

Peacekeeping on the Plains: Army Operations in Bleeding Kansas

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Review

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Policing the peace

Armed diplomacy delayed bloodshed

When asked to write a review of this military history of Bleeding Kansas, I initially hesitated. I had heard of Tony Mullis's book and knew that I *should* read it, but did this social and cultural historian *want* to slog through a military history? Prior to this review I had never read an entire military history nor had I ever wanted to. But, like a good soldier/historian, I put aside my biases and decided to serve my profession with honor. Mullis has served his country (as an officer in the Air Force and professor at the Air Command and Staff College) and the field of Civil War studies admirably by writing this book and thus filling an important historiographical hole. Although numerous political and social historians have written about Bleeding Kansas, no one has endeavored to analyze how the army operated amidst this infamous imbroglio until now.

Mullis convincingly argues that without the army's important peacekeeping role in Bleeding Kansas, the Civil War's first shots might have rung out in Lawrence or Topeka instead of Fort Sumter. He charts the army's course between the opposing political factions in Kansas and demonstrates how, particularly during the summer of 1856, the deployment of federal troops pacified potentially explosive local militias. He also illustrates how effective communication (command, control, communications and intelligence, or C3I) between federal authorities in Washington, D.C., the officers at Fort Leavenworth, and the territorial Governors proved to be vitally important to successful peacekeeping. Slow and ineffective communication, however, often resulted in botched missions or near-war, whether in Bleeding Kansas or on the Great Plains.

Discussion of the Sioux expedition in 1855 is more related to Mullis's second objective than to his central focus on peacekeeping in Bleeding Kansas. In addition to adding a military perspective to the political histories of the region and the era, Mullis also claims that the army's actions in Kansas and the trans-Missouri West provides evidence that the United States has been engaged in peacekeeping endeavors since the mid-19th century. The obvious relevance to our current situation in Iraq is not lost on Mullis or on this reader, and the author reveals the often complicated and difficult situations in which soldiers found themselves while in the process of protecting civilians.

As Mullis asserts on page 17, the army's primary purpose in the trans-Missouri West was to protect the vital lines of communication that emanated from Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri, as well as to shield the American citizens who traversed them. The successful transit of mail, the ever-expanding government projects like road and bridge-building, and the safe passage of settlers and emigrants to the West all depended upon the army for protection.

But Mullis points out that a standing army, even one that was asked to wear so many peace-oriented hats, raised public suspicion and had to be deployed carefully and tactfully. Americans have always been quick to cry tyranny, and an overzealous army stood the risk of hearing that cry. Mullis describes the army's attempts to quell the Lakota and Brule Sioux near Fort Laramie and uncovers the potential dangers of ineffective C3I and inexperienced officers in the West. After a cow wandered from a Mormon wagon train and met its maker at the hand of a Sioux Indian, the army dispatched Lieutenant John Grattan and 20 soldiers to arrest the offending party. But peace failed in this instance, as the overconfident and inexperienced Grattan fired upon Chief Bear, which initiated an exchange that resulted in the deaths of over 20 soldiers and 80 Indians. Luckily for the army, the victims of their botched peacekeeping mission were soldiers and Sioux Indians, not average American citizens, and thus a brief foray into war-making and the resulting casualties did not elicit much public scrutiny. Ultimately, what Mullis's analysis of the Sioux expedition reveals is the negative consequences of ineffective C3I and the problems that conflicting approaches of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the War Department created for peacekeeping operations in the West.

The relevance of the Sioux expedition to the army's policies in Bleeding Kansas is somewhat difficult to discern, but perhaps Mullis wanted to provide

context and contrast with the ultimately successful peacekeeping efforts in Kansas. After all, he claims on page 236 that Peace enforcement, as exemplified by the Sioux expedition, looked a lot like war, but Kansas never erupted into full scale war and Mullis would argue that we have the army to thank for that feat.

First Mullis finds that inadequate and partisan civilian leadership and ineffective C3I can be blamed, in part, for the lack of peace in Bleeding Kansas during 1855 and early 1856. Inept territorial Governors like Wilson Shannon, painfully slow and at times contradictory communications between Fort Leavenworth and Washington, and an almost inexplicable reluctance to use the telegraph help explain why Kansas bled in the fall of 1855 and spring of 1856. For example, even after both Secretary of War Jefferson Davis and President Pierce endorsed Colonel Edwin Sumner's suggestion to anticipate insurrectionary activity and stave off armed conflict by using federal troops, Governor Shannon hesitated to call on Sumner and his men. When such conflict appeared imminent in April and May of 1856, Shannon instead employed partisan militias to enforce territorial authority (hence, the infamous Sack of Lawrence). Mullis also uncovers the difficulties Pierce, Davis, Sumner and Shannon had communicating their objectives and orders and asserts that had Pierce utilized the telegraph more readily, peace would have been easier to attain in Kansas Territory. This discussion, like some of his detailed analysis of the C3I problems, can get mired down in the details of who sent what to whom, why, when and how. But Mullis's point is well taken: better communication and a unified approach to the peacekeeping process could have eliminated even more of the blood in Kansas.

For Mullis, the final tourniquet arrived in the form of three Pennsylvanians: territorial Governor John W. Geary, Brevet Major General Persifor F. Smith, and future President James Buchanan. All three men were Democrats, and Geary and Smith joined with outgoing President Pierce in his desire to make Buchanan his successor. Democrats knew that violence in Kansas garnered votes for Republicans, and Geary and Smith committed themselves to keeping the peace at all costs. The key to these men's success, according to Mullis, was their willingness to use federal troops, including a newly federalized local militia, as a preventative tool in a non-partisan manner. Pierce and Davis supported Geary and Smith as they enacted this strategy, and peace in Kansas prevailed in the face of formidable odds. The Geary-Smith combo held even the fiery James Lane and his army at bay and began to restore confidence in the ballot box over the bowie knife.

Mullis's study ends with Geary's administration and with the temporary peace that his policies helped ensure, and one wonders what role the army played in restoring or losing faith in the ballot box in 1857 and 1858 as the blood ebbed and flowed in Kansas. But his epilogue suggests that the army could have learned from its successes in Kansas. He points to Reconstruction and hints at current peacekeeping ventures as areas where a better understanding of the army's historical approach to brokering peace while living amidst hostile civilians could have facilitated the pursuit of a more permanent calm. Mullis's book is important for all historians who study Bleeding Kansas and enlightening for all Americans who only associate the army with war.

Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel is assistant professor of history at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. She is the author of Bleeding Borders: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Region in Pre-Civil War Kansas and is currently working on a biography of Clarina I.H. Nichols.