

The Gray Fox: George Crook and the Indian Wars

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Review

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Magid, Paul *The Gray Fox: George Crook and the Indian Wars*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806147062

A Controversial General in the Formative Days of Army Irregular Warfare Strategy

This is the second volume in what Paul Magid projects as a trilogy on General George Crook. The first volume, *From the Redwoods to Appomattox* (Oklahoma, 2011), examined Crook's career in antebellum California and the Civil War (where he was engaged in both conventional and unconventional operations, at, for example, Burnside's Bridge and in Missouri). *The Gray Fox* explores the decade after the Civil War, when Crook fought Paiutes (labelled "Snakes" by the Americans), Apaches and Sioux, culminating in the Great Sioux War of 1876 and 1877. The third volume will cover the final decade of Crook's career, when Crook proved unable to defeat Geronimo despite the uncommon blend of tactical acumen and cultural empathy he had developed. As Magid puts it, the post-Civil War decade showcased Crook's dogged and often ruthless aggressiveness in operations pursuing and fighting Indians: what the army today labels "kinetic operations."

During this decade Crook began to develop the empathy toward Native Americans for which he is best known, but he faced more of a guerrilla war (against the Apache), and indeed something close to a conventional war (albeit against very mobile opponents, against the Sioux and Cheyenne), than an insurgency that would have placed a greater premium on that empathy. In other words, the number of Indians given the geographic spaces in question was quite low, and the United States sought to coerce them into concentration on reservations (or "removal," as Magid titles both his chapters concluding the wars against the Apache and Sioux). The military problem was to catch and defeat the Indians—to "find, fix, fight, and finish" them—while the political problem, to the extent there was one, was to balance the demands of eastern humanitarians

with those of belligerent frontiersmen. Crook had already gained substantial counter-guerrilla experience in Missouri during the Civil War: the Indians were more elusive enemies, but the army faced fewer political restraints in its operations against them than against the white Confederates in a state that the government intended to readmit to the Union without permanently displacing its population.

Magid provides nearly 400 pages of text, and nearly a hundred of notes. On the whole the outlines and trajectory of Crook's career (as noted above) are already clear, and Magid does not substantially revise them. This is however only the second modern scholarly biography, so Magid's thorough detail and careful citations will prove valuable for historians of the frontier army and its wars. In particular, by examining the recriminations, public controversies, and courts of inquiry that followed most engagements, Magid effectively relooks most of Crook's battles, while using the endnotes for valuable but parenthetical elaboration. Crook himself presents a useful example for modern officers engaged in what Western nations label irregular or unconventional warfare: he was a contradictory and polarizing personality as well as a controversial general, operating in complex and ambiguous circumstances with well-intentioned as well as malevolent critics eager to pounce at every turn. As such, Magid agrees with the late Charles M. Robinson, author of the other modern scholarly biography, *General Crook and the Western Frontier* (Oklahoma, 2001), that Crook found it difficult to balance and synthesize empathy with effective military action.

On the whole, Magid is less critical of Crook as a general than was Robinson, but *The Gray Fox* is a very balanced analysis, and is particularly critical of Crook's involvement in the murder of Crazy Horse: not that Crook ordered it, but that he did much to create the situation in which it occurred, and then left the area in order to avoid blame and damage to his reputation among the Indians (see pp. 383-85). Similarly, Magid begins *The Gray Fox* with a nuanced evaluation of Crook's attitudes toward what we today consider (or recognize as) atrocities, observing that unlike other officers "he enjoined his troops to spare women and children whenever possible. Yet to him and most officers, such losses were often considered unavoidable; and they made no apologies, despite the obvious truth that sometimes the killing was deliberate and unnecessary" (p. 18). These attitudes enabled the massacre at Steen's Mountain on June 6, 1867, when soldiers and Indian scouts killed 27 of 57 Paiute women and children (along with more than thirty warriors, all but two of those present) in a dawn

attack, and the survivors were enslaved by Crook's Indian scouts. The attackers lost one man. On a larger scale, Magid notes that during two years (1873-75) following the surrender of major Apache leaders, more than 240 Indians were killed (and approximately equal numbers captured) in 35 engagements, compared with "several soldiers and scouts" (p. 417, note 2). Since these engagements (battles seems the wrong term) were not large-scale dawn surprise attacks on villages like those at Steen's Mountain, the Marias, or the Washita, the numbers suggest a relentless pursuit and little regard for the deaths inflicted virtually any time an Apache was found outside reservation boundaries.

Magid's conclusion assesses the differing opinions of contemporary superiors, peers, and subordinates, of historians, and of the contemporary media and Crook's Indian opponents. The general's peers and superiors, and their biographers and historians, tended to be critical, whether from jealousy of Crook's success or from concern at his growing empathy for Indians, which seemed to make him less aggressive and less militarily effective. His subordinates shared in his success, felt much the same impulses toward empathy, and admired him, sometimes to the point of adoration. In most cases, the more exposure reporters had to him the more they praised him. To cap his case in Crook's favor, Magid observes that "the Indians both feared and respected his abilities," "an epitaph that the old general surely would have appreciated" (p. 398). I look forward to Magid's final volume; his trilogy will be required reading for historians of the frontier army and its wars.

Samuel Watson is professor of American and military history at the United States Military Academy, where he has taught senior thesis seminars on the nineteenth-century army and the Civil War. His books Jackson's Sword and Peacekeepers and Conquerors, on the U.S. Army officer corps on the frontiers between 1810 and 1846, were published by the University Press of Kansas in 2012 and 2013; he is working on a similar volume for 1783-1812. His email is samuel.watson@usma.edu.