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## A Review of *The Indian Frontier of the American West* by Robert M. Utley

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*The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890.* By Robert M. Utley, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xxi + 325 pp. \$19.95, paper \$10.95.

In the past twenty years or so the Western American Indians and their conflicts with the white man have become the object of serious historical inquiry. The policies pursued by the United States government have received searching scrutiny, and the study of white men's attitudes toward Indians has become almost a field in itself. The literate public has become aware as never before of the consequences for the Indians of white frontier expansion. What has been needed for some time is a synthesis of the wide range of work being done in the field.

Robert Utley is, of course, a long-time scholar in the field. In *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, and *Frontier Regulars* he has provided what are now standard treatments of the "Ghost Dance" and the military aspect of Indian-white relations. Now he has demonstrated his grasp of the whole field. Instead of the conventional period 1865-1890, he takes the whole stretch of time from the United States' leap to the Pacific in the 1840s to Wounded Knee. At the beginning of the period most Indians west of the Mississippi, though aware of a white presence, still lived in more or less traditional ways. At the end, virtually all were confined on reservations, subject to the will of the federal government.

Utley surveys every relevant topic for his period. The actual military history of the various conflicts bulks large, as it should, and of course he is particularly qualified to understand and explain both the campaigns and the role of the army in Indian-white relations. But government Indian policy and the attitudes and politics that shaped it are of equal or greater importance, and Utley weaves together the wars and the background to show their complex interaction.

Utley's purpose throughout is not to casti-

gate or to defend, but to understand. He reminds us that both whites and Indians were locked into their separate cultural viewpoints, and that most of the time they were quite unable to understand each other. White expansion into the West—itself accepted as right and inevitable by white culture—continually created situations where such lack of understanding, combined with normal human failings, could be fatal. Since the Indians were quantitatively weaker, they stood to lose in all such situation in the long run.

There are, as noted, many recent works treating some aspect of this period, and some of them are quite good. But with Utley's book we have a lucid, thoughtful, and detailed survey of the whole subject to which a reader can turn with the confidence that it will guide him to an understanding of a complex, often troubling, part of our history.

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