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Review of *Circle of Fire: The Indian War of 1865* By John D. McDermott

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Circle of Fire: The Indian War of 1865. By John D. McDermott. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003. xvi + 287 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95.

The Indian War of 1865 marks the last time Plains Indians actually took the offensive against white intrusions into their territory. Besides the basic disruption of their hunting grounds by thousands of outsiders en route to the gold fields of Montana, the immediate cause was the massacre of Black Kettle's band of Cheyennes at Sand Creek by Colorado Territorial Volunteers in 1864. Throughout *Circle of Fire*, John D. McDermott refers to the hostile tribes as "the avengers," and rightfully so. Although in subsequent campaigns the Indians were largely on the defensive, the war of 1865 set the tone for the twenty-five years of bloodshed that culminated at Wounded Knee in 1890.

McDermott does an excellent job of chronicling this little-known and little-understood war as a whole. The book's real value, however, lies in his conclusions. He points out that the war was fought primarily by Volunteer troops who expected to be discharged at the end of the Civil War. Instead, they found themselves thrust into an Indian campaign, their disillusionment augmented by a new militancy among the Indians. But McDermott also notes that despite several mutinies, the Volunteers, when called on to fight and endure, acquitted themselves admirably.

If the campaign failed, it was largely because of the proverbial "system." McDermott points to a breakdown of plans and inadequacies of a military organization not suited for the Plains. As an institution, the army learned nothing from this or any other Indian campaign.

McDermott offers new insights into the often deprecated career of Brigadier General Patrick Connor. He notes that Connor understood Indian fighting as well as any officer of his time and, left to his own devices, might have succeeded in breaking the Indian resistance. This, in turn, might have avoided

ensuing decades of bloodshed. But this was not to be.

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