

# Coast-to-Coast Empire: Manifest Destiny and the New Mexico Borderlands

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## Review

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**Kiser, William S.** *Coast-to-Coast Empire: Manifest Destiny and the New Mexico Borderlands*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9780806160269

Billy Kiser, an Assistant Professor of History at Texas A & M University – San Antonio, is one remarkably productive historian. This time he has written an engaging and interesting study of the first decades of United States conquest in New Mexico. Kiser proposes that the Santa Fe trade, the American military occupation during the Mexican-American War, the antebellum Indian wars, the slavery question, the transcontinental railroad speculations, and the Civil War should be seen as “a single, interconnected process of imposed political and ideological transformation” (p. 13). While arguing that New Mexico mattered in the era’s national context more than previously thought, Kiser reflects on why and how the United States took it. The answer is often far from straightforward, in part because of powerful independent Apache and Navajo polities challenged the invasion and because Texas and California so clearly outshined New Mexico in the eyes of settlers, prospectors, businessmen, and politicians. Kiser proposes that New Mexico’s value was its geographical location. In order to have California, globalize the American economy, and challenge European powers in Asia, the expansionist United States needed New Mexico as a connecting thoroughfare. This interpretation underlines the role of the federal government, especially the military, and it convincingly positions New Mexico as an object pursued by rival Northern and Southern brands of settler colonialism (free soil vs. slavery).

For uncovering the interconnected processes of the American invasion, Kiser starts by examining transnational trade. Fur trappers and merchants using the Santa Fe Trail successfully oriented New Mexico’s economy toward a continental network the United States increasingly controlled. They not merely made locals dependent on American commerce, while loosening ties with Mexico City, but also initiated cultural linkages via acculturation and intermarriages. This, Kiser argues, enabled the seemingly peaceful invasion by Stephen W. Kearny’s army in 1846, the subject of Chapter 2. Yet the

invasion remained contested, as indicated in the way locals quickly rebelled against the American occupation.

It is regrettable that the invaders' voices so clearly trump local indigenous or Hispanic perspectives in this work, and that the readers get relatively little on how the invaded felt about or rationalized their actions and what was going on. This can be seen resulting from the purpose of the book; to explain the U.S. takeover in a national context, and from the reliance on English language sources. Still, for some readers centering the white invaders may seem a bit one-sided and problematic. As might Kiser largely sidestepping how active indigenous raiding in the 1840s facilitated the U.S. invasion. Furthermore, the examination in Chapter 3 on the complications of the antebellum Indian wars persuasively discusses the army and the government officials, but not so much the Apaches or the Navajos. Kiser narrates the army's poor living conditions as well as the troubled personal relationships between the War and Interior Department men and their often contradicting intentions, vacillating between feeding and civilizing the indigenous peoples to fighting and killing them. I found it striking that if the government had to spend some \$190,000 per year to feed and maintain army mules in New Mexico (p. 77), why it could not afford to properly compensate the Apaches and Navajos for their land or carry out the pledges for rations and supplies its officials made. It also seems paradoxical that many officials in high places, none probably more so than Colonel Edwin V. Sumner, loathed New Mexico and were open to idea of abandoning it to Mexicans and Indians.

Chapter 4 applies a broader lens, examining New Mexico's importance in the heated debates that gripped Washington and the nation over the nature and future of human bondage in westward expansion. The Compromise of 1850 granted New Mexico popular sovereignty, meaning it could, albeit only with federal approval, decide on slavery in the future. Yet in reality, as Kiser demonstrates, New Mexico was heavily slanted toward the South during the antebellum years. Its society already grounded on widespread captive taking and peonage and many southerners actively advocating the ideology of slavery for New Mexico, New Mexican lawmakers further tilted the territory toward the South through a succession of laws. These acts, for instance, protected the ownership of humans, determined conditions of servitude, banned free blacks from living in the territory, prohibited interracial marriages, forbid the emancipation of any black slave within New Mexico, and ordered law enforcement officials to capture runaways. This eye-opening chapter shows how the complex histories of human captivity and bondage in the Southwest extended to the American era and how the Civil War and the federal government slowly forced free labor ideology on New Mexican society. It was

President Andrew Johnson's executive order and the Thirteen Amendment that officially quelled slavery and captive taking, or at least turned the practice of involuntary servitude into nominally free labor.

If slavery was instrumental to New Mexico, so were the transcontinental railroads as is discussed in Chapter 5. The country yearned to nationalize the Pacific coast and to get its hands on the Asia trade, and for this it required a fast and reliable transport connection. With the railroads hailed as the answer, for a snow-free route New Mexico was the key. Kiser captures the energy, the visions, and the controversy as a railroad convention met in St. Louis in 1849, as surveys were conducted in New Mexico, as more land was bought from Mexico in 1853, and as numerous proposals landed in Congress, where fiery deliberation ensued until nothing happened in the way of actual railroad construction. The interconnected, and ultimately failed, Southern endeavor to have its own Pacific empire is the topic of the final chapter. While sidelined by the eastern theater, New Mexico witnessed a Confederate takeover, Union resistance and invasion via California, and unlimited warfare against the Navajos and the Apaches. In the end, the Civil War years, Kiser contemplates, did much to secure New Mexico for American expansion.

In all, this is a nicely written and solidly researched book that weaves together the different threads of American invasion in New Mexico into a consistent narrative. It should work nicely in classes pertaining to Southwest and United States history, while also being of interest to scholars. Kiser largely accomplishes what he sets out to do: to produce a cohesive story of how merchant capitalism, military occupation, political incorporation, slavery debates, and violence advanced American rule in New Mexico.

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