

Wages of War

by Marc Simmons

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In 1857 a band of Yuma Indian warriors left their village on the Colorado River and traveled east to the vicinity of today's Phoenix to attack a settlement of their enemies, the Maricopas. The two tribes had been assaulting one another for years, causing great slaughter. The Yumas had the advantage of surprise and should have achieved their goal easily. As it happened, however, Pimas, who were allies of the Maricopas, were camped nearby and they rushed to counterattack. Every one of the Yuma men was slain.

The only unusual thing about this example of intertribal warfare was that it occurred so late in history. Europeans, since their arrival in the 16th century, had been trying to end such bloody encounters.

Long ago I noticed in New Mexico's colonial documents the frequent Spanish references to battles between pueblos that resulted in enormous casualties. As Pecos Pueblo, for instance, native leaders of a pro-Spanish faction killed their kinsmen in the war faction in the 1690's. At the time of the initial Oñate settlement in 1598, a pueblo man told the Spaniards he was glad they had come, since their presence might put a stop to the age-old conflicts between the Indians. That statement sounds strange to modern ears, but becomes comprehensible when we see how deeply embedded war was in native society.

A true measure of its depth is revealed in a hefty new book by archaeologist Steven A. LeBlanc of UCLA. It is titled *Prehistoric Warfare in the American Southwest*. In his book, LeBlanc documents the abundant archaeological evidence showing that war in the region was common long ago, actually a preoccupation of the people.

It also was particularly brutal. Among examples LeBlanc mentions is the case of 30 children whose remains were found in a burned kiva at Salmon Ruins, an excavated site open to the public near Farmington. Written records of a later day confirm that trapping people in kivas and burning them to death lasted well into historic times. That happened in 1700 among the Hopi villages, when they banded together and marched against one of their own towns, Awatobi, exterminating it.

LeBlanc's fascinating new book on native warfare forces us to reexamine many of our older views on cultural evolution prior to the advent of Europeans. It is a reminder that Southwestern studies are ever-changing and always challenging.

LeBlanc explains that traditionally archaeologists have ignored or downplayed the significant role that warfare had in the development of Anasazi (pre-Pueblo) culture. In so doing, they have contributed to the romanticized and popular notion of the Pueblos as models of peaceful farming folk. In fact, they were able warriors and just as likely to pick up weapons as anyone else. Even their architecture confirmed that the Indians lived in a war

mode. When the Oñate settlers encountered the southernmost pueblos of the Piros, above and below Socorro, they observed large, multistoried houseblocks that clearly were built for defense.

All of this is relevant to the controversy that erupted last year on the 400th anniversary of Gov. Juan de Oñate's founding of New Mexico. In Albuquerque at least, the argument continues over whether to erect an Oñate monument. The point of contention is the governor's defeat of Acoma Pueblo, after it rebelled and killed a dozen Spanish soldiers, including his nephew. In many minds now, that seems to disqualify him from receiving any honors.

Both archaeology and history establish that the Acomas were among the most aggressive of all the Pueblos. Before Europeans arrived, they made short-term alliances with the Zunis and the Hopis, joining them in destroying other villages. As LeBlanc notes, the Acomas may have once had as many as 10 Villages, before they were reduced to the single one we know today. War no doubt was the cause of their decline.

It would appear, therefore, that the Oñate episode was not unlike what the Acomas had been experiencing far back into prehistoric times. Indeed, the past of all peoples is filled with strums and of violence. That's why I often say that history is not for sissies.

For more on this subject read: *PREHISTORIC WARFARE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST*, by Steven A. LeBlanc University of Utah Press, 1999