

### The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression

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## Review

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**Monaco, C.S.** *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$39.50 ISBN 9781421424811

*The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression* by C.S. Monaco is an important book on an often-neglected topic. The last monograph by an academic historian on this conflict of Florida Indian Removal, John K. Mahon's *History of the Second Seminole War*, has been in print for over fifty years. While Mahon focused narrowly on elite politics and military strategy, Monaco employs settler-colonial theory to interpret the Florida war's effects on antebellum American society as a whole. This book will draw interest from specialists in military, imperial, and Native American history.

Monaco's main argument is that the Second Seminole War had wide-ranging effects on the United States. Militarily, the conflict revealed the limits to which Monaco refers in his title, as several hundred Seminoles and Miccosukees successfully resisted Removal and remained in Florida after seven years of US military campaigns. Whereas in the 1960s John K. Mahon concluded that the Second Seminole War represented progress for the American military, both in terms of logistical capabilities and the development of anti-guerrilla tactics, C.S. Monaco focuses on the damage to the Army's reputation following disgraceful episodes such as Seminole leader Osceola's capture under the pretense of a white flag. Beyond the military realm, Monaco's interdisciplinary approach allows him to consider the effects of the Second Seminole War on such topics as medicine, politics, and migration.

This is C.S. Monaco's third book and his first on military history; his first two monographs concern the Jewish diaspora in the nineteenth century. Monaco has done extensive transnational research on the Levy family, Atlantic itinerants with North African roots who became large landowners in Florida by the early nineteenth century. The Levys' migration was roughly contemporary with that of many Creek families into Florida following Andrew Jackson's intervention in the Creek Civil War. David Levy Yulee appears in Monaco's latest book, as an ironic figure whose denunciation of the Seminoles as "wanderers" belied his own family's recent arrival in the United States. Though far from representative in the American South, the Levys reinforce Monaco's broader point that American "settlers themselves were actually wanderers *par excellence* (i.e., until they staked their land claims on Native soil)" (Monaco, 29).

Monaco is a skilled writer. He has distilled extensive archival research from across the United States – along with a robust list of newspapers and published memoirs – into eleven succinct chapters with an average length of sixteen pages. The first of four parts considers the

system of treaties that many army officers of the 1830s agreed were products of US agents acting in bad faith. Fraudulent treaties led the Seminoles to resort to armed resistance. In the second chapter, Monaco argues that historians have inflated Black Seminole leadership of the conflict on the basis of General Thomas Jesup's remark that he was engaged in "a Negro and not an Indian war." It is right to point out the context of Jesup's words – he was writing to Southern politicians in hopes of securing more troops and funds for the war. Yet in making an argument focused from the top down on political and military leadership, Monaco downplays the critical role that Black Seminoles played as guides, interpreters, and soldiers during the conflict. Part two considers the history of the war in five chapters and draws on work by military historians and ethnographic scholars alike.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the book is part three, "Health, Medicine, and the Environment." Monaco argues that the Second Seminole War resulted in the proliferation of quinine as a treatment for malarial fevers and the permanent organization of the US Army's medical bureaucracy. The final section of the book, "The War and the National Mind" considers how partisan politicians in the United States adopted symbols drawn from the Second Seminole War. Osceola's controversial captivity became fodder for debates between Whigs and Democrats on the management of the war, which became a referendum on political legitimacy. The US Army's use of bloodhounds in Florida emerged as a graphic image for abolitionists opposed to the expansion of the Slave Power in the decades before the Civil War.

In his introduction, Monaco claims that his book does not set out "to create heroes or villains" (Monaco, 7). In recent settler-colonial studies, historians have castigated white American pioneers while celebrating Native American resistance to racist violence. While Monaco mostly avoids moralizing when he discusses historical actors, he ends his analysis with a harsh criticism of two modern authors, John and Mary Lou Missall, whose *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* (University Press of Florida, 2004) contains a passage about the pressure on Florida Indians to "adapt or die" in the face of American expansion. The Missalls are not professionally trained academics, but they have done as much as any recent scholar to promote Seminole history. Besides the book that Monaco allows to stand in for the preservation of the settler-colonial mindset to the present day, John and Mary Lou Missall have edited collections of primary sources from Seminole War veterans as well as a volume of poetry that features work by modern Seminole writers. To accuse the Missalls of "unrepentant social Darwinism" and imply that their work poses "insurmountable challenges" to "reconciliation with the present-day Seminoles" is both misleading and unnecessary (Monaco, 198-200). It is difficult to imagine a safer target today than alleged apologists for those US citizens and government officials who attempted ethnic cleansing in antebellum Florida. And yet we are unlikely to gain much, aside from a sense of self-satisfaction, by using history to settle moral scores.

Despite this unfortunate choice in the Epilogue, *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression* succeeds in applying a profound collection of military sources to broader perspectives on politics, culture, and ecology in antebellum American society. C.S. Monaco's work will surely be a valuable resource for historians and students of American Indian Removal in the coming years.

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