to use all the force that was necessary, deserves pity, while Cochise's behavior was an "intentional display of defiance, an act of hubris," stemming from a violent and cruel character, which "cannot be justified by Bascom's hostage taking."
Nonetheless, his conclusion that the encounter in Apache Pass has all the elements of Greek tragedy seems right: The actions of the officer and the Indian chief did unleash responses out of proportion to their mistakes, producing results that were disastrous and inevitable.

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