

ETHNOHISTORY

Vol. 3, No. 2

1956

Anderson
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FEDERAL INDIAN POLICY AND THE SOUTHERN CHEYENNES AND ARAPAHOES, 1887-1907

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The Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes divided into northern and southern groups shortly after William Bent built his fort on the Arkansas River in 1832.¹ A majority of the tribes came south leaving their hunting grounds of the northern plains, their possession of the lands north of the Arkansas River being recognized by the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851.²

Part of these new lands of the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes contained gold—the object of the Colorado gold rush of 1859.³ When the white settlers swarmed into western Kansas territory, these Cheyennes and Arapahoes no longer enjoyed the undisturbed possession of their lands. Pushed into a small, barren reservation in southeastern Colorado by the Treaty of Fort Wise in 1861,⁴ the Cheyennes and Arapahoes broke out in a series of raids along the Colorado-Kansas frontier.⁵ The loss of their hunting grounds was difficult to accept, and further resentment was created by the Chivington Massacre at Sand Creek in 1864.⁶ Proximity to the Whites was now impossible—the young braves demanded the war path which the chiefs knew would lead to vigorous retaliation. At the treaties of Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge Creek in 1865 and 1867 respectively, the federal government attempted to establish reservations for the Cheyennes and Arapahoes which they refused to occupy.⁷ Campaigns led by Winfield Scott Hancock, George A. Custer, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan convinced the peaceful bands among these Indians that further military resistance would lead to extermination.⁸ Thus by 1869, the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, though