

Walter L. Williams, Total War Against the Navajo, in *Civil War Times*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March, 1983), pp. 12-19.

TOTAL WAR AGAINST THE NAVAJO

When Brigadier General James H. Carleton arrived to secure the New Mexico Territory for the Union in September 1862, he had more than Rebels on his mind. Seven months before, Texas troops led by Confederate Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley had invaded the territory. Lacking food and ammunition, trounced by the brutal desert elements and the few Union units available, they had trudged out of the area in April, long before Carleton was on the scene. Now, just in from a march from southern California with his 1,500-man "California Column" and primed for campaigning, the territory's new commander found himself without an adversary.

Lacking Confederates, but not vision, Carleton designated the territorial natives his new enemies and issued one of his first orders: "There is to be no council held with the Indians, nor any talks. The men are to be slain whenever and wherever they can be found. The women and children may be taken as prisoners." With those words he wrote the Navajo people of New Mexico into the history of the Civil War.

Carleton's approach to Indians said much about his personality. Born in Maine in 1814, reared in a strict New England family, deeply religious and moralistic, he had nurtured literary ambitions in his youth and thought of himself as sensitive. But he was also filled with righteous certainty, and allowed himself no change of mind or admissions of error. He took these traits into his career. As a professional soldier of twenty years and a veteran of other western campaigns, he did not favor outright extermination of native Americans, but neither did he recognize their rights to their lands. Instead, he believed, Indians should be "uplifted" by conversion to Christianity and molded to agricultural economies on reservations.

The small Mescalero Apache tribe in the southern part of the territory was the first to feel the effects of the general's autocratic bent; the only way they would know peace with the white man, Carleton haughtily informed them, was to give up their homeland and move to a small reserve in eastern New Mexico called the Bosque Redondo. There they would be kept in confinement by the Fort Sumner garrison.

Appalled and angered, 100 Mescaleros escaped to Mexico before another 400 of their number were pushed onto the reservation in early 1863. Their more numerous New Mexican neighbors, the Navajo, were alarmed.

In December 1862, while operations against the Mescalero went on, eighteen Navajo headmen traveled to the territorial capital, Santa Fe, and asked for an interview with Carleton. Frightened by the severity of the general's open, declared war on the Mescalero, and demoralized by raids on their camps by New Mexican settlers who took the general's policies to heart, they pled for peace. Carleton was blunt; they had raided settlements in the past, he could not trust their promises for peace, they should expect more of the same. Then, with incredible self-assurance he went on to explain that they should expect extermination. The only way to avoid it was to abandon their homeland and join the Mescaleros at Bosque Redondo.

The general felt good about his choice of the Bosque. Though it was land claimed by the Kiowas and Comanche, it was a barren plain where there was no pressure for white settlement. The Navajo could not easily escape it and they and their fellow inmates, the Mescalero, would serve as convenient buffers against raids launched from there by the Kiowas and Comanche against white settlements farther west.

The Navajo response to Carleton's option was equally blunt. Headman Barboncito spoke for many when he replied that though he did not wish to fight the whites, he would "never leave my country, not even if it means I will be killed."

The general counted Barboncito's opinion as nothing. The Navajo were a mere impediment to a bigger design. On May 10, 1863, he nobly wrote Major General Henry Halleck that his prime motive was to allow white settlers to expand "and not only possess themselves of the arable land but, if the country contained veins and deposits of precious metals, they might be found." Writing to Halleck a few days later, he brought up Navajo lands again, lands "richer in mineral wealth than California." Carleton was obsessed with discovering a gold and silver fortune.

The person Carleton turned to to remove the Navajo was Christopher — "Kit" Carson, famous trapper, hunter, and scout. Born in 1809 in Kentucky, he ran away to New Mexico at age 16. Over the years he had developed an appreciation of Indian cultures, and for a time was married to an Arapaho woman. During the 1850s he served effectively as a government agent to the Utes, and was respected by them for his fairness. He persuaded them to remain

loyal to the Union in the Civil War, and to even join him in defense against other Indians. An impressive character, he worked as a guide on John C. Frémont's western exploits, and had worked for Carleton in other operations. Commissioned in 1861 as a colonel of the 1st New Mexico Volunteers, Carson's proven military leadership against the Confederate invasion, and experience with Southwest Indians, combined to make him the best qualified person to command an expedition against the Navajo.

But Carson's heart was not in the campaign. He longed to return to his family at Taos, and protested he had volunteered to fight Confederates, not Indians. He favored negotiation, not Carleton's extermination threats, and not the actions of the men of the 1st New Mexico. Carleton wrote, "An Indian is more watchful and a more wary animal than a deer. He must be hunted with skill." Sadly, Carson's men usually shared the general's feelings.

Carleton ordered Carson to pursue this hunting expedition with finality. Every Navajo was to be killed or taken prisoner on sight. Carleton had told his quarry, "Go to the Bosque Redondo, or we will pursue and destroy you. We will not make peace with you on any other terms.... This war shall be pursued until you cease to exist or move. There can be no other talk on the subject." And he admonished Carson to tell the Zuni Indians, kin to the quarry, that if they aided Navajo refugees, "I will as certainly destroy their village as sure as the sun shines." It was to be total war, more devastating than anything Major General William T. Sherman had proposed for the State of Georgia.

Experienced fighters, it is undeniable the Navajo took advantage of the Union's preoccupation with the Civil War. Conflict with the whites was nothing new for them, and in the past 200 years it had become an integral part of their history in that part of the country. Since their arrival in the American Southwest centuries before, the Athapascan-speaking people, known as *Dineh*, had developed a close relationship with the native Pueblo Indians. Skilled Pueblo farmers traded their agricultural surplus for meat and hides brought to their villages by wandering bands of Dineh hunters. But this peaceful trade was disrupted in the early 1600s by the arrival of the Spanish. Expanding their empire north from Mexico, Spanish conquistadors and missionaries brutally repressed peaceful Pueblo villages. They forced the Pueblos to hand over all surpluses, thus ending native trade. The independent Dineh, whom the Spanish called 'Navajo,' responded by raiding. The Dineh not only had good reason to raid the hated Europeans, but were helped to develop a raiding economy by the capture of Spanish horses.

Mobility transformed the Dineh into wide-ranging horsemen, raiding Spanish towns and Pueblo villages with impunity. And their numbers increased as they welcomed Indians fleeing the Spanish, and incorporated new Spanish crops and livestock, especially sheep, into their lifestyle. By the 19th Century, the bandit Navajo were also prosperous herders with methods well adapted to their desert environment.

Dineh occupied a vast territory in present-day northern New Mexico and Arizona, but there was no tribal government or chief. Each band of several extended families was completely independent. A headman was recognized in every band, but even he had no power except by persuasion. Their society was remarkably egalitarian, with women being equal to men, and no individual having much control over others. Most "warfare" was really independent raiding, by small groups of young men who tried to gain wealth through capturing livestock from New Mexicans.

Old-time New Mexicans, descendants of the Spanish, were hardly guiltless victims of this raiding. They had taken up a kind of raiding of their own — capturing Indian women and children to sell as slaves. Later when Carleton set up his headquarters in Santa Fe, he would pay attention only to Indian raiding. He would ignore the fact that captured Indians were being openly sold all around him in Santa Fe, that slave raids had wiped out Dineh prosperity, and that an estimated 5,000 Dineh (over one-third of the Navajo people) were held in bondage by New Mexicans.

When people were enslaved or killed, the Dineh sometimes mounted a larger revenge raid, consisting of 30 to 100 men and women warriors. This reprisal was led by a shaman or religious leader who ritualistically blessed the raid to insure success. Much time was taken with purification ceremonies, and if the shaman made a mistake in a ceremony or a bad omen occurred, the raid had to be called off.

Although captives from these revenge raids were sometimes sold to other groups as slaves, they were usually adopted into a Navajo family to "replace" a dead person. The Dineh did not torture prisoners or burn villages, and even their reprisal raids were not warfare in a tribal sense. Their defensive strategy was to use sentries to warn their camp of an approaching enemy, and scatter rather than fight.

This back-and-forth raiding was a fact of life in the Southwest. In 1846 when the United States declared itself conqueror of the area during the Mexican War, it inherited a problem which would not be easily solved. The Navajo initially

saw the light-skinned Anglos, whom they called *Bilagaana*, as potential allies against the New Mexicans, so they willingly signed a treaty agreeing to give up their captives and stop raiding. But over the next several years the government did little to end widespread Navajo enslavement or to protect Navajo lands from encroaching white ranchers and New Mexican or Ute raiders. The Dineh called this period, after 1854, *Naahondzond*, "The Fearing Time."

A wholesale breakdown of peaceful relations between the United States Army and the Navajo occurred between 1858 and 1860, until on February 18, 1861, a settlement was reached. Seven months later this fragile peace was shattered because of an incredible incident that occurred at Fort Lyon, on the eastern border of Navajo country.

On September 22d many Navajo arrived at the fort to watch a horse-race between a soldier and a prominent headman named Manuelito. When the race began, Manuelito lost control of his horse and discovered that his bridle had been cut. The Dineh protested for a rematch, but the soldiers refused. An argument ensued, and when a soldier shot an Indian, other troops began an uncontrolled massacre. Fifteen Navajos, mostly women and children, died; another fifteen were wounded. After this senseless murder there was little peace in New Mexico.

Kit Carson started his campaign on July 7, 1863 and arrived in the heart of Navajo country, on the site of abandoned Fort Defiance, thirteen days later. There, he made contact with Ute raiders, employing 100 of them as guides, and rebuilt the fort, which he renamed Fort Canby.

Carson's command, the 1st New Mexico Volunteers, consisted of 736 men in nine mounted companies and three infantry companies. During August and September their expeditions left Fort Canby, moving southwest toward the Little Colorado River. The Dineh retreated into hiding rather than defend their settlements, and the troops spent most of their time destroying bountiful Navajo fields of corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins. To encourage the troops and Indian allies to capture more Navajo livestock, Carleton had ordered that a bonus of twenty dollars be paid for every horse and one dollar for every sheep captured.

The most dangerous conditions for the soldiers were not Indians, but the intense heat and lack of water that killed many horses. Knowing how dependent the army had become on its mounts, on August 15 a party of Navajos attempted unsuccessfully to stampede the army herd, but generally they kept away from the *Bilagaana*. The one death of an officer occurred three days later, when

Major Joseph Cummings rashly rode ahead of his troops in pursuit of fleeing Indians.

From the outset the Navajo fared much worse. Captain Eben Everett, commanding Company B, complained of his men scalping the dead: 'The Navajoes [sic] seldom or never scalp their prisoners and the barbarous practice should not have been commenced by us.' And excesses were not confined to the enlisted men. Throughout the fall, Carson's policy was to release a few captives with the message to be taken to their people that they would be treated kindly if they surrendered. His attempts were frustrated by Major Thomas Blakeney, the officer in charge of Fort Canby in Carson's absence. Blakeney mistreated and killed some prisoners, and news of his bloodshed spread among the Navajo.

The garrison itself experienced much fighting, bickering among the officers, and alcoholism. Incidents involving homosexuality and prostitution also produced controversies. Carson was not interested in disciplinary matters, and he left camp maintenance to Captain Asa B. Carey, who assumed command after Major Blakeney's transfer. But during October and November, Carson remained at Fort Canby, periodically sending out small parties to destroy more Dineh food supplies.

Up to this time only 180 Navajo had been captured, with another 70 killed, and the colonel was becoming discouraged by the lack of progress. Some small parties of Navajos even managed to capture army livestock on several occasions. Carson felt the horses of the command were in too poor a condition for a winter campaign, and he badly wanted to see his wife, so he requested leave until the campaign could resume in the spring. Carleton would have none of this, and ordered Carson to continue through the winter.

Kit Carson never realized the devastating effectiveness of his scorched earth policies. By mid-November his troops had destroyed an estimated two million pounds of Navajo crops, and many Dineh were rapidly being reduced to starvation. As families scattered to avoid the army patrols that shot on sight, the aged, pregnant women, and infirm often had to be left to starve. The Dineh later remembered these times sorrowfully, when young mothers often had to suffocate their hungry crying infants while they hid in the rocks from patrolling soldiers. The death rate was much higher than Carson imagined.

By late October a delegation of Navajo headmen came into Fort Wingate and reported a group of 500 Indians ready to surrender if they could only be allowed to live peacefully. General Carleton reiterated his policy that the only choice open to the Indians was removal to the Bosque where, he promised, they and

their livestock would be fed and "well cared for." In November sizable groups of Navajos, including the band of headman Delgadito, surrendered at Fort Wingate. Carson, meanwhile, led a twenty-two day raid as far west as the territory around the Hopi villages.

After Kit Carson returned to Fort Canby on December 5, more Indians were captured. And on January 3, 1864, Carson reported these captives "are completely destitute. They are almost entirely naked, and had it not been for the unusual growth of the Pinonberry this year, they must have been without any description of food. This is owing to the [army's] destruction of their grain . . . The dread of being discovered by my scouting parties which are continually in the field, prevents them building fires for warmth, and this adds greatly to the horrors of their situation, when all the severity of the winter in their mountains must be borne by them without protection."

On January 6, two columns, totaling 479 men, left Fort Canby for the last "stronghold" of the Navajo, Canyon de Chelly. Because of deep snow, it took six days to travel the forty miles to the canyon entrance. Part of the command, under Captain Albert Pfeiffer, was detached to enter the canyon from the east. Unknowingly, Pfeiffer missed the main canyon and instead entered the northeastern branch, Canyon del Muerto. On the three-day journey through this branch the snow reached depths of two feet, and the cold was bitter that two soldiers had their feet frozen. The canyon was so steep that the only passable route at its base was a frozen stream bed. Pfeiffer reported, The mules frequently broke through the ice and tumbled down . . . One mule split completely open under the exhausting fatigue of the march." The emaciated Dineh could only hide, or climb the steep 1,000-foot canyon walls to throw rocks down upon the soldiers. From the ledges, Pfeiffer wrote, Indians were "swearing and cursing, and threatening vengeance on my command in every variety of Spanish they were capable of mastering." Rifle fire from the troops forced the Dineh back, and the detachment made its way along the entire canyon without any deaths.

Meanwhile, Carson's main body of troops arrived at the west opening of Canyon de Chelly on January 12. Carson reconnoitered along the south rim about ten miles, and then in the next two days explored along the north rim. Becoming increasingly nervous about the whereabouts of Pfeiffer's command, Carson was overjoyed to find them at the west camp on the evening of January 14. The next day Carson sent a seventy-five-man detachment under Captain Carey to traverse the entire length of the main canyon, destroying Indian food stores and houses, then exiting from the eastern end and returning to Fort

Canby. Carey left for the fort on the 16th, and arrived on the 21st. He listed the immediate results as 23 Indians killed, 34 taken prisoner, and 200 surrendered. Carson proudly reported, 'We have shown the Indians that in no place, however formidable or inaccessible, in their opinion, are they safe from the pursuit of the troops of this command.'

Military historians have emphasized the tactical significance of the Canyon de Chelly campaign. While the efforts of the troops in this midwinter offensive are nothing short of remarkable, the real impact of the campaign lies elsewhere. The canyon may have been a refuge for the Dineh, but it was hardly a fortress stronghold. The Navajo were already defeated by the scorched-earth methods of the preceding five months. Only the fear that they would be killed if captured had kept them from surrendering.

Probably the most important aspect of the canyon campaign was the opportunity it gave Carson to speak directly with the Dineh — something he had wanted to do all along. As he reconnoitered the rims, he took particular pains to welcome captives and show his good faith by allowing them to return to Fort Canby on their own with their families. Carson told them that if they surrendered and agreed to go to the Bosque Redondo, "that the intentions of the Government toward them are eminently humane; and dictated by an earnest desire to promote their welfare; that the principle is not to destroy but to save them . . . (to provide) peace and plenty under the fostering care of the Government." Likewise, Captain Carey encouraged more surrenders by emphasizing benevolent intentions.

By January 24 approximately 500 Navajos surrendered at Fort Canby. While this number was a direct result of the de Chelly campaign and Carson's reassurances, even more Dineh were coming in as a result of headman Delgadito's persuasion. In late December, Carleton had decided to allow this leader to return from the Bosque, where he had been since November, to induce others to move there. By the first week of February, Delgadito had convinced over 1,200 refugees to surrender at Fort Wingate. And the Dineh continued to pour in to both forts; by the end of February over 3,000 had surrendered. Captain Carey, left in command of Fort Canby after Kit Carson's January 26 departure, ceased military operations.

Though Carson returned briefly in late March, he would participate in no other fighting against the Navajo. In July he was transferred to the superintendency of the Bosque Redondo reservation, where he remained until November. Then he was transferred again, this time to fight against the Plains Indians until 1867,

During February 1864 Captain Carey's' major duty was simply to keep the Navajo coming in. More arrived than he could feed or clothe, so, despite his efforts, more died while encamped at the fort. But the Dineh had little alternative to surrender; by this time their own food sources were gone, and starvation awaited many. Then in late February the first major removal party of 1,445 Navajos left for the Bosque. The trek the Dineh called "The Long Walk," 425 miles from Fort Canby to the Bosque, had begun.

For the Dineh their time of troubles seemed to continue without letup. This was caused partly by a mistaken assumption of Carleton's; he refused to believe there were more than 5,000 Navajo. Consequently, as refugees increased beyond that number, there were not enough supplies of food and clothing. He reduced rations to the Indians and even to his own troops, and sent frantic appeals for more supply money to Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas in Washington. He wrote on March 12 that the Navajo: 'have become thoroughly subdued. Now, when they have surrendered and are at our mercy, they must be taken care of; must be fed, clothed and instructed. This admits neither of discussion nor delay. These six thousand mouths must eat; and these six thousand bodies must be clothed. When it is considered what a magnificent pastoral and mineral country they have surrendered to us... [the cost of their support] sinks into insignificance."

To officials far away in Washington, in the midst of financing the Civil War, Carleton's sudden requests appeared less than pressing. Moreover, his plans for the Navajo had attracted controversy. Dr. Michael Steck, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for New Mexico, violently opposed Navajo settlement on the Bosque. Steck felt that the reservation could not support more than 2,000 people, and that the Apaches alone should be held there. To inundate the forty-square-mile reserve with up to 12,000 Navajos, traditional enemies of the Apaches, seemed to him the height of insanity.

Carleton ignored Steck's objections, and the Interior Department refused to take responsibility for the Navajo. The Dineh, meanwhile, suffered on the Long Walk. New Mexican slaveraiders captured some, while soldiers mistreated or raped others. If there were not enough wagons to carry the aged and sick, those individuals were left along the roadside to starve. Unseasonal spring freezes killed more, and others drowned as they crossed the Rio Grande River. It was remembered among Navajos as a time of misery, hunger, mistreatment, and death. Of the 11,468 who made the journey, 3,272 did not complete the trip; though some escaped and others were captured by New Mexicans, most of this number died on the trail.

Once they arrived at Bosque Redondo, the Dineh tried to grow crops on the strange barren ground, but the water was alkaline and their sheep weakened on the different vegetation. Insects, hailstorms, floods, and drought destroyed much of the fields. The lack of wood forced the people to dig pits in the ground for shelter. And when another winter came, the shortage of firewood meant more sickness and death. The Dineh had never seen such a barren land, desolately flat and without rocks or trees. They feared that their healing ceremonies were of no spiritual power outside their native land, and the wild plants they used as medicine could not be found. When another 2,000 people, about one-fourth of their population, died during the first three years on the reserve, the Dineh became convinced that each successive catastrophe was their gods' way of telling them to leave the Bosque.

With the distraction of the Civil War over, in 1866 Carleton's reservation attracted so much controversy he was removed from command. Government officials were concerned about the high rate of sickness and death among the Indians and were appalled by the high costs needed to support the reservation. For their part, the Dineh wanted nothing more than to return in peace to their homeland. Finally, in June 1868, the government reversed Carleton's policies and allowed the Navajo to make the journey homeward and leave the hated Bosque behind.