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# Kit Carson, John C. Frémont, Manifest Destiny, and the Indians: Or, Oliver North Abets Lawrence of Arabia

J. DOUGLAS CANFIELD

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Kit Carson and John C. Frémont were once unmitigated Western heroes. They remain important figures in Western American history. But both have been subject to revisionism. A recent biography of Frémont, *John Charles Frémont: Character as Destiny* by Andrew Rolle, critiques the explorer as an ill-fated adventurer and opportunist (it is Rolle who compares him to Lawrence of Arabia<sup>1</sup>). Carson has been branded a genocidal racist, especially for his Navajo campaign of 1863 to 1864.<sup>2</sup> Carson's supporters and defenders, whom I will call Kittites, have argued that Carson was not an Indian-hater, but merely an Indian fighter when provoked; moreover, he was married to two Indian women, raised a daughter from his first marriage, adopted another Indian son, treated the Utes with considerable equanimity when he was their agent in the late 1850s, and treated the Navajos as well as he could as a commander under orders to kill all Navajo men on sight and capture women and children until they surrendered unconditionally. Carson resisted his commander, General James Carleton, by not killing all the males, but often freeing them to convince their tribe to surrender and agree to be relocated to Bosque Redondo. The num-

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bers of Navajos killed, livestock butchered, hogans burned, and crops wasted have all been exaggerated, according to the Kittites. Carson did not administer the Long Walk, nor did he pull up the peach trees in Canyon de Chelly, nor did he preside over the disastrous reservation Carleton provided for Navajo re-education in farming and Christian civilization.

There is some truth in this counter-revisionist swing of the pendulum. Because of his intimate interactions with the Indians of the Southwest—he intermarried with them, he learned nearly a dozen of their languages—Carson seems to have matured in his later years into an agent for the government who was respected by the Indians and could often convince them to make peace. And if he has been quoted accurately (as all the Kittites quote him, following the earwitness account of Rusling), he condemned the Sand Creek massacre, deploring as dishonorable the killing of women and children.

The Kittites repeatedly attack the revisionists for sloppy history, citing instead the solid, empirical history of their own work and that of Carson's reliable biographers, Milo Quaipe, Morgan Estergreen, Thelma Guild, and especially Harvey Lewis Carter. Yet these biographies (Quaipe's biography consists of brief comments in an introduction and notes to his edition of Carson's *Memoirs*), from popular to scholarly, available in bookstores throughout the West at least, still carry such titles as *Kit Carson: A Portrait in Courage*, "*Dear Old Kit*," and the most recent and most definitive, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes*.<sup>3</sup> Carson's greatest biographer, Harvey Lewis Carter, author or coauthor of these last two titles, writes in the preface to the 1990 paperback issue of "*Dear Old Kit*" that by publishing Carson's own memoirs with extensive commentary, and then narrating the years between the memoirs and Carson's death and offering an appraisal of his contribution to American history, he was trying to rescue Carson from the mythmakers of over a hundred years who exaggerated his exploits—and now from the revisionist mythmakers who unfairly denigrate them.

To be fair, Carter's title for his first book, subtitled *The Historical Christopher Carson*, comes from Carson's friend Ned Beale, who late in life referred to the scout who accompanied him on a risky attempt to obtain reinforcements for General Kearny at the battle of San Pasqual as "Dear Old Kit." But the choice of this appellation for a purportedly demythologizing biography is telling. Carter concludes his estimate of Carson's relationship to American history: "Finally, if the whole concept

known as Manifest Destiny had any validity, Kit Carson was perhaps the best exemplar of it, all the more so because he was not a conscious but an unconscious agent of the concept."<sup>4</sup> Carter would seem to be endorsing this portrait by the earlier Kittite, Morgan Estergreen:

Kit Carson's life story is, in essence, the story of the West as that region developed over the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. As such, then, Kit's life symbolizes the story of the American fur trade; of buffalo hunting and beaver trapping; of Indian tribes and Indian wars; of the annual rendezvous in mountain meadows; of the immigrant, the pathfinder, the soldier, and the seeker after gold—all following the Santa Fe, Spanish, Oregon, and California trails; of cantonment, Indian trading posts, and an adobe castle on the Arkansas River; of the caravan, the pack train, the oxcart, the overland stage, and the express by pony; of the conquests of Oregon, New Mexico, Texas, and California; of a wild and unknown West finally explored and conquered; of the march ever westward until the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific was under one flag.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Carter and his coauthor Thelma Guild write uncritically of Carson that "he became a symbol of the daring and intelligence by which the frontier was being extended."<sup>6</sup>

In this essay I wish to contribute to revisioning the portrait of Carson, especially in his relation to Frémont, the doctrine of manifest destiny, and the (mis)treatment of American Indians by examining the rhetoric of their respective memoirs and the Kittites' treatment of that rhetoric—or rather, all too often, their failure to treat it.<sup>7</sup> I do not wish to demonize Carson. Out of this controversy over his character, we need to take the wheat and let the chaff be still. But the chaff must first be shaken loose and acknowledged for what it is.

Setting aside the question of the "validity" of the concept of manifest destiny, let me say that if Carson was the "unconscious" exemplar of the concept, Frémont was the conscious exemplar. Under the obvious influence of his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the puppet master of the Polk government and *a*, if not *the*, architect of manifest destiny, Frémont, a topographical surveyor for the United States Army

with no military training, began deviating from his orders on his second expedition to the West when he returned from Oregon Territory through the Great Basin and California with Kit Carson as his guide. Their daring journey was reckless. Why did Frémont so deviate? Out of a sense of adventure—or Benton's secret desire to acquire California for the States? Did he discuss manifest destiny with Carson?

Frémont must have had some special magnetism for Carson. Guild and Carter call it "allure,"<sup>8</sup> and maybe Carson was simply attracted by the romanticism of this Lawrence of Arabia figure who daringly crossed mountains and deserts. But having in 1842 guided Frémont on his first expedition to the Yellowstone area, in 1843 Carson precipitately left his new bride Josefa Jaramillo to go on Frémont's second expedition which detoured through California. And in 1845, Carson precipitately sold his brand-new ranch on the Cimarron east of Taos to join Frémont for his third expedition, one that would lead them again to California where Frémont's expedition became a force against Carson's wife's own people in the Mexican War. Carson says in his memoirs that he had given his "word to Frémont that, in case he should return for the purpose of making any more exploration, that I would willingly join him."<sup>9</sup> Frémont writes in his memoirs, "There was no time to be lost, and he did not hesitate."<sup>10</sup> Did Frémont communicate to Carson, either at the end of his second or at the beginning of this third expedition, exactly what was the urgency? Did he say something like "Your country needs you"?

Frémont claims to know from the beginning the real purpose of this third expedition:

The geographical examinations proposed to be made were in greater part in Mexican territory. This was the situation: Texas was gone and California was breaking off by reason of distance; the now increasing American emigration was sure to seek its better climate. Oregon was still in dispute; nothing was settled except the fact of a disputed boundary; and the chance of a rupture with Great Britain lent also its contingencies.

Mexico, at war with the United States, would inevitably favor English protection for California. English citizens were claiming payment for loans and indemnity for losses. Our relations with England were already clouded, and in the event of war with Mexico,

if not anticipated by us, an English fleet would certainly take possession of the Bay of San Francisco.

For use in such a contingency the only available force was our squadron in the North Pacific, and the measures for carrying out the design of the President fell to the Navy Department....

As affairs resolved themselves, California stood out as the chief subject in the impending war; and with Mr. Benton and other governing men at Washington it became a firm resolve to hold it for the United States. To them it seemed reasonably sure that California would eventually fall to England or to the United States and that the eventuality was near. This was talked over fully during the time of preparation for the third expedition, and the contingencies anticipated and weighed. The relations between the three countries made a chief subject of interest about which our thoughts settled as the probability of war grew into certainty. For me, no distinct course or definite instruction could be laid down, but the probabilities were made known to me as well as what to do when they became facts. The distance was too great for timely communication; but failing this I was given discretion to act. The instructions early sent, and repeatedly insisted upon, to the officer commanding our Pacific squadron, gave specific orders to be strictly followed in the event of war. But these frequent discussions among the men who controlled the action of the Government, gave to me the advantage of knowing more thoroughly what were its present wishes, and its intentions in the event of war.<sup>11</sup>

Frémont may simply have been trying to vindicate himself here in these memoirs published in 1887, for he was court-martialed for his actions in California. And one can readily see why. Captain Frémont's orders from his superior officer were to survey east of the Continental Divide. But the expedition moved quickly into the Great Basin, and on November 24, 1845, "Frémont now divulged to his men that they were going to California, as no doubt they had already surmised."<sup>12</sup> Had Carson surmised? Since he was, as Rolle says, Frémont's "main confidant,"<sup>13</sup> would he not at least have suspected Frémont's motives?

The Kittites admit that Frémont "allowed himself to be

maneuvered," especially by Benton,<sup>14</sup> that he was in California illegally, and that he committed rash acts of war, even before war was declared. When the expedition arrived in California in January 1846, at first Don José Castro, the commanding officer of the Mexican Army in California, graciously granted Frémont permission to survey routes from the Rockies to the Pacific. But by March, Castro had received orders from Mexico City to expel Frémont, whose expedition was suspiciously hanging around the California capital of Monterey—obviously waiting for news of a declaration of war. Incredibly, Frémont defied Castro, retreated to Gavilán Peak, set up a fort, and raised the American flag. But it wasn't only Frémont who was defiant. The Kittites at best note but fail to comment on Carson's sarcasm in his memoirs: "We remained in our position on the mountain for three days, had become tired of waiting for the attack of the valiant Mexican General."<sup>15</sup> This is essentially the rhetoric of double-dare.

Pressured by the U.S. consul in Monterey, Frémont retired, moving up the Sacramento river to Lassen's Ranch. There occurred an event destined to have serious consequences. Some American settlers came to Frémont complaining that nearly one thousand Indians were preparing for attacks on the settlers and requesting that he lend them his force for a pre-emptive strike. So the U.S. government could not be charged with an unprovoked, illegal attack, Frémont discharged the men in his command, promising to rehire them when it was over. The Kittites go only so far as to quote Carson from his memoirs without comment:

[Frémont himself] and party and some few Americans that lived near started for the Indian encampment. Found them to be in great force, as was stated. They were attacked. The number killed I cannot say. It was a perfect butchery. Those not killed fled in all directions, and we returned to Lawson's. Had accomplished what we went for and given the Indians such a chastisement that [it] would be long before they ever again would feel like attacking the settlements.<sup>16</sup>

Estergreen merely relates the incident as matter-of-fact, without quoting Carson. In his notes to Carson's memoirs Carter comments with litotes, "It seems doubtful that such a preventive expedition was justified."<sup>17</sup> In their narrative, Guild and Carter

take this event out of its normal sequence,<sup>18</sup> introduce it later with *mild* condemnation, and quote Carson's "perfect butchery" without comment.<sup>19</sup> Yet surely Carson's rhetoric demands comment, especially since his tone is celebratory. Here as everywhere in his memoirs Carson believes Indians should be constantly "chastised" to keep them in line—in this instance, even if the chastisement is preemptive. Moreover, the word *chastise* invokes the unmistakable paternalism of the imperialist conquest of peoples who just don't know any better and must be spanked.

Finally, in the afterword, amidst several rationalizations justifying such a preemptive strike, Guild and Carter focus on the word "butchery"—not to analyze Carson's obvious celebration but merely to say that "present-day standards" would condemn the *fact* of butchery. They conclude with a final broad brush stroke of whitewash: "Carson had no personal grievance against these Indians and allowed himself to be used by those who believed they had."<sup>20</sup>

The consequence was that the Klamaths, who had been peaceful and helpful when encountered by Frémont's second expedition, became understandably hostile. A Marine Corps lieutenant, one Archibald Gillespie, disguised as a convalescent merchant, had been sent in October 1845 to find Frémont with orders from Washington. After traveling overland through Mexico to Mazatlán, taking a ship to Monterey, he sought Frémont up the Sacramento, through Klamath territory. Harassed by hostiles, he sent a rider ahead, who near Klamath Lake in Oregon on the night of May 7 found Frémont. With Carson and a few others, Frémont rushed to Gillespie's rescue. That night in Gillespie's small camp, awake and contemplating the import of Gillespie's messages, Frémont thought he heard a noise and foolishly went to investigate alone, even more foolishly neglecting to alert anyone else or set a guard. Finding nothing, he returned to camp. Carson was awakened by the sound of a tomahawk crushing the skull of one of Frémont's best men and one of Carson's most trusted companions, Basil Lajeunesse. In a fierce skirmish, two more of Frémont's men, one a Delaware, were killed. Only when the Klamath chief was killed did the attack cease. Carson proceeded to bash in the chief's skull and Saghundai, one of the Delawares, scalped him. The revenge was not complete, however. The next day two of the Delawares, blackened with mourning ashes, stayed behind the departing party and ambushed Klamaths trying to



retrieve the body of their chief. They rejoined Frémont's party with two scalps, feeling "better."<sup>21</sup>

Estergreen comments on the Delawares' revenge: "Their primitive belief required them to exact immediate reprisals for a life lost among them."<sup>22</sup> But Guild and Carter describe Frémont himself as thirsty for revenge: "Even Frémont, usually intent on avoiding violence, was outraged. 'For the moment I threw all other considerations aside and determined to square accounts with these people before I left.'"<sup>23</sup> Carson himself seems motivated by a similar "primitive belief," for as Frémont's force headed back to California prompted by Gillespie's dispatches, on the other side of the lake, Carson—with an advance party under orders, according to Frémont, to avoid a fight if possible (though Carson insists he had discretionary authority<sup>24</sup>)—encountered a "large village of about 50 lodges."<sup>25</sup> I think it no accident that Carson writes that they had left a camp "nearly opposite to the place where we were encamped when we had the three men killed." He continues:

I knew that they had seen us and, considering it useless to send for reinforcements, I determined to attack them, charged on them, fought for some time, killed a number, and the balance fled.

Their houses were built of flag, beautifully woven. They had been fishing [and] had in their houses some ten wagon loads of fish they had caught. All their fishing tackle, camp equipage, etc. was there. I wished to do them as much damage as I could, so I directed their houses to be set on fire. The flag being dry it was a beautiful sight. The Indians had commenced the war with us without cause and I thought they should be chastised in a summary manner. And they were severely punished.

Frémont saw at a distance the fire, [and] knowing that we were engaged, hurried to join us, but arrived too late for the sport.<sup>26</sup>

Estergreen accepts Carson's account without comment, seeing no ironic relationship between his own rhetoric about the Delawares and his narration of Carson's reprisals. In his notes to Carson's memoirs, Carter admits that his "honest" (passim) Carson was claiming far more credit for the success of this attack than the facts warrant, for he had rashly led his men through a deep ford that wet their powder and Frémont had to

come to their rescue.<sup>27</sup> But none of these Kittites comment on Carson's rhetoric of "beautiful sight" and "sport" and his astonishing claim that the Indians had started it all. Do such mendacity and sadistic vengefulness expose as euphemisms the "daring and intelligence" that won the West?

Unsatiated, Frémont and Carson attempted to ambush the Klamaths burying their dead in this village, when they found only one lone Indian. Their party of six attacked mercilessly, killing him. The Kittites tell this story with relish, for they get to focus on Frémont's wonderful horse Sacramento and his great jumping ability, which proved to be useful when Carson's rifle misfired and Frémont jumped Sacramento into his Indian assailant. The Delaware Saghundai bashed in his skull with a war club. Guild and Carter write with unconcealed, unabashed adulation, "[T]he horse's love of jumping saved Carson's life."<sup>28</sup>

In his memoirs Frémont, with the whitewash of hindsight and vindication, commented on his lucubrations over the dispatches from Gillespie (remember that this is the night of May 8, 1846; General Zachary Taylor first attacked on the Rio Grande the next day, and war was to be officially declared on May 13, though Frémont did not receive official word until August):

Through him I now became acquainted with the actual state of affairs and the purposes of the Government. The information through Gillespie had absolved me from my duty as an explorer, and I was left to my duty as an officer of the American Army with the further authoritative knowledge that the Government intended to take California. I was warned by my Government of the new danger against which I was bound to defend myself; and it had been made known to me now on the authority of the Secretary of the Navy that to obtain possession of California was the chief object of the President.<sup>29</sup>

Here Frémont rather disingenuously pretends to forget his prior knowledge of this "chief object of the President."<sup>30</sup> He continues:

This officer [Gillespie] informed me that he had been directed by the Secretary of State to acquaint me with his instructions, which had for their principal objects to

ascertain the disposition of the California people, to conciliate their feelings in favor of the United States; and to find out, with a view to counteracting, the designs of the British Government upon that country.... I was required by the Government to find out any foreign schemes in relation to California and, so far as might be in my power, to counteract them.... In substance, their [the letters, especially from "home"] effect was: The time has come. England must not get a foothold. We must be first. Act; discreetly, but positively.

Looking back over the contingencies which had been foreseen in the discussions at Washington, I saw that the important one which carried with it the hopes of Senator Benton and the wishes of the Government was in the act of occurring [NB to whom he gives priority], and it was with thorough satisfaction I now found myself required to do what I could to promote this object of the President.... I had learned with certainty from the Secretary of the Navy that the President's plan of war included the taking possession of California, and under his confidential instructions I had my warrant.... [I]t was desired that possession should be had of California before the presence in her ports of any foreign vessel of war might make it inconvenient.... I saw the way opening clear before me. War with Mexico was inevitable; and a grand opportunity now presented itself to realize in their fullest extent the far-sighted views of Senator Benton, and make the Pacific Ocean the western boundary of the United States....

Except myself, then and for nine months afterward, there was no other officer of the army in California. The citizen party under my command was made up of picked men [including Carson], and although small in number, constituted a formidable nucleus for frontier warfare, and many of its members commanded the confidence of the emigration.<sup>31</sup>

Carter-Guild seem to accept the whitewash: "After receiving the letters from Gillespie, Frémont regarded war as certain and could act openly."<sup>32</sup> Could he? When Frémont finally reported to Commodore Sloat in Monterey, the ranking U.S. officer in California, and could produce no written orders for what he had done in the meantime, Sloat could only throw up his hands

in dismay and order him to cease his "irregular" operations.<sup>33</sup> Frémont pretends shock, that he had expected the naval officers to have instructions similar to his own, that he had acted with the knowledge of the powers in Washington to save California from becoming the "appanage" of a foreign power: "I had left Washington with full knowledge of their wishes, and also of their purposes so far as these could be settled in the existing circumstances; and I was relied upon to do what should be in my power in the event of opportunity to further their designs"; moreover, he says he acted with "great joy": "[F]or to what their sagacity of statesmen had brought them, I brought the enthusiasm which the wonderful value and beauty of California had created in me."<sup>34</sup>

What had Frémont and his men done? They marched to Sutter's Fort and requisitioned it as headquarters. The Kittites omit Carson's repeated references to killing and scalping Indians along the way, although Frémont's biographer Rolle calls Carson Frémont's "hit man" for the ruthlessness of his attacks on Indians.<sup>35</sup> The American settlers were beginning to organize themselves and sought help from Frémont, who apparently allowed his men to raid with them. Estergreen writes that in early June Carson accompanied a war party under Ezekiel Merritt to capture horses from Castro.<sup>36</sup> An American force attacked the Mexican garrison at Sonoma, declared California independent, and raised the Bear flag. Taken prisoner were several prominent Californios, including General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who was sympathetic to U.S. annexation. They were put under arrest at Sutter's Fort to Sutter's profound embarrassment. According to Rolle, "Sutter ... came to consider Frémont almost a tyrant."<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Frémont took possession of Fort Point in Yerba Buena, the future San Francisco; Guild-Carter pause to celebrate the beauty of the entrance of the bay Frémont rechristened the Golden Gate.<sup>38</sup> The Californios attacked the "Bear Flaggers", seizing two prisoners, who were freed by a party that included, as none of the Kittites mention, Carson's half-brother Moses. Rolle writes, "Kit ... now exerted influence upon Frémont to befriend the Bears.... In this violent atmosphere the Pathfinder reorganized his topographical engineers into the 'California Battalion,' placing Edward Kern [his mapper!] in charge at Sutter's Fort."<sup>39</sup>

Carson continued to act as Frémont's hit man, this time against the Californios. They had captured a couple of settlers en route to spread the news of the Bear Flag Rebellion, and they

apparently tortured the Anglos with knives. Guild-Carter comment, "A wave of anger and vengefulness swept the Americans."<sup>40</sup> Carson captured and summarily executed three Californios in retaliation. Carson himself fails to mention the incident. The Kittites maintain that Carson was under orders from Frémont to take no prisoners. But Carson was a hired guide, not a soldier. The ludicrous California Battalion had not even yet been created. And even if he were a soldier, should he not have refused to obey an immoral order? Looking forward to Frémont's court-martial, Estergreen stresses that Carson and the others "were as yet not in the regular army and were therefore not subject to any government orders,"<sup>41</sup> but strangely makes no application of this principle to Carson's murders.

Meanwhile, the reluctant Commodore Sloat raised the U.S. flag over Monterey. Soon after, exasperated with what Frémont had done, the beleaguered Sloat, supposedly for reasons of health, relinquished command to Commodore Stockton. Only then did Carson and the rest of Frémont's irregulars become soldiers. On the condition that Frémont submit to him, Stockton formed the equally ludicrous Navy Battalion of Mounted Riflemen. He elevated Frémont to major and made Carson a lieutenant (though at one point Carter maintains he remained a mere private).<sup>42</sup> Much to the chagrin of Carson, the "battalion" shipped to San Diego and Carson became seasick. They marched off to Los Angeles, which had been abandoned, and proclaimed the war over. Stockton declared California part of the United States, with himself governor and "Major" Frémont military governor. They chose Carson as their emissary to Washington, where he was to go first not to the president, nor to the secretary of the navy, nor to the secretary of state, nor to the secretary of war, but to Senator Benton, to whom Carson refers as "Colonel Benton" (*passim*), as if he were some kind of military *patrón*, leader of a powerful junta really in control of the government. Indeed, in an 1848 letter, Frémont's wife and Benton's daughter Jessie revealed that Benton had been intercepting secret dispatches from Mexico intended for Secretary of State Buchanan, that she and her sister had been translating them from Spanish for him, and that he was in effect in control of the destiny of California through his son-in-law.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, Carson was faced with disobeying a real order. In New Mexico he ran into General Stephen Watts Kearny, in charge of the Army of the West, who was marching

with written orders from the president and the secretary of war to conquer and then govern California. Kearny ordered Carson to guide him down the Gila River through Nuevo Mexico, then across the Mojave to San Diego. Carson apparently contemplated desertion until his friend Lucien Maxwell convinced him to obey. Obviously, Carson's loyalties were to Frémont and not the army or the U.S. government: shades of Oliver North?

Even more unfortunately, Carson informed Kearny that the California campaign was over, so Kearny dismissed most of his troops, only to be attacked and decimated at the infamous battle of San Pasqual, where Kearny himself was severely wounded and lost most of his men and officers. Even Carson's personal bravery and endurance in walking thirty miles without shoes, going for reinforcements, was a meaningless gesture, for Stockton had already sent the soldiers Carson mentions in his memoirs.<sup>44</sup> Carson was in the ignominious posture of almost losing his feet, and even Guild and Carter comment, "The cruel irony of the excruciating journey was that before the messengers reached Stockton, he had already sent the reinforcements Godey had requested."<sup>45</sup>

When the Californios rallied and retook Los Angeles from U.S. Marine Lieutenant Gillespie, who had been appointed commandant of the southern district by Stockton, Gillespie and his marines tried to march on foot to its relief but were forced back on ship by Mexican lancers. Stockton was in San Francisco Bay, and Frémont was also in the north gathering recruits. As he marched south to retake Los Angeles, during a rainstorm this inept military commander, military governor of California, lost more than one hundred horses and mules over a ledge into a ravine. Stockton managed to rescue Gillespie and the marines, and they joined with Kearny in San Diego and marched on Los Angeles, too. Carson and Stockton seem to have been instrumental in Kearny's victory at San Gabriel, and Carson seems to have virtually won the battle for Los Angeles single-handedly by turning back General Flores' flank. The great irony, however, was that Frémont had finally reached San Fernando, where the Californios once and for all surrendered to him and not to Kearny. To make matters worse, both Stockton and Frémont refused to acknowledge Kearny's authority, and Stockton tried to strip him even of his own troops.

Kearny had Frémont arrested for mutiny and taken back to Washington for court-martial. Benton and Polk could not pub-

licly admit their secret orders to Frémont, and some modern historians still deny they existed. In response to Jessie Benton Frémont's appeals on behalf of her husband, Polk wrote in his diaries that he thought Frémont wrong,<sup>46</sup> and on February 18, 1848 Benton wrote to Secretary of State Buchanan suggesting that Frémont's motivation be kept secret: "I do not think it necessary, nor desirable, to publish the instructions, nor in fact, any part of them."<sup>47</sup> As Rolle comments,

He wanted any public notice of both Frémont and Gillespie to remain "brief & ... only to go to the general point of observing." To do otherwise would be to admit that his son-in-law had a wider mission. Benton continued to pry out of key Washington circles information unavailable to any other legislator, using it to achieve his military ambitions vicariously through Frémont. Neither the army nor the navy could afford to risk offending the senator.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, Benton and Polk took care of their own: Upon his conviction Polk reduced Frémont's sentence to a reprimand. And he rewarded Carson with a regular commission as lieutenant in the United States Army. But Frémont's career was in an important sense over, and the senate refused to confirm Carson's commission.

If Frémont and Carson were, then, the conscious and unconscious agents of manifest destiny during the buildup to and through the Mexican-American War, their actions were utterly contemptuous of the rights of other nations and races. Theirs was a policy directed by the indeed "daring and intelligent" imperialist Benton. And Carson's role was arguably no heroic pattern at all as he latched himself onto this romantic adventurer Frémont, following illegal and immoral orders. If he was more mature, more of a friend to the Indians when he advocated putting them on reservations and removing them from the "settlements," as the Kittites maintain,<sup>49</sup> and when he followed orders again to implement Carleton's fanatic, Lawrentian scheme to do so, then he is a figure of tragic irony. For this supposed friend, this Indian in-law, this polyglot, this figure for multicultural potentialities has accepted implicitly a justification for imperialism that runs back through Locke to Cabeza de Vaca to Caesar: Those who have not *settled* the land,

used it, cultivated it, have no right to it, and they (Indians, Germans), with their nomadic, marauding lifestyle, must be isolated from those who would turn the land to account. The Kittites want to see the Navajo War as a “just” war (passim), apparently for the protection of property from these marauders. Maybe the Kittites should think Hobbes instead of Locke: What treaty could bind noncitizens, aliens from attacking an enemy bent on conquest? Why is Caesar more of a hero than Vercingetorix? Carson than Manuelito? Because they were agents of manifest destiny, which is what we call the history written by the conquerors.<sup>50</sup>

### NOTES

1. Andrew Rolle, *John Charles Frémont: Character as Destiny* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 66, 279.

2. For an overview of Carson revisionism, see the articles collected in R. C. Gordon-McCutchan, *Kit Carson: Indian Fighter or Indian Killer?* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1996).

3. Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *Kit Carson's Autobiography* (1935; rpt. Lincoln: Bison-University of Nebraska Press, 1966); M. Morgan Estergreen, *Kit Carson: A Portrait in Courage*, intro. Edgar L. Hewett (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Harvey Lewis Carter, “Dear Old Kit”: *The Historical Christopher Carson: With a New Edition of the Carson Memoirs* (1968; paperback reissue with new preface, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); Thelma S. Guild and Harvey L. Carter, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes* (1984; paperback reissue, Lincoln and London: Bison-University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

4. Carter, “Dear Old Kit,” 213.

5. Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, v.

6. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 137.

7. The contributors to Gordon-McCutchan’s collection, *Indian Fighter*, neglect this episode of Carson’s career entirely—a very telling neglect, for the episode reveals a great deal about Carson’s attitude towards Indians—and from his own mouth. While praising him for adopting an Indian son, the Kittites also neglect the account of Frémont’s mapper on his earlier expeditions with Carson that: Carson bought a Paiute boy as a slave, fed him only meat to make a man of him, especially the bone marrow, and intended him to be a horse thief. See Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont: The Private Diaries of Charles Preuss, Cartographer for John C. Frémont on His First, Second, and Fourth Expeditions to the Far West*, trans. and ed. Erwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 134.

8. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 110.

9. *Ibid.*, 95.



10. John C. Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (Chicago and New York: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887), 427.
11. *Ibid.*, 422-23.
12. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 142.
13. Carter, "Dear Old Kit," 70.
14. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 143.
15. Carter, "Dear Old Kit," 101.
16. *Ibid.*, 101.
17. *Ibid.*, 103, n. 187.
18. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 146.
19. *Ibid.*, 152.
20. *Ibid.*, 288.
21. *Ibid.*, 149; Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, 138.
22. Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, 138-39.
23. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 148, quoting from Frémont, *Memoirs*, 492.
24. Carter, "Dear Old Kit," 105 and n. 199.
25. *Ibid.*, 105.
26. *Ibid.*, 105.
27. *Ibid.*, 105-06, n. 200.
28. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 149.
29. Frémont, *Memoirs*, 488-89.
30. See above and Frémont, *Memoirs*, 423.
31. Quaipe is the only Kittite who cites this passage in Frémont's *Memoirs* (489-90), though he does not quote it at length, revealing its insidious implications, nor does he comment, *Kit Carson's Autobiography*, n. 99.
32. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 152.
33. *Ibid.*, 154.
34. Frémont, *Memoirs*, 535.
35. Rolle, *Frémont*, 70.
36. Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, 141-42.
37. Rolle, *Frémont*, 81.
38. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 153.
39. Rolle, *Frémont*, 80.
40. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 154.
41. Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, 143.
42. Carter, "Dear Old Kit," 200.
43. Rolle, *Frémont*, 296, n. 22.
44. Carter, "Dear Old Kit," 115.
45. Guild-Carter, *Pattern for Heroes*, 161.
46. Estergreen, *Portrait in Courage*, 181.
47. Rolle, *Frémont*, 76.
48. *Ibid.*, 76-77.
49. Gordon-McCutchan's contributors repeatedly and approvingly quote Carson to this effect, speaking to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1857.

50. The backlash against revisionism in its insistence, for example, that genocide is not genocide unless it is complete (see Marc Simmons, "The Strange Fate of Kit Carson," in Simmons and R. C. Gordon-McCutchan, *The Short Truth about Kit Carson and the Indians*, intro. Harvey L. Carter [Taos: Columbine Printing, 1993], 8) reveals its ideology in this final lament of Guild-Carter: "Americans do well to remember Kit Carson as one of their heroes, for Fortune has seldom smiled upon a more deserving character. Given the increasingly complex society in which we live and the confused values of modern life, perhaps she will never do so again" (*Pattern for Heroes*, 295). Simmons explicitly roots revisionism in the 1960s, with its political correctness and its theory (see his contribution to Gordon-McCutchan, *Indian Fighter*, ch. 4: "Kit and the Indians"). When biographers whitewash Carson's memoirs and omit comment on his rhetoric ("What a beautiful sight! What sport! What perfect butchery! Let's chastise them!"), and when historians omit this chapter from their *apologia pro vita Carsoniensis*, whose values are confused?

Among the Kittites, Gordon-McCutchan's entire case in his contribution to *Indian Fighter*, "'Rope Thrower' and the Navajo" (ch. 2), rests on our accepting the Navajo War as "just"; his attack on Clifford E. Trafzer's revisionist history of that war, *The Kit Carson Campaign: The Last Great Navajo War* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), comes across as strident, tendentious. Lawrence Kelly's attack on Trafzer (ch. 3: "The Historiography of the Navajo Roundup") is equally strident but raises questions about the latter's historiography that must be taken seriously, yet he too refuses to see through any but Western eyes. Robert Utley's approach (ch. 5: "An Indian before Breakfast: Kit Carson Then and Now") and that of Skip Keith Miller, "Kit Carson and Political Correctness" (online essay at <http://www.taosnet.com/primer/pckit.html>) strike me as more balanced. Though he condemns Carleton, Utley's trenchant conclusion applies to Carson as well: "Any formula that severed their [the Navajos', but one could insert the name of any tribe, like the Chiricahua Apaches'] roots in the soil of their ancestors was doomed to fail and to inflict such emotional pain as to constitute inhumanity" (97). This, I take it, is Trafzer's main point. After opening with a salvo against political correctness that sounds like Simmons, Miller concludes with a caveat: "[E]ach of us must decide for ourselves what to believe [in the various portraits of Carson] and why" (emphasis mine). Miller is thinking of the heavily mythologized Carson, but his comment applies to those who still characterize him as a "profile in courage" and a "pattern for heroes." Miller further raises the problem of viewing the past through lenses ground in our own time. I ask how anyone could possibly avoid such lenses. There's no clear glass available, folks. One must try instead to be responsible to truth as we develop it. Is it fair to accuse previous generations of racism? It is certainly fair to recognize practices and institutions as inherently racist. Or imperialist. Or in Carson's time, both.