

INTRODUCTION

REVERSED COLONIALISM

This book is about an American empire that, according to conventional histories, did not exist. It tells the familiar tale of expansion, resistance, conquest, and loss, but with a reversal of usual historical roles: it is a story in which Indians expand, dictate, and prosper, and European colonists resist, retreat, and struggle to survive.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, the Comanches were a small tribe of hunter-gatherers living in the rugged canyonlands on the far northern frontier of the Spanish kingdom of New Mexico. They were newcomers to the region, having fled the political unrest and internal disputes in their old homelands on the central Great Plains, and they were struggling to rebuild their lives in a foreign land whose absorption into the Spanish world seemed imminent. It was here, at the advancing edge of the world's largest empire, that the Comanches launched an explosive expansion. They purchased and plundered horses from New Mexico, reinvented themselves as mounted fighters, and reenvisioned their place in the world. They forced their way onto the southern plains, shoved aside the Apaches and other residing nations, and over the course of three generations carved out a vast territory that was larger than the entire European-controlled area north of the Río Grande at the time. They became "Lords of the South Plains," ferocious horse-riding warriors who forestalled Euro-American intrusions into the American Southwest well into the late nineteenth century.¹

The Comanches are usually portrayed in the existing literature as a formidable equestrian power that erected a daunting barrier of violence to colonial expansion.² Along with the Iroquois and Lakotas, they have been embedded in collective American memory as one of the few Native societies able to pose a significant challenge to the Euro-American conquest of North America. But the

idea of a Comanche barrier leaves out at least half of the story. For in the mid-eighteenth century Comanches reinvented themselves once more, this time as a hegemonic people who grew increasingly powerful and prosperous at the expense of the surrounding societies, Indian and Euro-American alike. Gradually, a momentous shift took shape. In the Southwest, European imperialism not only stalled in the face of indigenous resistance; it was eclipsed by indigenous imperialism.

That overturn of power relations was more than a historical glitch, a momentary rupture in the process of European colonization of indigenous America. For a century, roughly from 1750 to 1850, the Comanches were the dominant people in the Southwest, and they manipulated and exploited the colonial outposts in New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and northern Mexico to increase their safety, prosperity, and power. They extracted resources and labor from their Euro-American and Indian neighbors through thievery and tribute and incorporated foreign ethnicities into their ranks as adopted kinspeople, slaves, workers, dependents, and vassals. The Comanche empire was powered by violence, but, like most viable empires, it was first and foremost an economic construction. At its core was an extensive commercial network that allowed Comanches to control nearby border markets and long-distance trade, swing surrounding groups into their political orbit, and spread their language and culture across the midcontinent. And as always, long-term foreign political dominance rested on dynamic internal development. To cope with the opportunities and challenges of their rapid expansion, Comanches created a centralized multilevel political system, a flourishing market economy, and a graded social organization that was flexible enough to sustain and survive the burdens of their external ambitions.

The Comanches, then, were an interregional power with imperial presence, and their politics divided the history of the Southwest and northern Mexico into two sharply contrasting trajectories. While Comanches reached unparalleled heights of political and economic influence, material wealth, and internal stability, the Spanish colonies, the subsequent Mexican provinces, and many indigenous agricultural societies suffered from a number of disruptions typical to peripheral regions in colonial worlds. Without fully recognizing it, the Spaniards, French, Mexicans, and Anglo-Americans were all restrained and overshadowed in the continent's center by an indigenous empire. That empire—its rise, anatomy, costs, and fall—is the subject of this book.

Great American Indian powers have captivated scholarly imagination since Hernán Cortés fought his way into Tenochtitlán and Francisco Pizarro marched into Cuzco. Over the years, historians and archaeologists have uncovered sev-

eral imperialistic or quasi-imperialistic Native American polities that dominated other indigenous societies. The Aztecs, Incas, and other empire-builders in the precontact Americas come easily to mind, but one might, with a little more effort, also think of the Powhatans in early seventeenth-century Tidewater Virginia, Haudenosaunee—the Iroquois confederacy—in the seventeenth-century Northeast, or the Lakotas on the nineteenth-century northern plains.³

This book belongs to that genre while also stepping outside of it. Comanches, it shows, fought and subjugated other Native societies, but more important to their ascendancy was their ability to reduce Euro-American colonial regimes to building blocks of their own dominant position. Comanches achieved something quite exceptional: they built an imperial organization that subdued, exploited, marginalized, co-opted, and profoundly transformed near and distant colonial outposts, thereby reversing the conventional imperial trajectory in vast segments of North and Central America.⁴

Comanches, moreover, did that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the high tide of imperial contestation when colonial powers jostled for preeminence across North America. The colonial Southwest was a setting for several dynamic and diverging imperial projects that converged and clashed in unexpected ways. As Spanish, French, British, and U.S. empires vied with one another over land, commerce, and raw materials, Comanches continued to expand their realm, profoundly frustrating European fantasies of superiority. The result was a colonial history that defies conventional wisdom. A long-standing notion has it that the course and contours of early American history were determined by the shifts in Euro-American power dynamics and the reactions of metropolitan headquarters in Madrid, London, Versailles, Mexico City, and Washington to those shifts. The Southwest, however, is a striking exception. Metropolitan visions mattered there, but they often mattered less than the policies and designs of Comanches, whose dominance eventually reached hemispheric dimensions, extending from the heart of North America deep into Mexico. Indeed, Comanche ascendancy is the missing component in the sweeping historical sequence that led to New Spain's failure to colonize the interior of North America, the erosion of Spanish imperial authority in the Southwest, and the precipitous decay of Mexican power in the north. Ultimately, the rise of the Comanche empire helps explain why Mexico's Far North is today the American Southwest.

Yet for all their strength and potential for expansion, Comanches never attempted to build a European-style imperial system. A creation of itinerant nomadic bands, the Comanche empire was not a rigid structure held together by a single central authority, nor was it an entity that could be displayed on a map

as a solid block with clear-cut borders. Unlike Euro-American imperial powers, Comanches did not seek to establish large-scale settlement colonies, and their vision of power was not direct rule over multiple subject peoples. They did not publicize their might with ostentatious art and architecture, and they left behind no imperial ruins to remind us of the extent of their power. Preferring informal rule over formal institutions for both cultural and strategic reasons, Comanches nevertheless created a deeply hierarchical and integrated intersocietal order that was unmistakably imperial in shape, scope, and substance. The numerous Comanche bands and divisions formed an internally fluid but externally coherent coalition that accomplished through a creative blending of violence, diplomacy, extortion, trade, and kinship politics what more rigidly structured empires have achieved through direct political control: they imposed their will upon neighboring polities, harnessed the economic potential of other societies for their own use, and persuaded their rivals to adopt and accept their customs and norms.

To understand the particular nature of Comanche imperialism, it is necessary to understand how Comanche ascendancy intertwined with other imperial expansions—New Spain's tenacious if erratic northward thrust from central Mexico, New France's endeavor to absorb the interior grasslands into its commercial realm, and the United States' quest for a transcontinental empire. Comanches, to simplify a complex multistage process, developed aggressive power policies in reaction to Euro-American invasions that had threatened their safety and autonomy from the moment they had entered the southern plains. Indeed, the fact that Comanche territory, *Comanchería*, was encircled throughout its existence by Euro-American settler colonies makes the Comanches an unlikely candidate for achieving regional primacy. But as the Comanches grew in numbers and power, that geopolitical layout became the very foundation of their dominance. Their overwhelming military force, so evident in their terror-inspiring mounted guerrilla attacks, would have allowed them to destroy many New Mexico and Texas settlements and drive most of the colonists out of their borders. Yet they never adopted such a policy of expulsion, preferring instead to have their borders lined with formally autonomous but economically subservient and dependent outposts that served as economic access points into the vast resources of the Spanish empire.

The Comanches, then, were an imperial power with a difference: their aim was not to conquer and colonize, but to coexist, control, and exploit. Whereas more traditional imperial powers ruled by making things rigid and predictable, Comanches ruled by keeping them fluid and malleable.⁵ This informal, almost ambiguous nature of Comanches' politics not only makes their empire diffi-

cult to define; it sometimes makes it difficult to see. New Mexico and Texas existed side by side with Comanchería throughout the colonial era, and though often suffering under Comanche pressure, the twin colonies endured, allowing Spain to claim sweeping imperial command over the Southwest. Yet when examined closely, Spain's uncompromised imperial presence in the Southwest becomes a fiction that existed only in Spanish minds and on European maps, for Comanches controlled a large portion of those material things that could be controlled in New Mexico and Texas. The idea of land as a form of private, revenue-producing property was absent in Comanche culture, and livestock and slaves in a sense took the place of landed private property. This basic observation has enormous repercussions on how we should see the relationship between the Comanches and colonists. When Comanches subjected Texas and New Mexico to systematic raiding of horses, mules, and captives, draining wide sectors of those productive resources, they in effect turned the colonies into imperial possessions. That Spanish Texas and New Mexico remained unconquered by Comanches is not a historical fact; it is a matter of perspective.

In this book I examine the Comanche power complex as part of an emerging transatlantic web that had not yet consolidated into an encompassing world economy. Seen from this angle, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southwest and Mexican North emerge as a small-scale world-system that existed outside the controlling grip of Europe's overseas empires. Comanchería was its political and economic nucleus, a regional core surrounded by more or less peripheral societies and territories whose fortunes were linked to the Comanches through complex webs of cooperation, coercion, extortion, and dependence. The world-system approach to history has often been criticized for being overly strict and mechanistic, which it is. I have used its spatial language and metaphors selectively but also advisedly, fully aware that they convey a certain kind of rigidity and permanence. Viewed against the backdrop of constantly shifting frontiers of North America, the intersocietal space the Comanches occupied and eventually dominated was marked by unusually hard, enduring, and distinctive power hierarchies.⁶

This Comanche-centric world was by no means self-contained; it was anchored from its inception to the broader colonial world through the strong administrative and economic networks among New Mexico, Texas, northern Mexican provinces, and Mexico City. But these institutional linkages often had less impact on the colonies' internal development than Comanche policies did; the troubled and convoluted history of New Mexico, Texas, Coahuila, and Nueva Vizcaya may have had as much to do with the Comanches as with the ebbs and flows of New Spain's imperial fortunes. In fact, the systemic connec-

tions between Comanchería and northern New Spain gave the Comanches a modicum of exploitative power over the Spanish empire as a whole. When New Mexico was founded at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was expected to fuel Spain's imperial veins with raw materials and laborers, but by the eighteenth century the colony was leaking so much wealth into Comanchería that it could survive only by continuous financial backing from Mexico City. Texas functioned through much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a money-draining, often tributary defensive province against Comanche expansion. By subsidizing its far northern frontier, then, the Spanish empire in effect drained itself to feed and fend off an indigenous empire.

Although I focus on a particular place in time in this book, my arguments engage in the broader debates about colonialism, frontiers, and borderlands in the Americas. Over the past three decades, historians have conceived entirely new ways of thinking about Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and their tangled histories. Moving beyond conventional top-down narratives that depict Indians as bit players in imperial struggles or tragic victims of colonial expansion, today's scholarship portrays them as full-fledged historical actors who played a formative role in the making of early America. Rather than a seamless, preordained sequence, the colonization of the Americas is now seen as a dialectic process that created new worlds for all involved. Indigenous societies did not simply vanish in the face of Euro-American onslaught. Many adjusted and endured, rebuilding new economies and identities from the fragments of the old ones. Indians fought and resisted, but they also cooperated and coexisted with the newcomers, creating new hybrid worlds that were neither wholly Indian nor European. By foregrounding indigenous peoples and their intentions in the story of early America, recent scholarship has reinvigorated a field that only a generation ago was suffocating under its parochial and mythologizing tenets.⁷

Significant as this revisionist turn has been, it is not complete. Too often the alterations have been cosmetic rather than corrective. Historians have sanitized vocabularies and updated textbooks to illuminate the subtleties of colonial encounters, but the broad outlines of the story have largely remained intact. Outside a cadre of Native and early American specialists, the understanding of Indian–Euro-American relations is still limited by what Vine Deloria, Jr., called “the ‘cameo’ theory of history”: indigenous peoples make dramatic entrances, stay briefly on the stage, and then fade out as the main saga of European expansion resumes, barely affected by the interruption. With too few exceptions, revisionist historians have limited themselves to retelling the story of colonial conquest from the Indian side of the frontier. They have probed how Native peoples

countered and coped with colonial expansion and have largely overlooked the other side of the dynamic—the impact of Indian policies on colonial societies. Such an approach reinforces the view of European powers as the principal driving force of history and tends to reduce indigenous actions to mere strategies of subversion and survival. To recover the full dimension of Indian agency in early American history, we must once again reevaluate the intersections among Native peoples, colonial powers, frontiers, and borderlands. We have to turn the telescope around and create models that allow us to look at Native policies toward colonial powers as more than defensive strategies of resistance and containment.⁸

This book offers new insights into that effort, and it does so by questioning some of the most basic assumptions about indigenous peoples, colonialism, and historical change. Instead of perceiving Native policies toward colonial powers simply as strategies of survival, it assumes that Indians, too, could wage war, exchange goods, make treaties, and absorb peoples in order to expand, extort, manipulate, and dominate. Instead of reading Indian dispossession back in time to structure the narrative of early America, it embraces the multiple possibilities and contingency of historical change. At its most fundamental level, it promotes a less linear reading of Indian-white relations in North America. After the initial contacts, when Indians usually held the upper hand over the invaders, the fate of indigenous cultures was not necessarily an irreversible slide toward dispossession, depopulation, and cultural declension. As the history of the Comanches illustrates, almost diametrically opposite trajectories were possible. Before their final defeat in the canyonlands of the Texas Panhandle in 1875, Comanches had experienced an astounding ascendancy from the margins of the colonial world into imperial prominence as a dominant people who thrived and expanded in the midst of Euro-American colonies for over a century.

The history of Indian–Euro-colonial relations, as we today understand them, is inseparable from the history of the frontier, which forms another theoretical thread of this study. Over the past fifteen years or so, the frontier has made a forceful reentry into the very center of North American historiography. Recast as a zone of cultural interpenetration, the frontier is finding new relevance among historians who not so long ago had rejected Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as an ethnocentric and narcissistic rendition of the European takeover of North America. Instead of Turner's binary dividing line between civilization and savagery—or as seedbed of American virtues—historians have reenvisioned the frontier as a socially charged space where Indians and invaders competed for resources and land but also shared skills, foods, fashions, customs, languages, and beliefs. Indian-white frontiers, new work has revealed, were messy, eclectic

contact points where all protagonists are transformed—regardless of whether the power dynamics between them are evenly or unevenly balanced. This has brought the frontier closer to its rival concept, the borderland, which Herbert Eugene Bolton, the pioneering historian of Spanish North America, coined to challenge Turner's constricted Anglo-centric vision. Skepticism toward the nation-state as the main unit of historical analysis, a hemispheric vision, an appreciation of cultural and political mutability, and an emphasis on indigenous agency are the traditional strengths of borderlands history; today they are the strengths of frontier studies as well.⁹

This book makes use of several insights of new frontier-borderland studies. On a macrolevel, it shows how Comanches moved goods, ideas, and people across ecological, ethnic, and political boundaries, creating transnational (or trans-imperial) networks of violence and exchange that defied the more rigid spatial arrangements Euro-American powers hoped to implement in the Southwest. On a microlevel, it shows how Comanches forged intimate small-scale, face-to-face markets with Euro-Americans, creating nascent versions of what Daniel Usner has called "frontier exchange economies," self-sufficient trade systems that mostly existed outside of the burgeoning transatlantic economy. It describes how Comanches forced the colonizers to modify their aggressive ways and at the same time recalibrated some of their own practices to adjust to the Euro-American presence, engaging in the kind of process of mediation, mutual invention, and cultural production Richard White has called "the middle ground." Geopolitically, Comanches' Southwest would seem to fit into Jeremy Adelman's and Stephen Aron's recent redefinition of a borderland: it was a place where interimperial rivalries enhanced Native peoples' strategic options by permitting them to play off colonial powers against one another.¹⁰

And yet the new frontier-borderland studies can explain the world I am describing only partially. The Southwest depicted in this book is a violent and traumatic place where Natives and newcomers saw one another more as strangers and adversaries than as co-creators of a common world; it was only incidentally a place where frontier exchange economies or middle grounds could flourish. When Comanches and Euro-Americans met to discuss such contentious and conceptually slippery matters as war, peace, reciprocity, loyalty, and justice, they sometimes relied on creative and expedient misunderstandings that were so fundamental for the creation of middle grounds, but more often than not, they understood each other all too well and generally did not like what they saw. Euro-Americans deemed Comanches needy, pushy, oversensitive, and obstinate in their pagan beliefs, and in turn appeared greedy, arrogant, bigoted, and grotesquely boorish to Comanche sensibilities. In the end, most attempts at

meaningful cross-cultural mediation crumbled against the insolence of Euro-Americans and the impatience of Comanches. Negotiating from a position of growing physical and political power, Comanches adopted an increasingly assertive stance toward colonial powers. Their foreign policy became less a matter of accommodating Euro-American expectations than rejecting, reforming, or simply ignoring them.¹¹

Viewed broadly, the Southwest under the Comanche regime becomes a case study of alternative frontier history. From a Comanche point of view, in fact, there were no frontiers. Where contemporary Euro-Americans (as well as later historians) saw or imagined solid imperial demarcations, Comanches saw multiple opportunities for commerce, gift exchanges, pillaging, slave raiding, ransoming, adoption, tribute extracting, and alliance making. By refusing to accept the Western notion of sovereign, undivided colonial realms, they shredded Euro-American frontiers into their component parts—colonial towns, presidios, missions, ranches, haciendas, Native villages—and dealt with each isolated unit separately, often pitting their interests against one another. In the colonial Southwest, it was Comanches, not Euro-Americans, who mastered the policies of divide and rule.

Similarly, Comanches' assertive and aggressive policies toward Euro-Americans were only secondarily a borderland product. Comanches certainly benefited from their location between competing colonial regimes, but they had little in common with the Indians found in most borderland histories. Rather than marginalized people balancing between rival colonial regimes to enact minor alleviations in imperial policies, Comanches were key players who often forced the would-be colonizers to compete for *their* military support and goodwill and navigate *their* initiatives and intentions. In character and logic, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southwest was unequivocally a Comanche creation, an indigenous world where intercolonial rivalries were often mere surface disturbances on the deeper, stronger undercurrent of Comanche imperialism.

In popular imagination, the American Southwest before the United States takeover in 1848 is a study in imperial failure. The overstretched and stifflingly bureaucratic Spanish empire, with its North American headquarters in Mexico City, had spread its resources too thinly across the Western Hemisphere to affix its northernmost provinces firmly into its imperial structure. The French, while more resourceful than their myopic Spanish rivals, were too erratic and too preoccupied with Old World power politics, the British colonies, and Canadian fur trade to do anything imperially impressive with Louisiana or the western interior. The fledgling Mexican Republic was so fragile and fractious that it lost