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During the last decade there has been considerable debate over the American experience in warfare. The U.S. Army has been condemned as a Cold War dinosaur, celebrated for its rapid conventional victory in seizing Baghdad, again condemned as a blunt instrument fighting wars long past, and most recently celebrated for transforming itself in the midst of war, becoming the adaptive force for counterinsurgency and nation building many think it should have become two decades ago. These reactions have often been more political than historical in character. They have fostered greater attention to the “small wars” of America’s past, for which I have to be grateful. But the polemical ebb and flow have led to caricatures and straw men, an exaggerated dichotomy between conventional and unconventional, kinetic operations and counterinsurgency (hardly a monolithic phenomenon itself). Through their histories, the United States and its army have engaged in a wide spectrum of military missions and operations, often conventional and unconventional at the same time, which cannot be reduced to catchphrases like “small wars,” “Indian wars,” or “nation building.”

Peacekeepers and Conquerors continues where my previous volume, entitled Jackson’s Sword, left off, telling the tale of those “constabulary” roles and their effects in the years between the War of 1812 and the war with Mexico, years American historians label the age of Jackson or sometimes, more recently, the age of Indian removal. Jackson’s Sword examines the first big part of the story—the “problem” of institutional instability, multiple loyalties, and insubordination. The present volume explores the second part—the “solution” of greater professional commitment, experience (as much political and diplomatic as specifically military) developed during extended careers, and accountability to civilian authority, tempered in the forge of frustrating, politically complex constabulary operations along the nation’s frontiers. If there has ever been an American way of war—a debatable construct, given its inherent oversimplification—these two volumes show that it was highly variable and adaptive.
On the one hand, American military strategy and operations have been contingent on specific situations and objectives, rather than archetypal military developments (whether from Napoleonic example or technological change) or comprehensive American social phenomena (political ideologies of republicanism and Jacksonian democracy, the citizen-soldier ideal, or antagonism to standing armies). On the other hand, there have been critical elements of continuity in the development of American military institutions and culture, particularly in civil-military relations and the enduring character of American military professionalism. More important than their adaptation to any specific mission, threat, or skill set, the career officers of the national standing army—the army’s enduring core—developed quantitatively greater and qualitatively different commitment and cohesion, practical experience (in administration and logistics as well as combat operations), and subordination to civilian authority. Congress and the executive rewarded their effectiveness and accountability with insulation from partisan political attack and substantial autonomy in their implementation of national policy, a monopoly of strategic and operational command they have retained ever since. Hence, this story is as much about American civil-military relations—both on the scene of operations and in the nation’s capital—as it is about coercive diplomacy and conquest against Native Americans, Spain, and Mexico.

Jackson’s Sword examines the army on the frontier, particularly that in the Gulf South, during the years 1810–1821, concentrating on the actions of Andrew Jackson and his subordinates in the army’s Southern Division from 1814 forward. Though the army conducted a number of peacekeeping and law enforcement operations against brigands, marauders, corsairs, and smugglers on the Louisiana-Texas frontier, the Louisiana coast, and Amelia Island off the northeast coast of Florida, and though it frequently used the threat of force to remove whites intruding on Indian lands, most of its attention was directed against Native Americans—Seminoles and Red Stick Creeks—and Spanish rule in Florida. Relentlessly working to drive Spain from Florida, to eliminate possible bases for future British intervention, to repress Indian resistance, and to destroy refuges for fugitives from American slavery, Jackson and his subordinates seized the initiative and repeatedly launched incursions into Florida, commonly without civilian authorization and sometimes in direct contradiction of War Department orders. They usurped congressional war-making authority and cabinet direction over policy, but they got away with doing so and felt justified by their success, as Britain backed away from confrontation, Spain ceded Florida, the Creek and Seminole Indians surrendered most of the land they had lived on, and refugees from slavery were killed, reenslaved, or forced to flee deep into the wilds of Florida. Jackson calculated
the odds correctly, but could an army of loose cannons serve the nation’s interests effectively in the long term?

The last third of *Jackson’s Sword* turns to the army in the arc between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers during the decade after the War of 1812 and provides context for the changes in military conduct that flowered during the period covered by *Peacekeepers and Conquerors*. Readers should note that much of the deeper social, political, cultural, and institutional context for *Peacekeepers and Conquerors* is laid out in the extended introduction and conclusion to *Jackson’s Sword*. (These two volumes were originally a single book.) Between 1810 and 1821 the officers of the national standing army were often motivated by highly subjective emotions of regionalism, sectionalism, and antagonism toward Indians, Spaniards, and Britons, born from sympathy for frontiersmen and experiences in the War of 1812. Many of these men felt as much loyalty to section (the South) or region (the frontier) as to the nation as a whole. Andrew Jackson set an example of repeated insubordination against civilian authority, and the officer corps remained as unstable, and often dysfunctional, as it had been since the end of the Revolution. The resulting belligerence encouraged junior and field-grade officers to support Jackson in his usurpations of constitutional civilian authority and repeated invasions or threats to invade Spanish Florida without authorization, to pursue primarily military solutions to complex intercultural and international dilemmas.

Chapter 7 of *Jackson’s Sword* shows that many of the belligerently confident War of 1812 veterans in the Southern Division left the army around 1820, when they felt their work had been done, and sought new opportunities in civil life; Congress agreed and reduced the army and officer corps. The conclusion to *Jackson’s Sword* examines the reform of the Military Academy at West Point during the decade after 1817, when virtually all entrants into the officer corps were Academy graduates, producing a more consistent socialization in nationalism, subordination, and accountability. At the same time, the decline of international threats allowed the army to concentrate on continental expansion and pacification through the peacekeeping, largely aimed at white citizens, and conquest, largely aimed at Native Americans, explored in the present volume.

These developments—the beginning of an institutional stability that enabled and encouraged the growth of professional cohesion, responsibility, and expertise—are explored in chapter 7 and the conclusion to *Jackson’s Sword*, which examine officer socialization, commissioning, resignations, and assignments in the context of social, political, economic, technological, military, and cultural changes during the age of Jackson (the 1820s through 1840s). (These sections also suggest significant limits to change and substan-
tial sources of continuity.) Thus, although chapter 1 and the conclusion to Peacekeepers and Conquerors contain extensive contextual analysis, readers who want a full assessment of officer personnel patterns, the significance of the Military Academy to officer professionalization, and contexts external to the army should look to the last third of Jackson’s Sword. The introduction to Jackson’s Sword is where I examine interpretations of military professionalism and the nineteenth-century American nation-state, providing extended critiques of the “weak state” and “state of courts and parties” theses, which scholars studying the late nineteenth century have projected, without archival evidence, backward onto the first half of the century.

The present volume focuses on the quarter century after the reduction in force in 1821, when the United States was much less concerned with British threats or the possibility of expansion across international territorial boundaries than during the preceding generation. Instead, the nation and its standing army concentrated on internal development, though this development took extensive as well as intensive forms. The army continued to move west, into modern Arkansas and Oklahoma (then known as the “Indian Territory”) and the region between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Chapter 1 provides context for this extension of U.S. sovereignty and power and serves as something of an introduction to the volume as a whole, emphasizing the significance of the national standing army rather than citizen-soldier volunteers, militia, or the ecological or economic impact of the settlers.

Chapter 2 focuses on the range of peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations in the arc between the Missouri and the Mississippi over the course of this quarter century. Though these rarely involved overt war, they were intended to quell substantial or sustained Indian resistance to U.S. hegemony and succeeded in doing so by the mid-1830s. Continuities—the inefficacy of the militia, the government’s reliance on the standing army, and that army’s efforts to restrain atrocity by citizen-soldiers—rather than discontinuity most characterized the spectrum of U.S. government and American citizen expansion and violence in the northwestern forests and prairies. From this chapter forward, we see that the processes of peacekeeping (on U.S. terms), peace enforcement, coercive diplomacy, and domination and conquest were intricately and inextricably woven together. (For a brief elaboration, see appendix A, which outlines a spectrum of coercive diplomacy and deterrence from passivity to violence, from indirection to direction, from implication to action, from generally small scale to larger scale, from lesser to greater demands on the targeted populace.)
The minuscule national standing army also tried to maintain peace and order—on American terms—on the thinly settled frontiers between the United States and Mexican Texas, where nonstate actors were less organized but perhaps more common than during the decade of the first Mexican Revolution (1810–1821, the era of Jackson's Sword). After a controversial but indecisive intervention in Texas in the autumn of 1836, in which President Jackson reprimanded his former protégé Edmund Gaines for exceeding instructions, the U.S. Army continued to try to keep peace on that border, which involved guarding against Texan incursions on U.S. territory as much as fending off the Indians of the southern Plains. This peacekeeping became one of the principal missions of the First Dragoon Regiment, which engaged in diplomacy with Plains Indians from its formation in 1833. I delay sustained attention to these operations until chapter 10 in order to provide context for the army's move into Texas after its annexation in 1845 and the move toward war with Mexico during the following year, the subjects of chapters 11 and 12.

The core of this volume, not unlike the first, explores the conquest and dispossession of the southeastern Indians, potentially the most powerful resistance to U.S. expansion after the defeat of the northwestern Indian confederations during the 1790s and the War of 1812 and the rapprochement between the United States and Britain between 1815 and 1823. Jackson's Sword concludes with the Seminoles, Mikasukis, and Red Stick Creeks driven into central Florida by Andrew Jackson's invasion in 1818 and the Spanish cession of Florida three years later. Chapter 3 of the present volume examines the dispossession of the Creeks remaining in Georgia and Alabama during the decade between 1825 and 1834, although I do not address the “Second Creek War” of 1836, the subject of a superb book by John Ellisor. This process often involved operations to remove whites intruding on Creek land contrary to the federal trade and intercourse acts, operations that frequently led to clashes between federal and state governments as well as soldiers and local settlers. Indeed, Georgia threatened civil war to resist federal authority in 1825, and junior as well as senior army officers (Edmund Gaines and Jacob Brown) played crucial roles as diplomats and peacekeepers, showing the national flag as representatives of federal military power, communicating with Georgia leaders on the spot, and mobilizing nationalist sentiment within the state.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore similar federal-state tensions, military peacekeeping roles, and ultimately unity in federal and state goals toward Native Americans in the expropriation of the Cherokee between 1836 and 1838, operations that spurred significant tension between John Wool, the military commander on the scene, and the Jackson administration. Indeed, Wool
Preface and Acknowledgments

requested a court of inquiry into his conduct, in which his successor in command, Winfield Scott, exonerated him while permitting Wool to excoriate Jackson’s understanding of constitutionalism. By this time, however, Martin Van Buren was president and proved much more friendly to the army (and much less stringent in demanding policies, like Indian removal, without being willing to suffer their political consequences) than his predecessor. While Cherokee nonviolence was certainly the most important reason there was no war, the national standing army provided a much less violent instrument of expropriation and ethnic cleansing than the Georgia militia, probably preventing atrocities. Indeed, many of the army’s roles in the Cherokee country would seem familiar to officers engaged in overseeing the transfer of ethnic populations in Bosnia during the 1990s or ethnic group interactions in Kosovo after 1999.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the Second Seminole War, not through operations but as a nexus of army-Indian, civil-military, and army-militia attitudes and interactions, presenting further evidence of the military’s disenchantment with but ultimate execution of Indian removal. Sadly, much of the army’s subordination to civilian authority developed in that crucible at the expense of Native Americans, with whom officers often sympathized due to their friction with white frontiersmen. From the Native American standpoint, the most important thing about the army was that it was white. From the perspective of American politics and society, however, the army’s autonomy from Jacksonian values and dynamics—particularly populism, decentralization, and partisanship—stands out.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the army’s role keeping peace with British Canada by restraining American citizens. They follow the chronological trajectory of the army’s operational focus by shifting to the Canadian border, which exploded in rebellion and filibustering against British rule at the end of 1837. Though the vast majority of the army remained in Florida, and far more troops were deployed to force the Cherokee west, half a decade of instability produced the greatest crisis in Anglo-American relations during the half century between 1814 and 1862, perhaps the most dangerous crisis the two nations have endured since the War of 1812. Initially deployed to deter or oppose possible British incursions, the army soon began to cooperate with the British to preserve national sovereignty and international peace by enforcing U.S. neutrality laws. Though no more than a thousand soldiers were deployed, British officials applauded the U.S. Army for calming tensions and demonstrating its government’s support for the international state system and the rule of law. Officers expressed much the same attitudes toward frontier citizens, local civil officials, and citizen-soldiers as they had during the Seminole
conflict, but the Canadian border crises provided an experience of national-level civil-military harmony that helped soothe the wounds of Indian removal.

The final three chapters explore the gradual, intermittent but ultimately effective extension of U.S. sovereignty and power in the Southwest, along the borders with Texas and Mexico. The filibustering of the generation before 1821 was replaced by the colonization of Texas under Mexican auspices during the 1820s and by rebellion and independence in 1836. Anglo-Texans then proved more antagonistic toward U.S. sovereignty than Mexico had been, attacking Indians and Mexican merchants in U.S. territory until they were restrained by the U.S. Army. Nevertheless, the key political and diplomatic factor was ultimately the Texans’ whiteness, and in 1845 the army was sent into Texas to defend it against Mexico, precipitating the war with Mexico.

Chapter 10 explores the trajectory of U.S. military operations west and southwest of the Missouri River and along the Louisiana-Texas border between 1821 and 1838. Chapter 11 examines the dragoon expeditions and frontier diplomacy in the central and southern Plains as far as the Rocky Mountains between 1834 and 1845, as well as Zachary Taylor’s selection to command the Army of Occupation in Texas in 1845. Chapter 12 explores officer attitudes toward Britain, Oregon, and Texas and the likelihood, desirability, and probable outcomes of war with Mexico, assessing their values and priorities on the eve of the first conventional war the United States had fought in more than three decades, the sort of war the national standing army was putatively designed for.

American military professionalism did not develop independent of civilian society, nor was it simply a matter of growing expertise in the art of warfare. The career officers of the U.S. Army served as federal, international, and interethnic mediators; national law enforcers; and de facto intercultural and international peacekeepers, effectively advancing national objectives and power with remarkably little overt violence—“warfare” in the traditional sense—by extending and enhancing the authority and cohesion of the American nation-state along its borders and frontiers. The federal government and its army were almost continually challenged by nonstate actors—citizen, Indian, or foreign—while constrained by republican and liberal ideology, representative but racialist (white supremacist) democracy, adherence to due process and the constitutional separation of powers, and federalism and decentralization in sectional, regional, and localist forms. The officer corps’ claim to professional status and a role in its definition depended on civilian acceptance of its claim to authority over a distinct role in society’s division of labor, especially the
power to select, promote, and exclude aspirants to that role. This claim was continually contested by the anti–standing army and militia ideals, private and volunteer military units, and frontier constituencies who acclaims those ideals and created such units when they believed the regular army was acting contrary to their interests, as often seemed the case in the confused welter of borderlands diplomacy and settler expansion.

Nevertheless, despite widespread public criticism as aristocrats, martinets, dandies, and Indian sympathizers, the officers of the regular army secured a fundamental acceptance of their professional role and institutional autonomy in the federal government and among the middle classes and elites who served in and identified with it. This acceptance permitted extraordinarily secure employment, making possible careers that lasted an average of more than two decades, and it meant that the regulars ordinarily exercised senior-level command over volunteer and militia forces during wartime. The officer corps gained this acceptance through fiscally accountable administration; genteel interaction with local and national civilian elites; the exercise, through military command, of an authority most civilian elites could only dream of; and the politically reliable performance of their duties negotiating, mediating, intimidating, and coercing along the borders and frontiers. Officers made cogent arguments for the value of experience and specialization in military tasks—arguments accepted by most nationalist Republicans, National Republicans, and Whigs—and they clearly proved their capability advancing U.S. territorial expansion during the war with Mexico.

Most previous accounts have suggested that the army was subordinated to partisan politics—essentially patronage regardless of education or experience—in officer commissioning and promotion, or that it was physically isolated and mentally alienated from civilian society. These assertions are inaccurate, individually and collectively. Crucially, and unlike most other institutions of Jacksonian government, the army was able to secure substantial insulation, even autonomy, from partisan politics and sectional or civilian economic interests in its internal administration and field operations. The army officer corps became increasingly accountable to civilian authority in its internal institutional processes; in representative, constitutional, and federalist civil-military relations; and in the execution of foreign policy. Indeed, it struck a more diplomatic—a more just and less violent—balance among varying social, political, and interest groups than most civilian frontiersmen or its European counterparts, which were thoroughly linked to civilian politics through commissioning and civilian officeholding, serving elite class power at home while launching imperial and colonial adventures abroad.

Army operations in the Jacksonian borderlands restrained entropy,
enhanced national security, and advanced orderly national territorial expansion. The efforts of the army’s frontier diplomats, including their exercise of restraint, discipline, or command over citizens and citizen-soldiers, helped prevent the establishment of competing polities (nations, states, or other political entities) that might have constrained U.S. growth, limited settler and citizen-soldier atrocities against Native Americans, and played a crucial, perhaps decisive role in averting a devastating war with Britain circa 1840. Their logistical expertise proved equally crucial to successfully projecting U.S. national power, first to drive Indians from land sought by white citizens, then to do so against Mexico, and finally to reunite the nation during the Civil War.

Although the army was certainly authoritarian in its internal discipline and officer attitudes toward Indians and frontier civilians, and although it was certainly oriented far more toward national government, centralized authority, and social and political hierarchy than the decentralization acclaimed by the majority of Americans, its growing and (in Jacksonian America) unique professional autonomy did not come at the expense of political accountability. Indeed, autonomy, and the insulation that sustained it, enhanced accountability and subordination to civilian authority, to due process and the rule of law, and to the processes—however frustrating officers sometimes found them—of representative constitutional government. If one is looking for themes and keywords to the civil-military relations in *Peacekeepers and Conquerors*, mine are responsibility, accountability, and subordination, institutional insulation and operational autonomy rather than isolation or alienation.

During the quarter century after 1821 the officer corps became decisively more professional—more committed to extended careers of subordination, responsiveness, and accountability to national civilian authority rather than local, regional, or sectional interests, despite endemic tensions between these sources of authority. U.S. Army professionalism developed in great part because most junior officers were socialized in nationalism and statism, in subordination to constitutional civilian control, at the national Military Academy. These foundations, so thoroughly explored in William Skelton’s pathbreaking book *An American Profession of Arms*, were reinforced and confirmed during officers’ frustrating experiences trying to keep peace between white frontiersmen and Indians, between the United States and Britain, while forwarding the territorial expansion American citizens demanded of their government. That expansion is the conquest side of *Peacekeepers and Conquerors*, but the two dimensions could not, cannot, and should not be separated. Their interplay was the interplay of American civil-military relations, their nuances the complexity of the American frontier.
Jackson’s Sword contains a very extensive and specific set of acknowledgments; here I can no more than touch the surface of my debts to others. I thank the Department of History at the United States Military Academy; Rich Stevenson, our department’s computer officer; my colleagues, family, and friends; and the dozens, probably hundreds, of librarians and archivists who have helped me over the years. In particular, I must always thank Bill Skelton and Jim Bradford and my mother and father for inspiration and support. Mike Briggs, Fred Woodward, and all the staff at the University Press of Kansas deserve unending thanks for their patience; knowing them better now, I can cite Larisa Martin, Susan Schott, Kelly Chrisman Jacques, and my copyeditor for their indispensable assistance. Elizabeth Boyles cleaned up a rather convoluted index for Jackson’s Sword, and Jana Mansoor prepared the index for the present volume. I dedicated the first volume to my mom; I don’t think my dad will mind if I dedicate this volume to the cadets who follow the officers I study in the service of our nation.
PEACEKEEPERS
AND CONQUERORS
Map of Indian tribal locations, c. 1833.
From George Catlin,
*The North American Indians*
Military attitudes toward American territorial expansion were profoundly shaped by officers’ experiences—usually frustrating if not antagonistic after 1821—with civilian borderers. Due to democratic federalism, civilian control was far stronger on the contiguous American settlement frontiers than in the French, British, or Russian empires; federal military commanders did not have the extreme autonomy of their French, Russian, and often British counterparts to “deliberately exclude civilian colonists [and often civilian governors] from any effective participation” in diplomatic and military decision making. Because they were bound to execute controversial national policies, involving the restraint of white citizens as well as Indians, officers frequently became embroiled in conflicts with local civilians and civil authorities and had to worry about their representatives and allies in Congress. (One of the weaknesses of this book is its inattention to that congressional oversight; I have not attempted to assess the frequency or intensity of congressional complaint about army operations in the borderlands.) Indeed, everyday “civilian control” of the military meant officers mediating between local interests and national objectives and coping with the prejudices and subjectivities of majoritarian populism—dismay for institutions and disregard for law, especially Indian treaty rights—as much as protecting due process and the rule of law against the encroachments of military authoritarianism.²

Intolerant of abstractions and constraint, Jacksonian populism often proved a source of civil-military confusion, pitting impatient majoritarian sentiment against the legal forms and procedures career government officials (elected and appointed) identified with accountability to republican government under the
Chapter One

checks and balances of the Constitution. (The Jacksonians preferred to ignore these when they got in the way.) The ambiguity of these conflicts led many career professional officers to hope for dual policies of domestic and international restraint for fear that “disorderly” borderers would get out of hand; this reflected a conservative preference, common to Federalists, National Republicans, and Whigs, for the ultimately hierarchical order and stability imposed by the nation-state through the disciplines of domestic and international law. The political tensions and dilemmas posed by the army’s law enforcement duties along the nation’s borders and frontiers contributed significantly to the decline of aggressively expansionist sentiment among career military officers during the 1820s and 1830s.

The growing professional cohesion of the officer corps owed much to its quest for hierarchical order and predictability in all its critical relationships: within its units of working-class enlisted men, in the decentralized civilian social order of the frontier, and in the national sovereignty and professional jurisdiction over the direction of violence that ultimately provided officers with careers and authority. Like other Americans among the nation’s elites and aspirants to that status, professional soldiers sought prestige and legitimacy by identifying their values with those of the Old World and its elites. In American domestic society, this meant a growing emphasis on refinement and gentility; in foreign relations and the borderlands, professional soldiers sought respectability in the eyes of their European and civilian counterparts by adhering to the forms and disciplines of national and international law. Enforcing these norms along the nation’s borders provided the sanction of European precedent and practical utility for the army’s monopoly over the direction of organized armed force in the eyes of its employers in Congress and the executive branch. Class, state, and professional formation were closely linked phenomena in the army officer corps’ behavior in the borderlands, a pattern that encouraged military accountability to the authority of national civilian political structures centered in Congress and the cabinet.

Officers’ increasingly unenthusiastic responses to the opportunities presented by internal colonialism and frontier expansion demonstrate the close links among institutional maturity, occupational monopoly, elite class and nation-state formation, and professional accountability in the development of the commissioned officer corps between 1815 and 1846. Under the federal territorial system, the process of geographic expansion involved forming states as well as extending the existing pattern of local self-government; expansion therefore contained the potential both for social reproduction, in the decentralized agrarian mode envisioned by Jeffersonians and their Jacksonian legatees, and for the institutional elaboration and political consolidation of a more powerful nation-state some-
times capable of restraining its citizens. Put on the spot between whites and Indians and often between center and periphery, Washington and the frontier, unable to take refuge in the abstractions civilian policy makers could easily espouse, the professional soldier’s zeal for order had surprisingly similar consequences for military attitudes toward white and native frontiersmen.

Added atop Euro-American images of native barbarity, the military thirst for order meant that soldiers ultimately saw Native Americans as savages, child-like captives to impulse and passion who had to be restrained by threat or force. Toward white frontiersmen, genteel military professional values of order and integrity meant distaste and antipathy for the apparently insatiable materialism, rapacious lack of self-restraint, and thoughtless belligerence of individuals grasping at native lands while demanding military protection. Proud military commanders felt their profession, their nation, and their civilization degraded and disgraced by predatory frontier citizens, who often took soldiers to court if they attempted to enforce laws intended to protect the Indians and keep the peace. Indeed, career officers faced greater threats from white democracy than from Native Americans: the Seminole War aside, the chance of death or injury at Indian hands was far less than the likelihood of legal and political harassment, perhaps leading to reassignment and personal disruption, by individualistic frontier citizens antagonistic toward the authoritarianism of “military despot” from the national center.

Though that harassment rarely affected officers’ promotion, which was almost universally determined by strict rules of seniority, historian Francis Paul Prucha observes that officers were “ill-supported” by the War Department in such disputes, adding another layer of uncertainty to the jumbled mix of values, attitudes, and perceptions that influenced their decision making. Constrained by due process and federalism, loyal to the rule of law that undergirded the nation-state that gave them authority, they did not attempt to punish white citizens as they did Indians; even intimidation—coercive federal diplomacy aimed at restraining citizens without overt violence—was risky, even if apparently sanctioned, or explicitly directed, by the executive branch. Convenience and careerism gradually led many wearied professional soldiers to accept, and sometimes to more directly espouse, white expansion, but this did not resolve their moral and emotional dilemmas in the face of boundless citizen demands. This dynamic of frustration with white citizens, anger that could not be expressed in action, and the pursuit of catharsis through violence against legally and ideologically permissible antagonists—Native Americans—increasingly encouraged military atrocities against Indians after the Civil War, and chapter 7 suggests a similar trajectory in many officers’ thinking during the Second Seminole War.
Vilified and sometimes punished for doing their duty to uphold the laws under the Constitution, even the most experienced professional commanders had difficulty grappling with the dissonance between legal precept and political practice. In 1835, his twenty-seventh year of national military service, plain-spoken Colonel Zachary Taylor reviled the employees of the American Fur Company as “the greatest scoundrels the world ever knew.” Two years later, after a quarter century of military service, dragoon colonel Stephen Watts Kearny condemned the Indians’ “shameful” treatment by white frontiersmen; chapters 3–7 provide numerous examples from officers engaged in the removal process and the Second Seminole War. Under these circumstances, professional soldiers usually blamed land-hungry citizens for stirring up frontier conflicts, vowed that the government had “pledged its faith” to protect the natives, and tried to restrain citizens unwilling to restrain themselves. Their antipathy for the chaotic excesses of white individualism, combined with values of good faith, equity, and justice, meant a skepticism toward white claims and demands, toward the actual process of everyday American expansion, which commonly made the career professional officer the most objective actor on a frontier torn by the passions of cultural prejudice and greed.

This comparatively objective understanding of white-Indian relations, however limited or flawed from modern perspectives, was widely shared in the army and exerted substantial influence on its operations in the field. That objectivity tended to reinforce the very skepticism, antipathy, and desire for equity in which it was rooted, and the national military officer could easily find courageous native patriots a more fitting object of empathy than the poorly educated, rough-and-tumble frontier citizens who sought to dispossess the Indians, usually by spilling soldiers’ blood rather than their own. Prior to the 1850s, this empathy encouraged a much less overtly brutal approach to pacification than in European empires or among most American frontiersmen. During the period of this book, with the exception of the “battle” of Bad Axe (the destruction of Black Hawk’s band of Sauk and Fox Indians trying to cross the Mississippi River in 1832), the U.S. Army did not commit massacres of the sort common among their European counterparts in Algeria, India, or the Caucasus. It did engage in the “food fights,” resulting in the destruction of crops and villages, that had characterized Anglo-Indian warfare since the seventeenth century, but officers did the same, perhaps just as often, against white citizens settling on Indian lands without the permission required by the federal trade and intercourse acts, when the War Department authorized them to do so.

Military skepticism toward white frontiersmen was derived not from romantic sentiment or unadulterated admiration for Native Americans but from the distaste genteel national officers felt for the excesses of white democracy and
individualism, intensified on the frontier, and the consequent aggression against the Indians that drew the army into complex, essentially no-win situations fraught with political ambiguity and danger. The broad contours and objectives of Indian policy were determined in Washington, primarily in response to white citizen demands, not by the motives of military commanders on the frontier. Career officers could not turn their empathy for Indians into overt anger against whites, for such anger could not be publicly sustained in the political and legal arenas. In contrast, European governments often felt less sympathy for white settlers than the Jacksonians did, and in Algeria (France’s principal imperial venture during this era), this led to military mistreatment of both natives and settlers.

The balance of power and the degree of tension between European governments and their colonial military forces and settlers varied significantly. In France, efforts by the civilian government in the metropole to restrain colonial military autonomy were often unsuccessful; in Russia, this was attempted less often because there were fewer civilian colonists to question military demands, and the tsar usually supported his generals as long as they were successful. Civil-military relations in the British Empire varied, from a general civilian desire to hold down costs, which the military appears to have followed outside of India, to the “militarization of Britain’s ruling elite” (and English civilians in India) during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which blurred “the boundary between civil and military spheres of authority.” British government relations with settlers fluctuated over the course of the century, becoming increasingly supportive and open to settler autonomy as the costs of containing conflicts between settlers and natives increased. Greater settler autonomy commonly led to greater violence against the indigenous inhabitants, particularly when volunteers, militia, and vigilantes replaced the army, as in Australia and to some extent New Zealand.

Limits to power do not mean powerlessness, nor were the limits of American military power filled effectively by civilian agents. Historians often confuse the U.S. Army’s role and impact on the nineteenth-century frontier; with a few cursory exceptions, political scientists and students of American political development have not addressed the subject at all. Indeed, some senior western military historians have contributed to this neglect by downplaying the army’s impact, perhaps hoping to win greater acceptance among the majority of historians, who increasingly prefer to study social forces, language, and culture rather than government. The assumption that the army’s mission was little more than conquest, combined with the well-known tactical difficulties it faced,
leads many scholars, including leading military historians, to assume that the army was ineffective. Thus Robert M. Utley, the dean of military historians of the trans-Mississippi West, maintains that “if the Indians in the end lost the Indian Wars, it was not because the army defeated them.” Yet if we fail to recognize the army’s diplomatic and peacekeeping roles, or its actual efficacy, however gradual, in defeating Native American resistance, the army in the West becomes known primarily as an instrument of racism and atrocity, of conquest in the crudest and most reductionist sense, or perhaps as a market for farmers and entrepreneurs—either way, a dependent variable of limited significance.

That misperception encourages a misunderstanding of state and army autonomy and the significance of these institutions in nineteenth-century America, and that misinterpretation fosters an oversimplified notion of American politics and political culture. Contrary to crude notions of racial conquest, the nation’s Indian relations were militarized by restraints on whites as well as aggression against Indians. Until agrarian settlement caught up with the national military presence, a large portion of the army’s everyday energies was spent enforcing the trade and intercourse laws intended to limit friction between white and native by restraining white encroachment in areas as yet unceded by the Indians. Violence was common among the Indians themselves, between tribes (or “nations”) and factions within tribes competing for resources or revenging past aggressions. The army’s peacekeeping task was multiplied and complicated as the removal policy concentrated larger, more diverse Indian populations within smaller spaces, placing once-stable ecosystems under growing pressure. Increasingly dependent on white trade goods and supplies, Indian populations were diminished by epidemic diseases brought by white contact. Native tribes and factions recognized and often tried to draw support from the increasingly hegemonic military and economic power of the United States in their disputes, creating another set of diplomatic dilemmas—civil-military as well as interethnic—for national military officers.

National officials feared that tensions among the Indians would spill over into depredations against white citizens, but they worried that intervention by citizen-soldier militias or volunteers loyal to local interests might turn into vigilante actions and escalate into full-fledged racial warfare that would be costly in revenue, public opinion, and international reputation. Thus, the army’s most common mission along the nation’s inland frontiers between 1821 and 1846 was to uphold the sovereign Pax Americana asserted by treaty and national law (the trade and intercourse acts) against all comers, to intimidate those on all sides who might break the peace, and to coerce them if they did. Given the potential for incident, atrocity, and political embarrassment if white militias were employed to compel emigration, federal troops were often called on to
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step between natives and citizen-soldiers, to push the Indians west while limiting the risks created by harassment by whites. Yet in practice, given the ability of white citizens to draw on representative political processes to prevent, restrict, or punish military intervention, these peacekeeping duties were largely directed at Indians, especially when they struck back against white intruders and committed acts defined as assaults or robberies by white law, as in the Arikara and Winnebago “wars” and associated turmoil between 1826 and 1828. Though removal was supposed to be voluntary, national military power was commonly used to encourage and enforce the unequal treaties by which tribes supposedly agreed to move west and to prevent them from returning to their former homes, as in the Black Hawk War or the expulsion of the Potawatomi and Winnebago later in the 1830s and 1840s.10

Peacekeeping required diplomatic and political (or civil-military) as well as tactical military competence and discipline. Given their prejudices and indiscipline, state and territorial volunteers and militia usually proved diplomatically and militarily incompetent for the missions citizens demanded, unless they were able to operate with genocidal freedom against fragments of Native American societies. In contrast, the national standing army—so often maligned by frontiersmen—provided protection at a cost in both lives and taxes that ultimately proved acceptable to most citizens, East and West. Most of the army’s enlisted soldiers were men with limited resources and prospects in civilian economic life. Increasingly, they were recently arrived immigrants, especially Catholic Irishmen or Germans, who were denigrated by much of native-born civil society; their unskilled labor could easily be replaced, and their deaths in the army would be little mourned by the middle class or elites. Financially, civilian War Department officials and army leaders agreed that per soldier, regular troops were less expensive to sustain than volunteers or militia; once Jacksonian expansionism led Congress to pay for regular mounted troops, citizen-soldiers lost their principal military advantage. Thus, as leading western military historian Robert Wooster recently observed, the national standing army “became the driving force behind national military policy in the West.”11

Indeed, though citizen-soldiers still served as the equivalent of colonial or early national “rangers” in mountainous regions, they only became a significant military force on the central and northern Plains in the massacres at Bear River and Sand Creek. (Texas, with its strong tradition of state military forces rooted in the republic, remained something of an exception with its Rangers and associated vigilantes.) And citizen-soldiers never proved willing to serve over sustained periods (more than a few months): though they were sometimes—if organized, and if advance intelligence of an Indian attack was available—able to spring to action for local defense, they rarely went far from their
families and businesses. They could sometimes launch raiding expeditions but rarely attempted seasonal campaigns, particularly during winter, when Indian bands were more vulnerable. Thus, despite their self-proclaimed skill at unconventional warfare, the effectiveness of citizen-soldier forces depended almost entirely on destroying Indian villages, a tactic particularly likely to produce atrocity and public and international condemnation (however limited compared to the twenty-first century), given their indiscipline and racism. A similar dynamic operated among volunteer units in the war against Mexico.\textsuperscript{12}

Regular troops did not lack racist attitudes and emotions, and army commanders sought to attack Indian villages on the same military grounds—compelling surrender by destroying food and shelter, rather than trying to chase down more agile Indian horsemen—as citizen-soldiers. With larger cavalry forces available after the Civil War, more hardened commanders were able to lead surprise attacks in winter, when warriors and their families would be intermixed within villages. This led to atrocities—at the Washita in 1868 and on the Marias River against the Piegans two years later (both incidents encouraged and defended by the army’s senior commanders)—on a scale committed by regular troops on only one occasion prior to 1861 (against the Brule Sioux at Ash Hollow in 1855). The ultimate example was Wounded Knee, but we should note that the trajectory was by no means assured: the outcome might have been different had George Crook rather than Nelson Miles been in command. We might also compare the outcome—racial segregation and impoverishment—with the genocides in California, conducted almost entirely by citizen-soldiers, and the Australian outback, where British officials turned security responsibilities over to volunteers and militia.\textsuperscript{13}

Military restraint toward expropriating the Indians was most evident in the ambivalence expressed by career professional officers during the Second Seminole War, discussed in chapters 6 and 7. It is also evident, and most significant in terms of the conduct and human impact of federal Indian relations, in the history, or lack thereof, of atrocities against Native Americans by the national standing army during this era. Neither Sand Creek nor Wounded Knee was characteristic of the decades between 1783 and 1846. During these years, massacres were almost entirely the province of citizen-soldiers, such as the Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee militias and volunteers, and of individuals who killed natives out of hatred, greed, or revenge. (The “battle” at Bad Axe, the virtual massacre of a band of Sauk and Fox Indians trying to escape across the Mississippi River during the Black Hawk War in 1832, was something of an exception to this rule, involving regular troops as well as militia, volunteers, and Indians allied with the United States.) Indeed, one of the many elements of crisis spurred by the Second Seminole War within the army was the brutal-
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Yet atrocities like these remained rare prior to the war with Mexico, perhaps surprisingly so given the seven years’ corrosion of the fighting in Florida—the longest continuous war by the national military forces of the United States against the indigenous peoples of North America. One reason for the lack of atrocities was the threat they posed to social, cultural, institutional, and professional hierarchies and the debate they occasioned among career officers, who generally considered them contrary to genteel professional norms; such behavior threatened to reduce the army to the level of the unrestrained frontiersmen so many professional soldiers detested. Experienced federal military officers worried about the effect such excesses would have on the discipline of enlisted soldiers and the army’s image as a disciplined, accountable instrument of national policy. They rejected atrocities and indiscipline as characteristic evils of their volunteer competitors. They knew that loosening the bonds of discipline would not win them converts among the devotees of white democracy, who would always find the volunteers more attractive, in image and rhetoric if not in practice, as purer expressions of their radically egalitarian, anti-institutional values. Thus, as in so many other relationships, civil-military interactions, and the predispositions and expectations both sides brought to these relationships, pressed career military officers toward a Whiggish (though non-
partisan) affinity with the national state and the values of stability and cohesion they associated with it.  

Exploring the army's operations provides opportunities to understand large-scale geopolitical outcomes in the clash between ethnically based polities—the sources, trajectories, and extent of growing U.S. domination versus native power and decline. Chapter 2 evaluates the sources of U.S. hegemony, clear in political breadth if not cultural depth, over the watershed of the upper Mississippi. This hegemony was confirmed by the Black Hawk War and culminated in the expulsion of Native Americans from Illinois and southern Wisconsin during the 1830s. Compared with some later chapters, chapter 2 focuses more on military coercion of the Indians and less on civil-military tensions among whites. In doing so, it provides the important caution that white solidarity, and military subordination to democratic control by the constitutionally elected civilian officials who represented the nation's citizens, ultimately trumped military distaste for white frontiersmen or whatever sympathies career officers felt for the Native Americans they dispossessed (attitudes explored at some length in chapters 3–7). In the broad view, professional army officers certainly remained "agents of empire," the sword of a republic increasingly defined by whiteness, carrying out the final stage in the process of ethnic cleansing that historians commonly label Indian removal.

Nevertheless, the desire for expansion at minimal financial cost presented military commanders with complex dilemmas, fostering uncertainty, friction, and ambivalence. The government’s demand that officers further expansion while limiting the costs incurred by white citizens—indeed, the expectation among civilian as well as military policy makers that some temporary restraint on white citizens would further future expansion—implied the use of force against all parties. Yet large-scale bloodshed was remarkably, indeed surprisingly, rare: intimidation and deterrence rather than physical violence, coercive diplomacy rather than out-and-out war, characterized the vast majority of army operations on the inland frontier. All these operations were intended to avoid escalation and allow unimpeded white settlement; the army served as much as a facilitator of population growth and economic power as a weapon of direct, violent conquest. Nevertheless, modern interpretations in which the trans-Mississippi West is conquered by vast impersonal forces of demography and ecology, with military force functioning primarily as the embodiment of white racism, present far too simple a caricature, particularly for the era before the U.S.-Mexican War. Without specialist caveats to encourage correction, most college-level U.S. history textbooks now portray the American conquest of the
West in reductionist and determinist tones historians normally reject, with the appearance of railroads and settlers signaling inevitable native retreat. Indeed, the teleology and determinism of the “population, bison, and epidemics” school of interpretation standard in twenty-first-century college textbooks inadvertently replicate the triumphalism and Social Darwinism of ethnocentric nineteenth-century spokesmen for expansion. Despite the devoted efforts of ethnohistorians, the claims of demographic and ecological interpretations often leave the impression that Native Americans were fundamentally helpless, unable to adapt in the face of a white agrarian onslaught that substituted its own resource base for that of the Indians.16

Even outstanding western military historians have done their share to foster these ahistorical assumptions: Robert Utley asserts that “in the large picture the tribes succumbed to forces . . . more devastating than military force clumsily applied,” forces that “flowed from an irresistible tide of westering Americans—irresistible to the Indians militarily, irresistible to their own leaders politically.” Yet this hardly seems probable if the Indians resisted white aggrandizement as tenaciously as our stories of their agency suggest: as William Tecumseh Sherman observed of the southern secessionists in 1861, “no man surrenders from conviction, but from Superior Force.” Nor does any modern scholar claim that settlers en masse possessed the field skill or warcraft of a Kit Carson. Why, then, would hardy warriors, so superior to most whites in individual fighting skill, so skillful in the fieldcraft that enabled them to seize settlers’ horses and cattle, have found sedentary settlers militarily irresistible?17 Nor should we make the emotional leap, whether in the old mode of American triumphalism or the modern critical one, to an interpretation that privileges private nonstate actors—white frontiersmen acting as vigilantes or citizen-soldiers (a distinct but related embodiment of American racism)—as the primary source of native dispossession. With the exception of California, trans-Mississippi settler societies lacked the numbers and concentration to quell substantial Native American resistance through citizen-soldier mobilizations or the impact of daily aggression by individual bullies and vigilante groups—as occurred in Alabama, Georgia, and Indiana during the 1830s—until quite late in the period of white expansion. There is little in the historical record to suggest that the citizenry made or wanted to make the sustained sacrifice of livelihood and personal independence necessary to defeat the Indians or coerce them onto reservations.

Thus, in most instances during the period of this book, racist violence by nonstate actors became a precipitant for national military action, producing an unjust enforcement of peace on white terms but consisting of expulsion rather than massacre or extermination. The army was not an independent causal factor, nor was it independent of subordination to civilian political authority con-
stituted through the racially delimited processes of white man’s democracy. The army’s actions alone were not sufficient to enable the white settlement of the West, but they did influence the shape of that settlement both geographically, with forts as nodes of security and economic activity, and morally, through the restraint of genocidal violence against Indians. One can point out that white civilians destroyed most of the very loosely organized Indians of central and southern California with little national military assistance during the 1850s, and that citizen-soldier volunteers and militias proved capable of repressing Native Americans in California, Colorado, and the Pacific Northwest during the Civil War. Yet the pursuit of the Nez Perce, Sioux, Cheyenne, and Apache, and the defeat of the Modoc and the Comanche in battle, was accomplished by national military forces. The army, rather than the poorly trained, temporary militia or vigilantes, provided the rapid reaction (compared with that involved in mobilizing citizen-soldiers) and the consistent pressure—impossible for part-time soldiers to exert—that forced these Indians onto reservations and repressed their efforts to escape.

Nor, given the combat effectiveness of these tribes against disciplined regulars, were untrained, poorly coordinated citizen-soldier forces likely to defeat Indians consistently in battle: volunteers and militia proved most effective against Indian villages, in massacres like Sand Creek and Bear River. With the exception of the Texans fighting the Comanche early in the 1840s, citizen-soldiers usually fled from cohesive Indian combat forces, as at Stillman’s Run in 1832 or from the Paiute in 1860. Indeed, the defeat of the Shoshone during the Civil War stands as perhaps the only offensive battlefield victory by volunteers without substantial regular army—or Native American—assistance (as Andrew Jackson had in his battles) over a sizable, organized Indian force. The defensive victories of the Wagon Box Fight and Adobe Walls notwithstanding, the postbellum Comanche barrier to white settlement in West Texas was broken by a strategically, operationally, and tactically effective offensive by converging columns of the national standing army.

There is certainly much to be said in favor of ecologically focused interpretations that emphasize the decline of the Plains Indians’ resource base with the destruction of the buffalo, but these interpretations do not explain the defeat of the Apache, the Navajo, the Nez Perce, or the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, who relied on different food sources. Those societies were defeated militarily, usually by the persistent force of the national standing army. (Much of the American war against the Navajo was conducted by volunteers during the 1850s and the Civil War.) Moreover, we face an explanatory chasm between historical interpretations of the pre– and post–Civil War eras: students of the postbellum West
should remember that the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, and Ohioan Indians had to be defeated in war before the territories between the Appalachians and the Mississippi could be settled by whites. In Florida and the Old Northwest, to say nothing of the trans-Mississippi West after the Civil War, this was done almost entirely through the agency of the regular army, not by citizen-soldier volunteers, vigilantes, or militia, who commonly ran away when they encountered Indians who fought back. This was true in Ohio in 1790 and 1791 and in the opening skirmishes of the Black Hawk and Snake wars in 1832 and 1864, to name only a few examples. Nor did the eastern Indians lack for food, so long as they retained control of the land on which they hunted and farmed.

The Sioux were not driven from the Black Hills by the inhabitants of Deadwood: political pressure from the white intruders led the War Department to order the army into the Black Hills, where it ultimately defeated, through persistence as well as cumulative battlefield attrition, the previously hegemonic Sioux. Indeed, this was the case in virtually every conflict between whites and Indians during the period of American nationality, from the Ohio wars of the 1790s through the Seminole Wars to the final conquest and pacification of the western Indians a century later. Utley does recognize that “the standing army . . . proved indispensable to the advance of the frontier” east of the Mississippi. Indeed, he begins his 1984 book with Stephen W. Kearny’s Army of the West departing Fort Leavenworth for Santa Fe, referring to it as an “instrument of decision” that “marked the end of one era and the beginning of another” for the Cheyenne observing the march. What, if anything, changed that equation in the trans-Mississippi West after 1846 or 1865? Railroads did not suddenly produce population concentrations greater than those in the early years of the Old Northwest or the Old Southwest. The scale of white settlement in the Plains and beyond probably approximated that in early national Ohio and Jacksonian Florida, but it was far less, in any one spatially equivalent area, than it had been in Jacksonian Alabama or Georgia during the dispossession of the Creek and Cherokee, where citizen-soldiers and vigilantes played more significant roles than on the Plains. Neither the Apache, the Navajo, nor the Indians of the Pacific Northwest were driven or removed to reservations by ecological, cultural, or economic processes of resource decline or by the adoption of white practices or dependence on white goods, as may be argued, however incompletely, for the southeastern tribes. The belief that nonstate actors—private economic enterprise in the form of railroads or buffalo hunters, or private military enterprise in the form of citizen-soldiers—drove the Indians onto reservations and kept them there is yet another version of the American exceptionalism of statelessness.
Intercultural peacekeeping led the army into inescapably political situations: as William Skelton has observed, “even more than the pursuit of [institutional] service interests . . . the army’s constabulary role . . . drew officers into civil affairs,” intensifying the authoritarianism rooted in their professional culture. Yet, unlike many of their European counterparts, American military officers had no comprehensive “imperial” vision for the borderlands, beyond their support for American national expansion in general, tempered by their desire that expansion proceed in an orderly manner through national processes. Though they shared many features of the essentially authoritarian “ethos of Imperial service,” the fundamentally aristocratic “call to discipline and respectability” that historian C. A. Bayly has delineated among contemporary British imperial agents, American officers did not expect, or consciously set out, to shape postfrontier or postcolonial civil society. Sociologist Anthony Giddens observes that “a final characteristic of internal pacification [of intrasocial, intracultural, or intrastate violence] . . . is the withdrawal of the military from direct participation in internal affairs of state.” As borderlands became frontiers, frontiers became borders, and territories became states, American military officers expected to move on (generally westward to new frontiers) or to assume purely international, interstate functions as defenders of national sovereignty against foreign aggression. They showed no interest in becoming civil policemen or administrators within states, and little desire to do so within the federal territories; they sought to carve out an international security role and to avoid domestic missions requiring intervention in disputes among citizens.19

The American officer corps was unusual, perhaps exceptional, in this preference for a primarily international rather than domestic or colonial security role, for the latter was common in every major European army, even the British. Giddens notes that “the differentiation [between domestic and international security or policing roles] is usually full of tension,” as the people of France, Russia, Spain, the German states, and even Britain (for example, the Chartists, to say nothing of the Irish) could attest with regard to their nations’ armies during the mid-nineteenth century. This difference merits far more exploration and explanation than it is normally given, particularly when we observe the military interventions, or threats of intervention, in politics during the American Civil War and the substantial increase in the use of military force, national and state, against labor unrest after Reconstruction. The difference may lie solely in American political, ideological, or constitutional traditions external to the army, but it is surely worth considering whether the army’s own experiences, attitudes, and traditions played some role in its antebellum restraint
toward white citizens or its wartime and postbellum willingness to serve as an instrument of repression.20

There were also substantial differences between American and European frontiers. The American frontier, like European overseas colonial and imperial frontiers, presented a contrast between two very different cultures (or culture groupings), a contrast aggravated by an extreme chauvinism, amounting to racism, on at least one side. Yet on the American frontier, driven by a rapid, ultimately tremendous influx of families and individuals (far too many for the imperial state to halt without resorting to extreme violence against its own nationals) rather than a few businesses or military policy enforced by a few temporary residents, there was little crossover or sustained mixing in settlement. The modern historiographical concept of “middle grounds” notwithstanding, white Americans expelled Native Americans whenever they could, rather than settling permanently among them, whether as equals or masters. Few whites felt any desire for the sort of accommodation required to sustain middle grounds; where white populations grew, native dispossession soon followed.21

Furthermore, most Indian frontiers encountered by the United States were within the international territorial borders it claimed. After the British withdrew their support for the northwestern Indians in the decade after the War of 1812, only the Caddo on the Louisiana-Texas border could claim refuge across an international boundary, and this did them little good during the white expansion of the 1830s that led to the Texan Revolution and raids by Texans into the United States against the Caddo. The Sioux, the Nez Perce, and other northwestern Indians would attempt to use the Canadian border for refuge later in the century, with mixed success, particularly as British and Canadian authorities began to pursue a pacification policy not fundamentally dissimilar from that in the United States. As Jackson’s Sword demonstrates, the Seminole, the Mikasuki, and the maroons of the Negro Fort found that the Spanish border offered little refuge from Andrew Jackson and his protégés.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the government of the American frontier was politically distinctive, far more representative and far less dependent on military officers than those of most European colonies and empires. After some experimentation and tension during the Federalist era before 1800, the combination of American federalism, legal due process, and representative democracy meant that nearly all the officials governing states along the borders and national territories along the frontier were civilians, elected or appointed through civilian influence—increasingly, the influence of local frontier citizens. The laws of the United States applied in territories as well as states, although states also had their own laws and courts and territories had their own ordi-
nances and federal courts; military officers were subject to all of them. In con-
trast, most French and British imperial officials (to say nothing of Russians in
the Caucasus, central Asia, or Siberia) were military commanders or civilians
imbued with militarist examples and an imperial ethos of authoritarian hierar-
chy operating far from parliament, usually without civilian courts, and often
applying martial law with little restraint from civilians in either colony or metrop-
ole. The officers of the American national standing army shared much of their
counterparts’ authoritarian ethos but faced much stronger pressure from civil-
ian officials and their constituents, and they remained subordinate and account-
able to the civilian representatives of the borderland regions where they were
stationed. (European systems of “indirect rule” bear instructive comparison to
U.S., and U.S. Army, relations with the Indians, but they are beyond the scope
of this book.)

Despite the nonintercourse laws passed by Congress to minimize friction
between white and Indian, the combination of formal legal neutrality—the sup-
posed monopoly of legitimate violence by the nation-state and its federated
elements, and its denial to individuals, whether white or native—with white
supremacist politics enabled whites to flood native territory. When the Indians
lashed out or resisted white encroachment, white citizens used the democratic
process to deny native claims of self-defense and call on white political author-
ities for assistance, which the army was then obligated to provide. Yet rumors
of Indian attack often proved as illusory, as rooted in white visions of native
savagery, as those of slave unrest in the South, leaving the army to handle the
costs of overreaction. Opposition politicians would criticize the army and
administration, the president and secretary of war would be irritated by the
criticism, and Congress and the Treasury would complain about the expense.
If military commanders actually used violence, they might be criticized for civil-
ian casualties if they were unable to contain the Indians and the natives struck
out against white frontiersmen, or for Indian deaths that might impugn the
nation’s reputation for paternal humanity and fair dealing toward childlike “sav-
ages.”

While professional military officers had little formal or legal insulation or
autonomy from political pressure, they were expected to exert substantial oper-
ational initiative and discretion so long as they could balance its exercise with
the demands of subordination. The practical autonomy of the national stand-
ing army was enhanced but also complicated by institutional, social, political,
technological, and cultural factors (see chapter 7 and the conclusion of Jack-
son’s Sword). Most important, politicians virtually never interfered success-
fully with the basic system of promotion by seniority. Nor were military
courts-martial or courts of inquiry initiated by civilian officials, by the army
hierarchy at civilian instigation, or for overtly political reasons. Even more fundamentally, communications and transportation technology on the landward frontier changed very little between 1820 and the Civil War. Steamboats began to increase the speed of mail delivery and transportation up navigable rivers, but railroads and the telegraph did not become significant factors on the trans-Mississippi frontier until the 1850s, and they were not extended past the edge of the Plains before 1861.

Nor did military commanders have formal legal training or designated legal or political advisers, whether from the State Department (responsible for administration of the federal territories), the civilian Bureau of Indian Affairs, or state or territorial governments. Under these circumstances, responsible career officers were expected to exercise a great deal of discretion—a term repeated over and over again in their instructions—but they had to be discreet, taking care not to exceed the restraints, real or perceived, of subordination to civil authority, whether local (the demands of legal due process) or national (executive policy and congressional statute). Like policemen in tough neighborhoods, career professional officers had to judge the political situation, both on the ground (“in the street”) and “at headquarters” in national, state, and territorial capitals, assessing how far they could go using intimidation and force against the contending parties, acting as diplomats to the Indians while mediating between local demands and national priorities. Although they would not be dismissed from the army for erring—I have not found a single officer who was—they surely knew that the army, and they as individuals, might suffer, through reduced appropriations or less desirable postings, if their actions led to controversy and embarrassment for their political masters. Their decisions were hardly permanent, but they certainly influenced the extent, shape, and limits of U.S. hegemony, while minimizing financial costs and human bloodshed, if not Indian suffering.23

Though they continued to share civilian convictions of the superiority of white civilization and engaged in land speculation like other Americans, the career professional officers of the nation’s standing army felt more economic and emotional autonomy from sectional or sectoral attachments in the West than their counterparts and predecessors in Jackson’s Division of the South during the strife on the Florida frontier in the 1810s. Historian Thomas Hietala demonstrates that “many Democratic expansionists viewed the acquisition of land and markets as essential to their program for sustaining the unique character of American social and political life” during the 1840s. While neither insensible to these desiderata nor incapable of profiting from their pursuit, army officers no longer lived in the agrarian Jeffersonian milieu that civilian expansionists were attempting to preserve and restore. Their service within increas-
ingly formalized bureaucratic institutions led them to a Whiggish yet institutionally nonpartisan perspective that valued order, restraint, and stability in all aspects of personal and national life. By proclaiming themselves the neutral servants of the nation-state, army officers were usually able to avoid taking a direct stance on what Hietala calls the central cultural conflict of the decade. The officer corps had led the American conquest of Spanish Florida during the 1810s, in general agreement with the southern and western civilians who took a strong interest in the subject, but it proved content to follow the gradual trajectory of American public opinion in coming to imagine and accept the seizure of the Mexican Southwest during the 1840s.24

Given the limited population of the western states and territories and West Point’s monopoly on new commissions during the 1820s, military commanders were rarely westerners themselves, though Tennesseans, Kentuckians, and Ohioans doubtlessly shared some of the antagonism toward Native Americans felt on frontiers farther west. This antipathy was surely aggravated by the experience of the War of 1812, but few officers of the postwar army had served in the West during that conflict. Hence, the desire to exterminate Indians common among contemporary civilian frontiersmen, and not uncommon among army officers prior to the War of 1812, depended largely on circumstance and the attitudes of their postwar counterparts: how violently did the Indians resist, and how easily were they overcome? U.S. power overawed most overt native opposition during the generation between the wars against the Seminoles, and military commanders rarely felt enough of a threat to discuss annihilation or extermination as a policy option. Indeed, the army’s ranking westerners, Brigadier General Edmund Gaines (from Tennessee) and Zachary Taylor, who was retained in 1815 because of a frontier victory and was one of the few Kentuckians who wanted to remain in the army, displayed little of the extreme ethnocentrism and racism of many civilian frontiersmen. Gaines showed as much empathy for Indians as any white nineteenth-century American not involved in humanitarian reform (though his second wife was a famous peace advocate) and ultimately came to oppose his former patron’s policy of removal. (However, this never altered Gaines’s fundamentally coercive and paternalistic approach to dealing with the Indians.)25 Despite his defense of Fort Stephenson against Indians in 1812 and his image as “Old Rough and Ready” in the 1840s, Taylor had worked earnestly to fashion himself into a gentleman whose Whiggishness was a compound of experienced caution, genteel moderation, and a subdued authoritarianism directed at white, Indian, and slave alike.

Nor were career military officers closely associated with any major sectors of the western economy: while many engaged in localized land speculation, at the cost of civilian envy and criticism, there is little if any evidence that they
invested in fur companies, lead mining, or the Indian trade or were financially dependent on these or other primarily western economic sectors. Gaines did have plantation holdings and became an advocate for southern economic development, but his expansionism appears to have been more national than sectional or economic in motivation. Nor, unlike British colonial commanders, were army victories rewarded with large cash bonuses and peerages. Taylor owned a plantation in Louisiana; the other senior officers (colonels and brevet brigadier generals) who became identified with the West by commanding there for extended periods—Henry Atkinson, Hugh Brady, Matthew Arbuckle, and Stephen W. Kearny—consistently advocated moderation and diplomacy toward the Indians whenever they thought it possible. Indeed, some company-grade officers believed that Arbuckle’s Arkansas plantation distracted him from enforcing peace more vigorously among Cherokee emigrants, but Arbuckle could claim twenty years of local knowledge and experience to justify his moderation and restraint.

Personal and institutional security, and a personal and institutional reputation for the values of order and good faith officers held dear, proved more powerful motives in the officer corps’ worldview than white supremacism or the urgent drive for territorial expansion that had permeated Jackson’s Division of the South. Most career officers preferred to imagine themselves commanding large-scale conventional operations, gaining reputation, fame, and glory leading soldiers in linear battles against their European counterparts. The army officer corps devoted little attention to the actual practice of warfare with Native Americans prior to the Second Seminole War, and little beyond debates in the Army and Navy Chronicle even then. The combination of this Eurocentric focus with the army’s cautious, nonpartisan execution of the removal policy and frequent friction between officers and white frontiersmen hints at the officer corps’ mental orientation and loyalty toward the nation-state that paid and employed it. Indeed, service in the West engendered at least as much disdain for white frontiersmen as for Native Americans, resentment that turned to disenchantment and outright disgust as the army became bogged down executing the removal policy in Florida during the Second Seminole War. Officers’ distaste for this seemingly thankless work fostered ambivalence toward territorial expansion, especially as social and cultural distinctions grew between West Pointers socialized in the allied values of nationalism and gentility—expressed in disinterested service and hierarchical order—and rough-hewn frontiersmen pursuing material self-interest at the expense of national sovereignty and social hierarchy. By the late 1830s, many officers saw themselves as national policemen, their role as much to preserve law and order among unruly white citizens as to facilitate the westward movement.
Whatever diplomatic skills military commanders developed at the strategic level, whether through experience or their comparatively more objective position as representatives of national central authority, the nation’s reliance on the standing army often proved counterproductive at the tactical and operational levels. Cost rather than desired capability drove force structure, and the regular army had never had a substantial mounted component in peacetime. In twenty-first-century terms, the constraints of the army’s force structure meant that strategy was neither threat nor objective based; fiscal constraints drove force structure, limiting the missions the army could perform and the objectives it could pursue. The initial northwestern advance was conducted by infantry, which was unable to catch mounted Indians and was tethered to rivers for supply. It proved difficult to project or sustain military power—strategic, operational, or tactical, for whatever purpose—without greater mobility. Expense permitting, infantry commanders sometimes mounted small units (a company or two at most) for temporary patrols or pursuit, but this was playing the Indians’ game, surrendering the cohesion and firepower of the army’s linear discipline and exposing small, isolated contingents to defeat by more experienced Indian horsemen.

This was much more than simply a tactical dilemma for the army, which would ultimately rely on taking the offensive to destroy native food stocks and shelter in case of extended war. Developing mounted mobility was a critical factor in frontier civil-military relations and the army’s aspiring professional monopoly. White frontiersmen used the army’s inability to catch small parties of marauders to demand and sometimes secure funding for a variety of state and local citizen-soldier organizations, from the militia to expeditionary mounted volunteers (“rangers”), threatening the officer corps’ hegemony over the direction of organized American military force. The army could not ensure its control, and thus an effective national direction, unless it could develop the mobility to catch Indians who dispersed to avoid its firepower. Indeed, given frontier citizen-soldiers’ tendencies toward atrocity and ethnic cleansing, experienced professional soldiers considered them more likely to start wars than end them. Tactical capability was essential to executing national strategy, and even more important to maintaining national control over security strategy. On the western frontier, mounted mobility was ultimately a prerequisite for national sovereignty and geopolitical efficacy.

Army leaders therefore demanded greater mobility as the focus of national policy began to turn toward the central and southwestern Plains during the 1820s and 1830s. Following congressional demands to protect the Santa Fe trade during the 1820s, the Black Hawk War (the most serious outbreak of
National Military Expansion on the Western Frontier

frontier hostilities since the First Seminole War) led to the creation of the Battalion of Mounted Rangers later in 1832 and the First Dragoon Regiment the following spring, the army's first permanent mounted units since the War of 1812. With that ice broken, the quest for mobility dominated War Department planning during the mid and late 1830s in reaction to the concentration of Indians driven from the Southeast. Following the apparent success of significant dragoon expeditions in the Southwest between 1834 and 1836 and the redeployment of most infantry regiments to Florida against the Seminoles in 1836 and 1837, mobile units assumed the dominant role in western military strategy and operations. Indeed, the single dragoon regiment deployed on the western frontier between 1833 and 1842 demonstrated the greatest economy of force in the national military strategy of that era.28

Despite this limited mobility, the national standing army did deter or quell Indian resistance to white expansion in the Upper Mississippi Valley, a task at which state and territorial volunteers and militia proved consistently inadequate and often dangerously incompetent. White frontiersmen and settlers were emphatically not irresistible: apart from the Civil War years, it was the national standing army—not the temporary, locally organized militia, volunteers, or vigilantes—that provided the consistent pressure required to force the Indians onto reservations and repressed their efforts to escape (certainly not without great difficulty and several tactical defeats) within a single generation after 1865. (Citizen-soldiers did commit most of the genocide against the California Indians in the 1850s.) Apart from the Texas Revolution and the years of the Civil War, regular forces directed by career officers dominated the U.S. force structure in virtually every large-scale conflict between whites and Indians from the Ohio wars of the 1790s through the final conquest of the western Indians. With the significant but intermittent exceptions of the Tennessee war against the Chickamauga Cherokee (roughly 1786–1795), the “First Creek War” (1813–1814), the Indian wars of the Texas Republic, the Civil War, and the genocides of the 1850s, volunteers were never more than auxiliaries, however important their service as scouts. In two of these cases, the federal government had bigger issues to deal with; in two, it did not seek war; and it had no sovereignty over the Texas Republic.

The army also became a significant, though hardly complete, restraint on intertribal warfare, at least between native and immigrant Indians in the region immediately west of Arkansas and Missouri, where U.S. policy needed peace most. Indeed, in its role as the enforcer of U.S. assertions to a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within the nation’s boundaries, the army acted as the principal stimulus (or goad) to Indian pacification and the gradual development of a rational-legal social order among the native polities. Some Indian
nations, particularly those with long experience adjusting to white pressure in the Southeast, like the Cherokee, developed impersonal or “objective” legal systems; they outlawed customs of individual and clan retaliation and revenge, largely on their own initiative, as defensive or preclusive responses akin to the “defensive modernization” of developing nations during the age of European imperialism. But for most tribes on the western frontier of white settlement, their adoption of a more centralized political system of relatively impersonal written law was first mediated through the U.S. Army. The army intervened to halt or prevent violence between individual whites and Indians and between Indian factions or tribes, limiting the unrestrained violence of massacre and turning native suspects over to white civil authorities per the principle of due process and civilian supremacy. Meanwhile, federal courts rarely met or accepted jurisdiction on the frontier, and state legislatures extended their jurisdiction largely as a means of ruling the Indians more directly, without federal mediation. Given the prejudice of white courts and juries and Indians’ frequent inability to testify under state law, each tribe or nation gradually moved to create a formal legal system and police force of its own, if only to ward off white intervention.

Though some historians have criticized the army for failing to sustain a presence on the upper Missouri between 1825 and the war with Mexico, the Missouri and Yellowstone expeditions of 1818–1825 were exceptional in scale, distance, and duration among western military operations prior to 1846. The army eventually succeeded in projecting U.S. power wherever civilian interest was sufficient to pay for doing so. In other words, while the army was insulated in personnel matters and autonomous in its routine operations and administration, it could not sustain policy independent of funding authorized by Congress. Apart from the First Seminole War and that with Mexico, the army was more the shield than the sword, as Francis Paul Prucha terms it, of the republic; it usually provided protective cover for settlement, albeit somewhat (and sometimes significantly) forward of most white farmers, rather than launching offensive wars against native polities prior to the arrival of numerous settlers and the growth of popular demand. Apart from the Missouri expeditions, this shield normally operated along a contiguous frontier, not far beyond the Mississippi or far up its tributaries (particularly the Red and the Missouri), until the 1840s. Indeed, by the mid-1840s, the national military presence lagged behind settlement in Minnesota, leading to popular demand for forward posts to encourage further settlement. The War Department learned a lesson from this disparity between military supply and political demand, and during the 1850s, new lines of forts were dispersed across the northern, central, and southern Plains to guard emigrant trails and settlement while intimi-
dating the regional Indian hegemons, the Comanche and Sioux. Indeed, with the expansion of white settlement in California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Great Basin during the decade after the war with Mexico, the army was compelled to deploy posts across the now-continental United States in a scatter-shot pattern that had far more to do with civilian demand than any cohesive vision of military strategy.30

The result, whether of military action or its absence, was ultimately a more secure and more cohesive nation. By the mid-1820s, international competitors like Britain were excluded from significant authority among the Indians of the Old Northwest and the upper Mississippi, though this was accomplished at least as much by cabinet-level diplomacy and changes in the internal business dynamics of the fur trade as by military presence. (Of course, we might question how great that influence really was, or to what extent it was a projection of white inability to credit native agency.) White frontiersmen did not feel so neglected by the federal government that they attempted to mobilize a more locally responsive armed force by establishing independent republics within the boundaries or along the peripheries of the United States; nor did they appeal for international patronage or intervention, as some of their predecessors in the southern borderlands had done before 1820. Though armed settlement on other people’s land certainly qualifies as a form or variant of filibustering on the spectrum of illegal group violence, white encroachment on Indian territory was not accompanied by political separatism or other fundamental, sustained challenges to U.S. national sovereignty. Texas was distinctive in its retention of an active state military force under the guise of the Rangers, and dissatisfaction with federal military protection proved a substantial factor in the state’s secession in 1861, but these were southern political and cultural phenomena as much as western ones.

Most important for the future course of American development, western interests were never so dissatisfied that they united in sectional political form as a third major competitor for national power with the North and South. This was no small achievement, given the fluidity, even chaos, scholars usually associate with borderlands, and the value of the trans-Mississippi states to Union victory in the Civil War. With lower population densities, and without the desire to protect and extend plantation slavery, the western territories and states posed few of the challenges to national sovereignty seen in Georgia (discussed in chapter 3) and exhibited little of the alienation from national military policy that began in the southern states (especially Georgia) during the 1780s. Indeed, the unusual combination of relatively dense white settlement with federal reluctance to deploy military power against the Indians in Georgia is the exception that proves the rule of federal initiative in the pacing of expansion.31
Few organized nonstate actors, whether political or economic, seriously challenged U.S. sovereignty over relations with the Indians, and further white expansion ultimately depended on the contingencies of securing political support within the institutions of the nation-state through the constitutional processes of election and representation. To repeat, the ultimate physical pace and contours of citizen expansion ultimately depended on the nation-state, particularly its deployment of military forces to deter, defend against, or expel Indians. The American fur companies retreated, along with the United States, from Arikara and Blackfoot attack in the mid-1820s, and by the 1830s, most American trapping and trading were done by individuals—either mountain men or Indians who sold furs to American traders—rather than the “brigades” organized by the fur companies to penetrate Indian country in the early 1820s. Without national military assistance, the Indian trade on the central and southern Plains, like that at Bent’s Fort in Colorado, remained dependent on native, particularly Comanche, cooperation, although dragoon expeditions hinted at the proximity of American power after the mid-1830s. More successful in their negotiations with the federal nation-state, the St. Louis merchants engaged in trade with Santa Fe secured U.S. military protection for their convoys as early as 1829. Despite some calls for military support of U.S. claims in Oregon, Congress and the executive were content to defer national intervention and military power projection into the Pacific Northwest until the 1840s, after white settlement had reached a politically significant level with the opening of the Oregon Trail and the migration of farmers. Even then, American military commanders did little detailed planning, unlike their British counterparts.32

Ultimately, civilian demands, rather than a military thirst for glory or hatred for Indians, drove westward expansion, yet this expansion usually required a permanent, and thus national, military presence to persist and succeed at an acceptable cost. To repeat, sustained white settlement on a substantial scale, by farmers rather than individual trappers or traders, rarely occurred prior to the deployment of national military forces—a pattern repeated across the continent from the Ohio Valley in the 1780s to the closing of the frontier a century later. (Georgia and Tennessee in the 1780s, when the nation-state was almost nonexistent, provide the best examples to the contrary.) Consequently, constraints on national military powers due to expense and political antagonism—usually from Old Republicans and Democrats, but potentially from Whigs and National Republicans if the rationale for larger forces was extermination of the Indians—limited the actual pace and extent of white expansion. (See appendix E for a schematic illustration of these dynamics.)

This constraint, however unintentional, contributed to a degree of conservation of national energy—economic, political, and social, as well as military
and diplomatic—and thus to greater national cohesion and more intensive, powerful national growth—the commercialization, urbanization, and industrialization in eastern centers that historians now label the Market Revolution. Scholars should ponder whether that transformation would have taken the same shape if territorial expansion, and the replication of the Jeffersonian agrarian vision, had been as unrestrained as many contemporaries hoped, or as helter-skelter as many accounts have implied. Historians have commonly portrayed the decentralized character of politics between the Constitution and the Civil War as a source of expansive energy. They should also contemplate the extent to which democratic, liberal, and republican antipathy toward centralized power—particularly national military power and the taxation necessary to sustain it—actually operated to constrain the expansion that liberal populists sought, and ask what impact this unintended restraint had on the form and character of the American social and political order. Would the North have developed so differently from the South? Would there have been a Civil War, and would the greater dispersal of population and resources have prepared the North for subjugating the South?33

EXPLORING THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST: OFFICIAL RECONNAISSANCES, JUNIOR OFFICER INITIATIVES, AND THE CORPS OF TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS

Fiscal constraints limited the frequency of government-sponsored exploration, but career military officers were some of the leading actors in the “Great Reconnaissance” of the North American West. Such forays tended to correspond with new opportunities for imperial expansion, so they remained ad hoc and intermittent, rather than part of a concerted plan of continuing scientific inquiry, until the 1850s. Nevertheless, they demonstrate both the fundamental expansionism of American military strategy and operations and the contingencies of bureaucratic structure and individual agency that so often limited the army’s expansionist efforts. The expeditions led by Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Montgomery Pike between 1804 and 1807 were initiated to examine newly acquired and prospective territories as much to gather general strategic intelligence and to serve diplomatic purposes, like intimidating the Indians and arguing the boundaries with Spain, as to gain scientific knowledge per se. Once the flag had been shown, the Indians had been instructed in the identity of the new claimants to sovereignty, and general geographic information had been collected, the quest for scientific knowledge provided too little justification for more detailed exploration of regions so distant from the frontiers of significant
white settlement. By 1808, Thomas Jefferson was about to leave office, James Wilkinson was busy defending himself against inquiries into his expansionist intrigues, and it was clear that the next president would have his hands full with Britain and the Floridas.

Another decade passed before the next major exploratory forays sponsored by the federal government in the West, under the direction of topographical engineer Stephen H. Long between 1819 and 1824. Long conducted two extended reconnaissances in the Plains and the Upper Mississippi Valley, in 1819–1820 and 1823 respectively. These followed three shorter trips to inspect the Illinois, Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Arkansas Rivers for potential sites for military posts between 1816 and 1818. In the process, Long chose the site for Fort Smith, reported on the resources and Indians of Illinois, and advised department commander Thomas A. Smith on the positioning of posts across the arc from the upper Mississippi to the Red River, providing an outline for strategic planning as the United States redeveloped its northwestern outposts and began to reach toward the Plains. Like Wilkinson, who had proposed the last strategic plan for western posts a full decade before, Long recommended a post at the mouth of the Platte; responding to Smith’s suggestion, he advocated placing a post at the head of the Yellowstone and advised locating an intermediate post at the Mandan bend. Long thereby expanded routine efforts to site forts into more extensive reports on the Illinois and Oklahoma regions, leading his superiors to request similar reports to buttress their plan to launch a reconnaissance up the Missouri to the Yellowstone. This was virtually established policy by mid-1818, but Long’s work provided useful ammunition to support requests for appropriations, and his forays to the Red, Washita, and Kiamachi Rivers laid the groundwork for the establishment of Fort Gibson on the Arkansas and Fort Towson on the Red in 1824. These efforts encouraged Secretary of War Calhoun to send Long onto the Plains for an exploratory expedition far beyond the existing boundaries of settlement.35

Like the Jeffersonian reconnaissances, Long’s 1819 and 1823 expeditions were as much diplomatic as scientific, intended to show the flag among Indian populations distant from the centers of American power. Much like Zebulon Pike in 1806, Long referred to his 1819 foray across the Plains as a “military survey,” seeking information that would be useful in future campaigns. His 1823 foray followed and then passed Pike’s footsteps, exploring the region granted to the United States west of the Lake of the Woods by the Convention of 1818, where Long raised the flag and placed a boundary marker at Pembina. Carrying a letter of introduction from the British foreign minister, Lord Canning, Long went a hundred miles into Canada and then returned to the United States along the northern shore of Lake Superior. Both forays were accompa-
nied by company-sized escorts of federal troops, and both led to tense encounters with local Indians. Indeed, Long fired Congreve-style rockets to intimidate the Kansa Indians, who had spent the winter of 1818–1819 harassing the advance guard of the Missouri River expedition at Cow Island.

The army also contributed to a civilian expedition, led by scientist Henry Schoolcraft, in the upper Mississippi region in 1820. Schoolcraft was an ethnologist as well as a physical scientist, and Michigan territorial governor Lewis Cass accompanied him in order to confer and negotiate with the Indians, taking a company of soldiers for escort. One might have expected the Adams administration to continue or even expand these exploratory efforts, but the army’s advance into the Upper Mississippi Valley and its retreat from the upper Missouri after the Arikara War made these expeditions less imperative by the mid-1820s. More generally, Long’s condemnation of the Plains as the “Great American Desert” discouraged further exploration on the entire arc of the Plains and prairie frontier. (Long’s record at assessing economic potential was not very good: he also misjudged the timber and mining potential of the northern woods he explored in 1823–1824.) A decade later, with Jackson as president and Cass as secretary of war, Schoolcraft, now U.S. agent to the Sioux, led an expedition to study the fur trade, report on British influence among the Indians, and try to discourage conflict between the Ojibway and the woodlands Sioux. Escorted by a company-sized force, he performed some vaccinations and took a census of the natives he was able to contact. But by the 1830s, the upper Mississippi was becoming too well known to require further government exploration, and the scene of reconnaissance, like the fur trade during the age of the mountain men, began to shift west.

Indeed, the next significant exploratory venture undertaken by an officer was only quasi-official and was initiated by the officer himself, illustrating the dilemmas involved in permitting government agents to undertake official duties in private capacities. In 1831, sixteen-year veteran Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, a captain in the Seventh Infantry, sought and gained permission to travel to and beyond the Rockies, receiving leave of absence to do so. Although Bonneville intended to engage in the fur trade for his own profit, commanding general Alexander Macomb saw an opportunity to gather strategic and tactical intelligence and gave Bonneville instructions to that effect:

Note particularly the number of Warriors that may belong to each tribe or nation that you may meet with: their alliances with other tribes and their relative position as to a state of peace or war, and whether their friendly or warlike dispositions towards each other are recent or of long standing. You will gratify us by describing the manner of their making War, of the
mode of subsisting themselves during a state of war . . . their Arms [and their effects], whether they act on foot or on horse back, detailing the discipline and maneuvers of the war parties, the power of their horses.38

After two years of silence, Bonneville reported from the Wind River country in present-day Wyoming, requesting an extension of his furlough to expand the range of his investigations (and his mercantile efforts). He regarded the local Indians as “extremely peaceable, and honest.” Though very thorough, his report was much more concerned with the fur trade than Indian warfare; his principal diplomatic advice was to occupy Oregon to forestall British economic competition, “the sooner . . . the better.” Indeed, Bonneville believed that a single infantry company, usually about forty soldiers, would be sufficient “to enforce all the views of our Government” there, particularly against the aggressive but dispersed trappers of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Unfortunately for Bonneville, the War Department was undertaking an effort to compel officers to serve with their units, and he was denied an extension of his leave. Yet the orders seem to have missed him in the wilderness, and the intrepid captain over-stayed his leave by a full two years, returning in 1835 to find he had been dropped from the rolls of the army. His reaction demonstrates some of the effects of socialization at the Military Academy after the War of 1812:

Judge then . . . what must have been my mortification, when instead [of] the approbation I had expected for my exertions and enterprise [I lost the commission] I held dearer than life. Trained at the Military Academy, I became as it were identified with the Army; ’twas my soul, my existence, my only happiness . . . ’tis mortifying indeed. My character as a soldier has been fair too long to believe that my superiors will hesitate one moment, to restore me my character, and my rank.39

The ensuing controversy illustrates the internal fractures created by promotion by seniority and disparities in leaves and postings, but it also spotlights the army hierarchy’s judicious evaluation of officers’ future potential. Bonneville overstated his misfortune. Although he had gained some familiarity with the West during his regimental service on the edge of the Plains, he had already held a privileged, autonomous post as a recruiter in New York City. His ability to secure another such opportunity that was even more profitable, unsupervised, and exciting, while avoiding the responsibilities of troop duty at unhealthy Fort Gibson, irritated many of his fellow officers stuck on routine peacekeeping and company duty. Indeed, about half of those in the Seventh Infantry Regiment petitioned against his reinstatement, which would have cost
them the increments of seniority (and for several, the promotion) his dismissal had produced. Macomb recognized Bonneville’s ability, however, and the case ultimately went to the Senate, which consented to the administration’s recommendation to restore the adventurer’s rank. Macomb’s faith in Bonneville’s initiative and enterprise was rewarded six years after the general’s death, when Bonneville commanded the Sixth Infantry at Mexico City, earning a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel for gallant and meritorious conduct at the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, where he was wounded in action.40

Army exploration returned to official channels after Bonneville’s expedition. The Corps of Topographical Engineers, autonomous since 1831, was augmented nearly 300 percent and became fully independent of the Corps of Engineers in 1838, after Congress passed legislation to expand the army. Most historians have followed William Goetzmann in viewing the topographical engineers as passionate proponents of territorial expansionism, attributing the 1838 increase to the growing pressure for expansion after a generation’s hiatus. Missouri senators Lewis Linn and Thomas Hart Benton, for example, were ardent advocates of the Santa Fe trade and the settlement of Oregon, and Benton would soon become the political patron of John C. Frémont, commissioned as the second-lowest-ranking topographical engineer directly from civilian life in 1838. Frémont woud marry Benton’s daughter Jessie three years later.

Yet promoting westward territorial expansion was not the statutory mission of the topographical engineers (aka “topogs”), nor was it their commanders’ intention: the corps sought augmentation largely to meet the prosaic demands of military roads, river and harbor improvements, and the Seminole War in Florida (where commanders needed the topogs as mapmakers). In other words, executive branch intent and congressional support for the 1838 law were complex; the law was not simply a means by which expansionist Democrats could redirect national surveying expertise westward or a set of restrictions imposed on army engineers by egalitarian Democrats, as several scholars have recently suggested. Since the 1838 statute sharply restricted the assignment of army engineers to civil engineering projects, the enlarged corps had the personnel necessary to resume the exploration that western politicians demanded, but there is no evidence that the senior topogs saw this as their principal mission or envisioned it leading to the aggressive incursions Frémont undertook in Mexican California.41

Investigating the papers of these commanders, Vincent Ponko and Vernon Volpe recently demonstrated that the initial thrust of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, as led in 1838 by twenty-seven-year veteran Colonel John J. Abert, was scientific rather than expansionist. (This was also the case in 1839 and 1840 with the United States Exploring Expedition under navy lieutenant
Charles Wilkes, who was instructed to continue his scientific work even if the United States became engaged in war with Britain during the Canadian border crises of those years.) Indeed, Volpe found that Frémont, one of the most junior topogs, was initially subordinated to a civilian engineer, Joseph Nicollet; Frémont gained command of the 1842 expedition that made his reputation as the “Pathfinder” only because Nicollet died shortly before the journey was scheduled to begin.\(^{42}\) Though Abert placed strict limits on Frémont’s freedom of action, the junior engineer conspired with his father-in-law to go beyond his commander’s instructions, ultimately to the point of aiding American rebels in California in 1846. Frémont’s third expedition was intended to clarify the sources of the Red and Canadian Rivers, but he detached Lieutenant James W. Abert, son of the chief topographical engineer, to do so while he proceeded to California. Though Abert recommended a location for a new post, showed off his percussion rifles to the Indians, and observed that Americans would invest in the mines of New Mexico if the United States gained control there, his party was composed mostly of civilians, without a significant military escort. The junior Abert’s report included a number of caustic aspersions directed at various Indians but was notably free of expansionist sentiment.\(^{43}\)

Frémont’s disobedience and belligerence were exceptions to the midcentury officer corps’ pattern of subordination to civilian authority, and relying on Frémont as an archetype of the midcentury army officer presents a badly distorted picture of military sentiment regarding territorial expansion. Indeed, Frémont’s political connections—which helped him secure assignment to the exploratory missions—and aggressiveness were unusual even in the Corps of Topographical Engineers, where officers’ support for expansion was certainly increased by Frémont’s example and the romantic vision of national potential fostered by their experiences as explorers. Frémont was also distinctive in that he was one of only six topographical engineers out of seventy-two commissioned without some socialization at West Point. (All six were commissioned in 1838; the corps was eliminated in 1863, and the experiment was not repeated.) Indeed, just as many of the new topographical engineers commissioned in 1838 were former officers and West Point graduates, including George Gordon Meade and Andrew A. Humphreys, who had resigned during the boom times of the mid-1830s; their professional socialization and commitment reemerged amid the instability of civilian life following the Panic of 1837.

The culmination of Frémont’s first term in uniform provided a potent demonstration of both the army’s political subordination and its institutional autonomy from civilian control—the fate that lay in wait for junior officers motivated more by politics and ideology than by institutional rank and discipline. Ultimately, professional military roles and routines triumphed over the
John C. Frémont, expansionist icon expelled from the army, in an 1856 presidential campaign lithograph. (Courtesy Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03212)

Politicized self-assertion of the romantic rebel. Frémont was court-martialed after he refused to turn over the military governorship of California to thirty-six-year veteran Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearny, the genteel, authoritarian dragoon commander designated governor by President Polk, the Democratic expansionist. Kearny had his own connections to match the Benton-Frémont ties: born to a wealthy New Jersey family and married to the stepdaughter of William Clark, the former explorer, Missouri governor, and superintendent of western Indian affairs.

Polk sought to avoid court-martialed Frémont, but he went ahead after Senator Benton threatened to mount a congressional investigation to vindicate his son-in-law. Nor did the junior topographical engineer get the sympathetic court of peers and former subordinates that General Macomb had arranged for Inspector General John Wool in the Cherokee country a decade before. Benton provided the legal defense, which was surely intended to intimidate the court’s members, accusing the army of prejudice against an officer who had not graduated the Military Academy. Although the court sentenced Frémont to dismissal, it did compromise by recommending leniency (reinstatement with sanc-
Chapter One

tions like suspension of pay or seniority). Senior topographical engineers
Stephen H. Long (the explorer from the 1810s and 1820s) and James D. Gra-
ham joined in that verdict and recommendation. Still hoping to smoothe things
over, the president invalidated the most severe conviction (for mutiny), remit-
ted the sentence, and ordered Frémont back on duty without further penalty,
but the arrogant Pathfinder demanded full exoneration, an annulment of the
conviction on all charges.

Polk then acknowledged the autonomy of the army as a professional insti-
tution and accepted the court’s sentence, costing him the support of Benton,
a former ally in the cause of territorial expansion. Frémont demonstrated his
limited commitment to the army and its professional ethic by departing its
ranks to enter politics. His partisan efforts would lead to his appointment as a
major general of volunteers in 1861 and to his resignation amid friction with
President Lincoln in 1862. Career army officers were not discharged in peace-
time reductions in force after 1821: if they were dismissed it was for ethical
deficiency or indiscipline; if they resigned it was to pursue civilian economic
opportunities or because they could not adjust to military subordination. Polit-
ically focused officers were much more likely to leave the army than to suffer
political sanction—a remarkable demonstration of the army’s autonomy from
the partisanship of Jacksonian civil government.