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Book Review: Peacekeeping on the Plains: Army Operations in Bleeding Kansas

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Peacekeeping on the Plains: Army Operations in Bleeding Kansas. By Tony R. Mullis. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004. xvii + 278 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$44.95.

In *Bleeding Kansas*, the U.S. Army was “the key instrument” in “the territorial governor’s peacekeeping arsenal.” There are many articles on the use of the Regular Army in domestic law enforcement, and a couple of books that treat several different case studies (Durwood Ball’s *Army Regulars* [2001] and my own forthcoming work), but *Peacekeeping on the Plains*, the only book-length study of a single peacekeeping campaign during the nineteenth century, provides invaluable context and detail. As an Air Force officer, Mullis has brought the tools of today’s doctrinal frameworks and language to his analysis, thereby strengthening his work by fostering greater specificity.

Following several chapters that provide context along with an account of William S. Harney’s expedition against the Sioux in 1855, *Peacekeeping on the Plains* focuses on the relations between army officers and the federal and territorial governments in Kansas in 1855 and 1856. Mullis finds that the federal executive branch was largely reactive, the territorial government proactive (at first unfairly so, under the avowedly pro-slavery administration of Wilson Shannon). At the same time, army officers like Edwin Vose Sumner (commanding the peacekeeping operations through mid-summer 1856), while willing to present ideas, were reluctant to act without authorization from Washington. Given the explosive situation, all three government forces sought more reliable means to achieve their objectives. Both the federal and the territorial governments preferred to use regular troops rather than partisan citizen-soldier militia, and, along with the army, preferred written communications to the faster but less reliable telegraph system.

Excesses of political fervor were the greatest threat to peace. Both sides feared partisanship among army officers and could present some evidence for it. With the 1856 elections coming

up, the Pierce administration, wanting to tamp down the fires in Kansas to deny the new Republican party its most energizing campaign issue, assigned Major General Persifor F. Smith, a known Democrat, to command. Smith that June consulted with Democratic presidential nominee James Buchanan about peacekeeping policy—at least four months before the election. New territorial governor John White Geary, recognizing that even a “legitimate” pro-slavery territorial militia would continue to provoke the formation of free soil counterweights, worked closely and effectively with Smith to monopolize organized armed force under federal control by disarming militias or incorporating them into the federal territorial militia. Mullis concludes that despite some partisanship and conflicts of interest involving land speculation, “officers suppressed their political feelings to accomplish their peacekeeping mission.”

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