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Review of *The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783-1900* by Robert Wooster

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Given the vast breadth and depth of American military historiography, well-organized and well-written narrative overviews of the field are always welcome. Robert Wooster’s recently released The American Military Frontiers certainly fits that description. Wooster, a professor of history at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, and the author of four other books on western military history, synthesizes several generations of previous scholarship to support his most fundamental theme: that the Army served not only as the executor of nineteenth-century national policy, but also as an important catalytic “shaper” of that policy. In its attention to the multiple roles played by the Army on the frontier, Wooster’s work is most reminiscent of Michael Tate’s award-winning The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West (1999). Wooster also draws from, and ably summarizes, a wide array of primary archival sources as well as scores of secondary books and articles by noted scholars such as Robert Utley, Colin Calloway, Francis Prucha, and William Dobak, among many others. Indeed, one of the greatest values of the volume may be found in its extensive bibliography, which would serve as an extremely useful starting point for anyone seeking to explore specific topics in more detail. In addition, Wooster provides a large collection of wonderful maps and illustrations—many of them unique and rarely, if ever, previously published—that should be destined to find their way onto projector screens in history classrooms across the country.

One of the key recurring threads of Wooster’s narrative is the impact of the Army’s establishment of forts throughout the Great Plains and the Far West. Those installations, he demonstrates, became the centerpieces of the federal government’s presence on the nation’s many frontiers, as they frequently evolved into civilian communities that gradually knit the
country together in ever-expanding networks of transportation, communication, and commercial activity. Simultaneously, those same forts provided the "modicum of security" that was, then and now, generally perceived as the military's most natural role. On this point, the book is particularly useful for students of Great Plains history, inasmuch as Wooster devotes considerable attention to the development of such iconic Plains installations as Forts Atkinson, Belknap, Fetterman, Kearny, Laramie, Leavenworth, Randall, and Sill, among many others.

Whatever this volume may lack in terms of innovative analysis is more than overcome by the value and high quality of its academic synthesis, and its lively and accessible narrative style. Wooster deserves an appreciative audience for this work, among both lay readers and specialists alike.

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