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## Book Review: Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869.* By Jerome A. Greene. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xii + 292 pp. Map, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

At dawn on November 27, 1868, Lt. Col. George A. Custer led troopers of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry in an attack on the village of Black Kettle, a Southern Cheyenne peace chief. Custer's men thundered across the frozen, snow encrusted bottom land of the Washita River in what is now Roger Mills County, Oklahoma, surprising and defeating the Cheyennes. In this book the author describes the circumstances that led to this pivotal event and its consequences.

Inhabiting the Great Plains since the late 1700s, the Southern Cheyennes claimed as their traditional domain land between the Platte and Arkansas rivers. Success as a warrior, as in other tribes that practiced the horse/buffalo culture, became one of the most important means of acquiring social status. Prior to the arrival of non-Indians, they frequently engaged in combat with their neighbors. When in the 1850s significant numbers of non-Indians began to traverse their homeland, the Southern Cheyennes regarded these transient white pioneers as a curiosity they tolerated or avoided. During this period Black Kettle emerged as a principal advocate of cooperation with the white man.

In the 1860s this situation quickly changed. On November 29, 1864, Colonel John M. Chivington perpetrated the Sand Creek Massacre on Black Kettle's peaceful village. This event produced two important consequences. First, Black Kettle's influence as an advocate

of peaceful coexistence declined dramatically. Second, a series of retaliatory raids by Southern Cheyennes and other warriors produced demands to make the Plains safe for settlers.

Early in 1868, General Philip H. Sheridan devised a winter campaign to pacify the Central Plains. By this time Black Kettle had removed his followers to Indian Territory to avoid the fighting. Yet warriors of his band joined others to raid settlers and travelers on the Colorado and Kansas frontier. It was their trail Custer's Osage scouts followed that brought the troops to Black Kettle's Washita River village. The attack left Black Kettle and his wife among the fatalities. Warriors from other bands encamped along the river rushed to the aid of the embattled village and a day-long fight ensued. The success of Custer's strike convinced most Southern Plains tribes to accept reservations assigned to them in the Medicine Lodge treaties of 1867.

Greene's book is not the first to consider this engagement. *The Battle of the Washita* by Stan Hoig (1976) and *Washita* by Mary Jane Warde (2003) also carefully examine this episode in Plains Indian history. The difference is that Greene unequivocally and with persuasive evidence asserts that Custer's attack was a battle, not a massacre as claimed by critics of the engagement then and now. Moreover, the author keeps events in historical context. He clearly explains the policy of the army toward hostile Indians, the inability of Black Kettle and others to control their warriors, and the divisiveness these events brought to the Southern Cheyennes. The author, no stranger to devotees of western military history, writes with alacrity, employs much detail, and conveys a sense of anticipation as events build to a climax. This book will make

a good selection for college classes and seminars. More important, it provides scholars and general readers with a significant perspective on one of the pivotal events in Southern Plains history in the nineteenth century.

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