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THE LAST APACHE WAR: HOW DIPLOMACY BECAME DECEPTION IN GERONIMO'S FINAL SURRENDER

N. R. Gopal

ABSTRACT

The Apache wars ended in 1886, bringing to a close not only a series of military campaigns in the Southwest but also indigenous armed resistance against the United States that had persisted for decades. The last noteworthy armed conflict of this long period of resistance was the 1885-86 Geronimo Campaign. With the end of this conflict came the end of not only Geronimo but also a whole series of American expansion that used various deceptive means (and military force when necessary) to carry out their "final solution" to the "Indian problem."This paper will not only spotlight Geronimo's surrender but also explore what led Geronimo to surrender and what made the peace (or lack of peace) that came after his surrender particularly deceptive.

KEYWORDS: *Geronimo, Apache Wars, Diplomacy, Deception, Indigenous Resistance, Colonial Betrayal*

INTRODUCTION

September 1886 should have been candid. Geronimo and his small group of Chiricahua Apaches surrendered to General Nelson Miles, and with that, years of conflict along the U.S.-Mexican border came to an end. It's mentioned:

> On September 4, 1886, Apache leader Geronimo surrenders to U.S. government troops. For 30 years, the Native American warrior had battled to protect his tribe's homeland; however, by 1886, the Apaches were exhausted and outnumbered. ("Geronimo Surrenders")

This surrender, however, was anything but simple. It shows American westward expansion, for all its claims to peace, achieving that peace only by using force and by managing the settlements of the people it was displacing. The story of Geronimo's surrender is a way of looking at American history that uses Geronimo himself as a sort of lens. In that way, we see not just the triumphal American narrative, but also the deeply contradictory nature of what that narrative tries to accomplish.

The Long History of Apache Resistance

To truly grasp the events of 1886, one must first recognize that they are not the result of some sort of episodic violence—outbreaks in which the Apaches seemed to be, as Army officers put it at the time, "going crazy." The resistance was part of a centuries-long struggle. It was the same kind of struggle that the Apaches' ancestors had engaged in against Spanish colonizers in the 1600s, then against Mexican conquerors in the 1800s, and now against American "settlers" and their Army. The strategies that Cochise and other Apache leaders used were as much a part of this "Old Army" as the bugle calls and infantry squares that were used in the more conventional fights mounted by Union and Confederate soldiers:

> Of all the Apache groups that impeded the advance of the southwestern frontier, the Chiricahuas proved to be the most savage and persistent in their opposition. (Utley 1)

The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 brought about some profound changes. The Americans came with big promises of peace and protection, which they sealed in treaties that were nothing more than thin veils for the good faith that animated them. What the treaties envisioned was something like peace. What they netted, however, was a net of war that closed around the Apaches. What followed was a series of bloody skirmishes that morphed from peace into chaos, fueled by the insatiable appetite of settlers and prospectors for even more Apache land. Then came Geronimo, transformed from a local figure defending his homeland into a commanding officer in an otherwise endless series of conflicts across the Southwest.

Enter General Crook: Trying Something Different

By the 1880s, the U.S. military had to yield that the Apache were winning and that their form of traditional, "linear" warfare wasn't working. The Apache were too skilled at guerrilla tactics, and they knew the landscape too well, to be defeated in set-piece, conventional battles. So in 1882, the military brought in a different kind of commander— General George Crook— who used "diplomacy on horseback" to achieve political ends.

Crook was clever to comprehend that continuing the same failed tactics would mean additional dead soldiers and no solution to the problem. He used Apache scouts to trail their own people, which was contentious but effective. He made wide use of interpreters like Tom Horn and Mickey Free, who could negotiate between Apache and American cultures. But communication stayed uptight with misinterpretation and wariness. Geronimo had good reason to be disbelieving of Crook's promises. Barrett's 1906 narrative makes clear that, after agreeing to Miles's terms, Geronimo and the Chiricahua were held as prisoners of war for years- contrary to their expectations of a limited exile(Barrett). But the whites did keep prisoners, and worse. Every time Crook tried to negotiate, politicians back East would undermine him, or newspapers would whip up public hysteria about Apache "savagery."

The pattern emerged with depressing predictability: natives would negotiate, reach some kind of understanding, watch it fall apart due to bad faith or misunderstanding, and then start fighting again. When Geronimo escaped from the San Carlos Reservation for the last time in 1885, Crook pursued him all the way into Mexico. But the mutual distrust was too deep. Neither side could fully commit to peace because neither side trusted the other enough to believe that the peace would hold. Crook's failure to resolve the situation led to his being replaced by General Nelson Miles, who had a very different approach to handling the "Apache problem."

Miles Takes Over

A new breed of military leaders was required to deal with the significant and novel challenges the West posed to the U.S. Army in the late 19th century. These men—Sheridan, Miles, and others—had new ideas and new ways of organizing and employing modern military forces to get the job done. They were results-oriented and didn't waste time seeking to understand enemy cultures, prospecting for peace efforts, or finding ways for "modern men" and "ancient cultures" to coexist. They had modern means, in the form of the telegraph, railroads, and a growing bureaucracy, to employ in the task of moving troops and controlling unruly enemy "tribes."His orders from Washington were clear: no negotiations, no compromises, just get it done. But Miles, for all his determination to avoid diplomacy, lastly had to resort to talking. The Apaches were simply too effective at evading capture through military means alone. So, he turned to Apache scouts, using them to open communication channels with Geronimo, though his promises of eventual freedom if they surrendered were even more cynical than Crook's had been.

As Angie Debo shows, assurances given in the field were not matched in Washington, where policy favored securing Geronimo's capture over honoring understandings reached on the ground (Debo). By late summer of 1886, after years of running, fighting, and watching his followers dwindle from exhaustion and casualties, Geronimo finally met with Miles in Skeleton Canyon:

In few words, Gen. Miles told them what he would [do], the gist of which was that they would be sent to Florida there await the final action of the President of the United States. (Gatewood 69)

The surrender ceremony itself was carefully orchestrated. For the American audience, it was presented as the triumph of civilization over savagery. For the Apache, it was something else entirely—a forced submission to an uncertain future, made under duress and based on promises they suspected (correctly) would not be kept.

The Performance of Peace

Here's where things get really interesting from a historical perspective. The "diplomacy" of the Apache Wars was not diplomacy in any meaningful sense of mutual negotiation between equals. It was conquest dressed up in the language of peace. Albert Wratten records:

> Gatewood was taking the hostile Indians a message from General Miles asking them to surrender. Yes, they were given certain promises in order to induce them to surrender- their lives, and the government would get them out of Arizona before the civil authorities could arrest them and try them for murder. They were to go with their families to Florida, and maybe after a while could come back to Arizona and quieted down, two years or so. (97)

U.S. officials conveyed that exile would not be permanent, yet nothing binding was put in writing; in practice, the Chiricahuas were kept as prisoners of war for years with no return to their homeland. Within days of surrendering, not just the warriors but even the Apache scouts who had loyally served the U.S. Army were declared prisoners of war.

They were shipped to Fort Marion in Florida, where the humid climate was completely alien to people from the desert. Later, they were moved to Alabama and eventually to Oklahoma. Many died from diseases they had no

immunity to, or simply from despair. The interpreters who had worked so hard to broker peace found themselves prisoners alongside those they had helped capture. This wasn't an accident or a misunderstanding. The government understood precisely what it was about. Washington had to put to rest a costly war on the frontier; the American people demanded a clear victory and an obviously defeated enemy. The myths that the papers had already spun around Geronimo did not call for anything so humane as rehabilitation or anything so mundane as living peacefully in a community that happened to be in Arizona. They called instead for the next stage in the myth, which was the selling of peace as a cover for the indefinite imprisonment of more than a hundred people, including men who had served the U.S. in two different, peaceable, frontier service missions.

Life After "Peace": Geronimo as Prisoner and Propaganda

Once held in captivity, Geronimo's portrayal took a strange turn. He shifted from being the most feared Indian in America to something akin to a sideshow performer. The government used his presence in public as a means to entertain and notify. Even as President Theodore Roosevelt rode a horse in the 1905 inauguration procession, Geronimo could be seen serving as a living testament to American success (Wratten 118). But Geronimo wasn't without power in this new role. His dictated autobiography, published in 1906 as *Geronimo's Story of His Life*, offers his own version of events. His faith in spoken promises—what his culture taught him to be the right way to conduct negotiations—became the very thing that doomed him to a life in captivity. Meanwhile, officials saw Geronimo's appearance in public and their ability to manipulate language and promises as a clever American strategy rather than, as his story illustrates, a dishonorable, duplicitous path leading to an end all the Indians feared—reservation life.

Deeper Meanings: Two Worlds Colliding

The U.S. Army and Geronimo had conflicts that ran deeper than issues of land and politics. They had vastly different worldviews and ideas about what life should be. The Army and the Apaches might have seemed to be fighting on two different levels—one for some kind of dominion, the other for just the kind of life they had always lived. To the Army, Geronimo and his warriors must have seemed like crazed fanatics, going to any lengths to avoid capitulation. To the Apaches, the Army's demand that they give up their way of life and live as Apaches did under U.S. authority (essentially, as helots) was the same as demanding that they commit mass suicide. For them, "peace" meant something much deeper, with far more implications for their identity and way of life, than it did for the Americans, who saw negotiation as a tool for achieving.

The Apache pattern was not singular. Red Cloud, after his so-called "victory" of 1868, had the same outcome. He had the same hopeful expectation for partnered leadership with the federal government. And the same was true for Sitting Bull, who returned from Canadian exile expecting much the same outcome. Time and again, Native leaders sat across from federal negotiators expecting equal partnerships, only to find that they had been led to the door of surrender. If Geronimo's surrender can be viewed through this interpretive lens, then the "peace" negotiated in Skeleton Canyon (and beyond in the Southwest) is easily viewed as a federally sanctioned erasure of Apache leadership and autonomy.

Myth-Making

In American pop culture, Geronimo is pinned between two stereotypes: the bloodthirsty savage and the noble warrior. Early Hollywood westerns celebrated his defeat as a victory for "Manifest Destiny," the U.S. army's euphemism for its program of annihilation and extermination of Native Americans. Later, revisionist histories tried to reclaim Geronimo as a figure of resistance. During World War II, U.S. paratroopers shouted "Geronimo!" as their battle cry when they jumped from planes (this was popularized after a 1939 film). There is an irony to an imprisoned figurehead of resistance becoming a battle cry for U.S. soldiers and sailors overseas.

But the best recent history of Geronimo presents him not as a "bloodthirsty savage" or even a "noble warrior," but as a sophisticated and "unbelievably rational" figure working under conditions of impossible choice.

What Surrender Really Meant

Geronimo did not surrender in the usual way. He negotiated his capitulation under the threat of the U.S. Army's superior force. He used language that suggested he was resigning but not really giving up; in fact, he was acknowledging a superior military force but not conceding any claims about the human virtues of the military that put him under the threat of surrender. Geronimo's story raises questions about what we mean when we say "peace" in the aftermath of the colonial situation. The Apache Wars ceased in 1886. Their outcome, however, did not stop U. S. officials from censoring the Apaches' real-life story. Geronimo kept fighting U. S. policy, turning his own life into a kind of argument for why the Apaches fought. From Geronimo's viewpoint, what happened in the 1880s

amounted to a human rights violation, and he wrote an autobiography—perhaps the first-ever such military memoir—to tell his view of the story. When the armistice came, U. S. officials might have thought they'd snuffed out the Apache story. Not so; Geronimo would deliver the story in a way they could not control.

Conclusions: The Lessons of Skeleton Canyon

In September 1886, Geronimo surrendered to Miles at Skeleton Canyon. This moment reveals a key fact about the US Westward expansion. The government misrepresented this as a peaceful transition when it was anything but that. Using imprisonment and military force, the government sought to remove Natives from their ancestral lands in "peace". The moral problems with this forced "peace" helped push America toward being the nation it is today. Apache culture prized maintaining commitments, so Geronimo trusted them. However, he encountered the cold, dishonest U.S. authorities. 1886's surrender was not the civilization beating savagery. Labels were mythologies rationalizing violence. Instead, it depicts strong people twisting words to justify their behavior. Today, Geronimo's tale matters because peace means different things to different leaders. This can help or hurt.

It was a deathly choice: work for the empire or die. Despite this catastrophe, resistance exists. Geronimo's memoirs and historical documents undermine American expansion myths. He shows that true freedom cannot be written or signed in a canyon. Sometimes the fight for freedom begins when you are down. After the Apache War in 1886, justice, freedom, and peace remain unresolved. Although Geronimo lost his body, his story never did. His greatest accomplishment may be that lasting story. Schools and museums throughout honor him.

Thus, Geronimo gave up in 1886. His surrender was a trick and not diplomacy. Apache honor clashed with the U.S. habit of bending treaty language. The word 'peace' turned into endless confinement, not freedom. Loyal scouts ended up jailed despite promises. The 1906 memoir he wrote laid bare the treachery involved and called into serious question the mythical notions of expansion. This false deal repeats across Native dispossession, echoing Indigenous justice fights.

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