Review of *Terrible Justice: Sioux Chiefs and U.S. Soldiers on the Upper Missouri, 1854-1868* by Doreen Chaky

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When strong tensions exist between cultures, small incidents can have grave consequences. Thus, in August of 1854, when a Sioux Indian living near Fort Laramie, Nebraska Territory, found a lame cow and killed it to feed his family, a sad chapter began. The cow’s emigrant owner complained of his loss to the fort’s commander, and Lt. John Grattan was soon on his way to a Sioux encampment to demand that the thief be turned over to face justice. As a cannon rolled into place to reinforce his demand, violence broke out, and thirty soldiers, including Grattan, soon lay dead. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis viewed the event as a deliberate and unprovoked attack, and the following year ordered Brig. Gen. William Harney into the field to punish any Native Americans he could find and remind them to stay clear of white roads and settlements. On September 3, 1855, Harney attacked a camp of a few hundred Sioux hunting buffalo, killing eighty-six of them at the Battle of Blue Water Creek in what is now western Nebraska. Over the following year, Harney traveled through the Northern Plains and hammered out a treaty with a number of bands.
Although the treaty was never ratified, it was nonetheless held over the Indians’ heads for years as a prerequisite to receiving their annuity goods.

As the discovery of gold in Idaho Territory brought increased travel through Sioux lands in 1862, tensions peaked again, this time to the east in Minnesota. Once more, the triggering incident was trivial. In the midst of a crop failure and impatience with the late arrival of annuities, the theft of eggs from a white family escalated to their murders. In the paroxysm of violence that followed, commonly known as the Dakota Uprising of 1862, some 500 white settlers were killed. Though already hard pressed by the Civil War, the United States military mounted a vigorous response.

In June 1863, Brig. Gen. Henry Sibley entered Sioux territory from the east with 1,400 infantry and 500 cavalry soldiers. The plan was to drive the fleeing enemy before him into the waiting forces of Brig. Gen. Alfred Sully, who was to ascend the Missouri from Fort Pierre. Low water in the Missouri River prevented Sully from moving his troops; however, with the extraordinary mobility of the Sioux and the extent of their territory, it is unlikely that such a “hammer and anvil” plan would have worked anyway. Sibley engaged the Sioux in three battles on his way west; few casualties were suffered by either side. Finding nobody at the appointed rendezvous, he returned to Minnesota, destroying what enemy property he could find on the way. Sully finally took the field in late August. His only engagement of consequence took place on September 3 when he came upon some 600 tepees, whose owners were hunting to secure winter stores. Known variously as a battle or a massacre, some 200 Sioux were killed at Whitstone Hill and their property destroyed. Sully led his men into western Dakota Territory again in 1864 where he engaged the Sioux a few times and, in December, negotiated the release of Fanny Kelly, a white woman who had been taken prisoner by the Sioux in July.

The Indians’ response was complicated by the internal tension between those who urged the pursuit of peace and accommodation and those advocating all-out war. Terrible Justice offers a well-nuanced analysis of this aspect of the uprising, along with a careful description of the various Sioux bands and their interrelations. While the campaign proceeded, the U.S. government was suffering from its own internal conflict, with the Department of War and the Indian Bureau often working at cross-purposes.

Terrible Justice is thoroughly referenced and well illustrated with photographs of all the main players. Given the detailed descriptions of the military actions involved, the two maps included are not sufficient to support the text.

Many sources refer to the Indian Wars as beginning in 1866, leaving the events of 1862 quite separated from the larger picture. The geographical distance of Minnesota from the western theater contributes to the sense that the conflict there occurred in isolation from the broader cultural and military history of the Northern Plains. Doreen Chaky’s book provides an excellent remedy to this misconception, tying a wide range of events together to create a coherent and comprehensive picture. This in itself makes it a welcome addition to any library of the history of the West.

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