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## **Coping with Conquest**

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## Coping with Conquest—Todd Shallat

On March 10, 2006, the United Nations assailed the United States for denying the natives of the Boise Valley their traditional rights to an oval of sagebrush that spanned the desert corners of four western states. Already Congress had offered \$140 million for 27 million acres in four western states. “The fight is not over,” said Raymond Yowell of Elko, a cattleman descended from Shoshone-Paiutes who never agreed to relinquish their land. “You cannot sell out a nation. The [settlement offer] does nothing to change our inherent rights.”

It’s a picture starkly at odds with the history textbooks. In the standard *Dances With Wolves* spin on the Indian wars, where

the victims—alas—are doomed before the juggernaut of industrial progress, the story typically ends with the 1890 massacre of the ghost-dancing Sioux at Wounded Knee. “The progress of the white settlers meant the death of the Indians” according to *The Pursuit of Liberty*, a popular text for college freshmen. Another flatly maintains that the natives were exterminated. A third eulogizes that the Indians, after 1890, “lost their special distinctiveness as a culture.” Genocidal annihilation likewise pervades the published history of Idaho where timelines typically end with Chief Joseph’s “I will fight no more” surrender or the Bannock War of 1878.



The seminomadic Bannock people of Idaho are indigenous to the Great Basin, once ranging over a wide area in pursuit of buffalo. Courtesy of Idaho State Historical Society.

Can these Indians be the ancestors of the same Idahoans still fighting for treaty rights to endangered steelhead and salmon? The same who repeatedly frustrate Air Force plans for training ranges in the Owyhees? The same who effectively used the Idaho Supreme Court, in 1996, to block a non-Indian claim to Fort Hall's headwater snowmelt? These are not the massacred Sioux. To draw their curtain at the Bannock War is to slight the success of the armed insurgents who capably defended their homeland. To equate their fate with annihilation, to assume that barbed wire and ranching and war so traumatized the western Shoshone that they abandoned ethnic identity, is to rob from desert peoples the most remarkably enduring of all American characteristics: their talent for innovative adaptation—their capacity to cope.

In the 1974 edition of *Westward Expansion*, a standard college-level textbook, famed historian Ray Allen Billington reduced the Shoshone resistance to a single, inaccurate sentence: “[In 1868] Shoshoni and Bannock tribes ceded their lands in return for annuities and two small reservations.” More recently, Jon E. Lewis's *Mammoth Book of the West* found space for Buffalo Bill's funeral and outlaw Butch Cassidy's escape to South America but none for the Army's final solution to attacks on the Oregon Trail. Perhaps Idaho remains too remote for the publishers of history textbooks. Or perhaps Idahoans prefer the brevity of William Ghent's account of the U.S. Army's 1863 massacre of a Shoshone encampment on Bear River. “The weather

was bitterly cold and [Colonel Connor's] men suffered greatly. . . . [Connor] attacked the Indian camp on Bear River, near the present Franklin, Idaho, killing most of 300 warriors and capturing 160 women and children. For this feat, which brought peace, cleared the Trail, and opened to settlement a region that had been harassed for fifteen years, Connor was made a brigadier general of volunteers.”

Alas the natives seemed doomed. Peace and progress required a crushing defeat, or so Ghent contended in 1929. A poem published in Boise the following year bled for the brave pioneers who “suffered woe/ to bring the frontier westward ho.” The poet continued:

*They braved dangers ever near,  
In early days of Idaho.  
Ah, who can say they did not fear  
In Idaho, our Idaho  
To meet the dusky, hidden foe,  
With poison dart and trusted bow,  
Whose purpose was to lay them low,  
In Idaho, our Idaho?*

Poison darts? So fogged was the road to empire that historians ignored the Shoshone resistance until the U.S. Army was again chasing a hidden foe through the jungles of Vietnam. Not until the late 1960s and 1970s did historians such as Merle Wells and Brigham Madsen begin to understand that the killing of Shoshone noncombatants accomplished about as much as door-to-door searches in Baghdad or the carpet bombing of Hanoi: it infuriated the enemy, redou-

bling the will to resist. "Instead of cowing the Northwestern Shoshoni," wrote Madsen, "there is overwhelming evidence that the reverse happened." In 1863, for example, a twenty-warrior attack near the boomtown of Bannock City (future Idaho City) killed the gold miner who discovered the mother lode, George Grimes. Michael Jordon, the prospector who found gold in the Owyhees, met the same brutal fate. But the violence trapped the fishing people of the Boise Valley like wayfarers battered by storm. More than four hundred Shoshone from various places spent the bitter winter of 1867-68 under armed guard at a refugee camp near Boise. When the Army in 1869 attempted to caravan the refugees to the new Fort Hall Shoshone-Bannock Indian Reservation, most escaped. When again in 1877 the U.S. Indian Bureau used every possible means to entice homeless nomads to a second Sho-Ban Reservation at Duck Valley in the Owyhee highlands, two-thirds refused to go.

How, then, did the United States lay claim to the Boise Valley? Chief Yowell of Elko continues to fight the government. "If you say we've been conquered, show us where the battle took place. Show us the terms of surrender and show us the signatures of the Shoshone chiefs who signed the papers."

Yowell is right historically speaking. And wrong. No juggernaut rolled in from the East to smash his civilization. In the battle for historical understanding, however, the Sho-Ban defeat was a rout. So completely was history conquered that Americans cheered when President Herbert Hoover lopped thirteen years off a century to make 1930 the official centennial of the 1843 Oregon Trail. Boiseans celebrated on June 12, 1930, with a day of horseshoes and baseball. At dusk the festivities closed with what the souvenir program called an exact historical reproduction of an emigrant train being attacked by Indians and their timely rescue by a troop of U.S. Cavalry uniformed in authentic military style of 1860. Whooping savages fled before soldiers on polo ponies. The phantom had been vanquished at last.

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