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THE COMANCHE EMPIRE

Pekka Hämäläinen

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Southwest Studies, Southern Methodist University*

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CONQUEST

They came to the plains from the west, slipping through the canyon passes of the Sangre de Cristo Range in small, roving bands. Like so many other Native groups of the age, the Numunu moved to the great continental grasslands seeking new opportunities, to build a new way of life around the emerging ecological triad of grasses, bison, and horses. They were few in number, possessed little wealth beyond a handful of mounts, and seemed indistinguishable from their more prominent allies, the Utes. New Mexico's Spanish officials noted their arrival to the southern grasslands in 1706 and wrote it off as a minor event. Yet by midcentury, the Numunu, then bearing the name Comanches, had unhinged the world they had almost unnoticeably entered.

Despite its modest beginnings, the Comanche exodus to the southern plains is one of the key turning points in early American history. It was a commonplace migration that became a full-blown colonizing project with far-reaching geopolitical, economic, and cultural repercussions. It set off a half-century-long war with the Apaches and resulted in the relocation of *Apachería*—a massive geopolitical entity in its own right—from the grasslands south of the Río Grande, at the very center of northern New Spain. The Comanche invasion of the southern plains was, quite simply, the longest and bloodiest conquering campaign the American West had witnessed—or would witness until the encroachment of the United States a century and a half later.

But the Comanche invasion was far more than a military conquest. As they made a place for themselves in the southern plains, Comanches forged a series of alliances with the adjacent Indian and European powers, rearranging the political and commercial geography of the entire lower midcontinent. Seen from another angle, the Comanche invasion was a momentous cultural experiment.

It brought destruction and death to many, but it also introduced a new, exhilarating way of life—specialized mounted bison hunting—to the Great Plains, irrevocably altering the parameters of human existence on the vast grasslands that covered the continent's center. Finally, Comanche arrival to the southern plains was a major international event: it marked the beginning of the long decay of Spain's imperial power in what today is the American Southwest. The Comanche conquest of the southern Great Plains was a watershed event that demolished existing civilizations, recalibrated economic systems, and triggered shock waves that reverberated across North America.

But Comanches were not the only expansionist people in the early eighteenth-century Southwest; their invasion overlapped with, crashed against, and eventually benefited from three other sweeping colonizing campaigns. In 1716, after several aborted colonizing attempts, Spain laid the foundation for a new outpost, Texas, on the southern edge of the Great Plains, thereby pinching the grasslands between the new colonial base and its older counterpart in New Mexico. This expansionist thrust was a reaction to another imperial venture. At the turn of the century, France built a series of forts on Biloxi Bay and along the lower Mississippi valley, creating a springboard for what they hoped would become a great western empire stretching across the plains and beyond.¹ And finally, as Spain and France jostled into position around the southern plains, a much longer history of conquest and colonization was culminating on the grasslands themselves. Just as they faced the Comanche assault, the Apaches solidified their control over the entire southern grasslands by simultaneously annihilating and absorbing the last of the Jumanos, a once-prominent nation of hunter-traders that vanished from the historical record by 1715.

Into this volatile and violent multipolar world came the Comanches, who found both ordeals and possibilities in its instability. They suffered from the escalating disorder, which complicated their adaptation to their new homeland, and they frequently faced more than one enemy group on their expanding borders. But the advantages far outweighed the drawbacks. The confluence of several colonizing projects meant that their rivals were often preoccupied with other challenges and therefore unable to organize effective resistance or, alternatively, willing to negotiate and form alliances with the invaders. Comanches also took advantage of the imperial rivalry between New Spain and New France, playing off the two powers against one another to extort concessions from both. In their quest to carve a living space out of a foreign territory, they had the inestimable advantage of invading an already colonized landscape where territorial arrangements were in a state of flux. And finally, Comanches arrived in the southern plains just as European technology—horses, guns, and iron tools—began to

spread there in mass. As immigrants used to adjusting their ways to changing conditions, Comanches were able to harness the empowering potential of the new technology more fully than their Native rivals who tried to incorporate the innovations into their more established and more tradition-bound lifestyles. Comanches were invaders who made a place for themselves on the southern plains by raw force, but they were also opportunists who exploited a chaos that was only partially their own making.

Despite its far-reaching influence, the Comanche invasion of the southern plains has never been studied in a systematic fashion, and we understand its battles, protagonists, turning points, and underlying impulses only vaguely. Scholars have tended to sketch the invasion with broad, impressionistic strokes, which inadvertently has promoted the eighteenth-century view of Comanches as land-hungry militarists who randomly pushed ahead until reaching the natural limits of expansion. In this chapter I will show, by contrast, that the Comanche conquest of the southern plains was a long and complex process that evolved through several stages and was fueled by a variety of forces ranging from geopolitics and commercial interests to defensive concerns and kinship politics. In traditional historiography, the early West stands alone, set apart from the East by its lack of high imperial stakes, climatic battles, and rich diplomatic history. The pages that follow make clear that such things were an integral part of the colonial West as well.

The Comanches entered recorded history in 1706, when residents of Taos pueblo in the far northern corner of New Mexico sent word to the Spanish governor in Santa Fe that the village was expecting an imminent attack from Ute Indians and their new allies, the Comanches. The attack did not materialize, however, and the report, along with the people it introduced to written history, was soon forgotten. Two decades later, as Comanches made their presence felt across New Mexico's northern borderlands as fierce but elusive raiders, Spanish officials were fervently gathering information about them. One of those officials was Brigadier Pedro de Rivera who, while inspecting New Mexico in 1726, attempted to piece together a coherent account of these "very barbarous" people whose "origin is unknown." Rivera's remarks, covering only a few lines, make up the first ethnographic account of Comanches, who emerge as brutal, seminaked slave raiders who "make war on all nations" and always travel "in battle formation." Rivera also learned, apparently from a Comanche captive, that their ancestors had begun their exodus to the New Mexican frontier from a land that lay three hundred leagues northwest of Santa Fe. In Spanish imagination, this

put the Comanche place of origin in the fabled kingdom of Teguayo, a land of great riches and the birthplace of the Aztecs.²

Rivera's terse report bears a startling similarity to modern academic views of Comanche origin. Most scholars today believe that the Comanches are part of the Uto-Aztecan-speaking people, who in the early sixteenth century occupied an enormous territory stretching from the northern Great Plains and the southern Plateau deep into Middle America. This Uto-Aztecan supremacy was the result of two sweeping migrations and conquests that had begun centuries earlier. Sometime in the early second millennium, large numbers of Uto-Aztecan speakers moved southward from a place they called Aztlán and the Spanish knew as Teguayo, somewhere in the deserts of the Great Basin or the Southwest. They traced the arc of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Madres into the central valley of Mexico, where they built the vast Aztec empire that in 1500 towered over most of Central America. At the same time as the ancestors of the Aztecs migrated southward, another branch of Uto-Aztecs, the Numic people, left their core territory in the southern Sierra Nevada and moved to the east and north. A severe drought in the thirteenth century had vacated large tracts of the interior West, allowing the Numic people to expand into deserted lands. They drove east and northeast until, by 1500, they dominated much of the southern Plateau, eastern Great Basin, and central and northern Rocky Mountains. This Numic expansion was spearheaded by the Shoshones, the parent group of the Comanches, who came to occupy much of the northeastern Great Basin all the way to the edge of the Great Plains.³

Gradually, Shoshones settled down and adjusted to the varied environment of the Great Basin, Rocky Mountains, and Great Plains. They lived by a finely choreographed yearly cycle, combining hunting and fishing with intensive gathering. They spent most of their time in the mountains and meadows of the semiarid Basin, camping beside lakes and marshes; hunting antelope, deer, and mountain sheep with bows and arrows; catching salmon in the Snake and Salmon rivers; and harvesting nuts, roots, and other wild foods. In winters, however, they often journeyed through the South Pass to the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains where, in a deep, well-wetted erosional furrow between the mountains and the grasslands, they found multitudes of bison, elk, and other big game to hunt as well as superb shelter against the cold. These seasonal migrations brought the Shoshones to the fringes of the plains but probably not beyond. The dry period that had begun in the thirteenth century had plunged the plains' vast bison herds into a sharp decline, discouraging the Shoshones from entering. In fact, the decrease in animal populations was so drastic that most plains people

had sought refuge from the bordering regions, using the grasslands only for seasonal hunts.⁴

Shoshones had built a flourishing and eclectic culture that belies the traditional image of the brutal, impoverished existence of Basin peoples; and yet over the course of the sixteenth century, they abandoned the Basin for the Great Plains. This migration was apparently triggered by a climate change, the beginning of the Little Ice Age, which ended the long dry spell and brought colder temperatures and higher rainfall. As steady rains once again nourished the grasslands, allowing the ailing bison herds to recover, humans began to move back, first in trickles, then in masses. What followed was one of the greatest migrations in the history of North America. As if pulled into a vacuum, people flowed in from the Rocky Mountains, northern woodlands, and the Mississippi valley, turning the plains into an agglomeration of migration trails. This human tide consisted mainly of groups that had lived on the plains before the great drought, but some of the immigrants were newcomers. Among those newcomers were the Shoshones.⁵

Building on their century-old tradition of seasonal transmontane migrations, more and more Shoshones filtered through the South Pass onto grasslands in the early seventeenth century, elbowing the Kiowas and other nations eastward to the Black Hills region. By midcentury a distinct branch of Plains Shoshones had emerged. Occupying the northwestern plains between the South Platte and upper Yellowstone rivers, these eastern Shoshones morphed into typical plains hunters who shaped their diet, economy, and culture around the habits of bison. They lived as nomads, following their migrant prey on foot, moving their belongings on small dog travois, and sheltering themselves with light, easily transportable skin tipis. In hunting bison, they alternatively surrounded the animals, ran them onto soft ice or deep snow, or drove them off steep precipices. These communal hunts absorbed a lot of time and energy and required careful planning, but astounding returns rewarded the efforts. The Vore site, a precontact buffalo jump near the Black Hills, contains partial remains of ten thousand bison, even though people used the site only once every twenty-five years or so. Hundreds of similar, if smaller, sites in the Shoshone range testify to a burgeoning economy and a flourishing way of life.⁶

But prosperity did not translate into stability. Sometime in the late seventeenth century, the Shoshones suddenly splintered into two factions and left the central plains. Possibly seduced by larger and denser bison populations above the Yellowstone valley, the bulk of the people migrated onto the northern plains, where they were dragged into prolonged wars with the southward moving Blackfeet and Gros Ventres—wars that were still raging on when the first Canadian fur

traders entered the northern plains in the 1730s.⁷ A smaller faction headed south and disappeared from archaeological record for several years. They reemerged in the early eighteenth century in Spanish records as Comanches, one of the many Native groups living along New Mexico's borderlands.

It is not entirely clear why these proto-Comanches split off from the main Shoshone body, abandoned their lucrative bison-hunting economy on the central plains, and migrated several hundred miles into an unfamiliar territory, but pressure from other Native groups seems to have played a role. In the late seventeenth century, the Apaches, up till then a minor presence on the central plains, began to build mud houses and irrigate fields along the region's river valleys. Apaches thrived in their new villages, which soon dotted the entire central grasslands from the Dismal to the Republican River, compressing the Shoshones' domain from the south and east and forcing them to extract subsistence from a shrinking realm. The encroachment of Apaches may have also introduced European diseases, which caused devastation among the Shoshones, who had not yet been exposed to the deadly alien microbes. This kind of scenario is supported by Comanche and Shoshone traditions, which maintain that Comanches broke off from the parent group after a dispute over game and an assault by a smallpox epidemic.⁸

This sketch casts Comanches as exiles fleeing escalating violence in their homelands, but there is another possible motivation behind the separation from their Shoshone relatives: their southern exodus may have been an attempt to gain a better access to the Spanish horses that had just begun to spread northward from Spanish New Mexico in large numbers. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 in New Mexico and the subsequent banishment of Spanish conquerors from the colony had left large numbers of horses to Pueblo Indians, who embarked on a vigorous livestock trade with the surrounding Indians in the grasslands and the mountains. Supplied by Pueblo traders, the ancient Rocky Mountain trade corridor carried horses northward, bringing the animals among the Shoshones around 1690. Boosted by their suddenly enhanced ability to move, hunt, and wage war, some Shoshone bands invaded the bison-rich northern plains; the others, the ancestors of the Comanches, followed the horse flow back to its ultimate source in New Mexico. This scenario, too, is substantiated by the Shoshones who remembered that the Comanches "left them and went south in search of game and ponies."⁹

Once on the move, the proto-Comanches probably tracked the front range of the Rockies to the south, skirting the Apache villages on the open plains farther east. But while preventing clashes with the Apaches, that route took the migrants into the home territory of the powerful Utes, who ranged between the Sa-

watch Mountains in the west and the Colorado Front Range in the east. The encounter between the two groups probably took place in the closing years of the century, and it marked the beginning of a relationship that would profoundly change them both. Yet the only clue to what actually occurred is a single word, *kumantsi*, the Ute name for the newcomers. By conventional reading, the word means "enemy," or "anyone who wants to fight me all the time," suggesting that the first contact was a violent one. However, a more recent interpretation holds that *kumantsi* refers to a people who were considered related yet different, and it suggests an encounter of another kind: rather than a clash between two alien peoples with sharp reflexes for violence, it was a reunion of two Numic-speaking peoples, who probably originated from the same Sierra Nevada core area, had taken different routes during the sprawling Numic expansion, and now, despite centuries of physical separation, found a unifying bond in their persisting linguistic and cultural commonalities.¹⁰

Building on those commonalities, Comanches and Utes formed by the early years of the eighteenth century a long-standing military and political alliance that remained an essential part of Comanches' power base until the mid-eighteenth century. Cemented by intermarriage and kinship ties, the alliance offered compelling strategic advantages for both. Utes were locked in an on-and-off war with the Navajos over raiding and trading privileges in northern New Mexico and were eager to obtain Comanches' military assistance in their efforts to keep the numerically superior Navajos in the west and farther away from New Mexico. Utes also needed Comanches' military aid in their conflicts with the Indians of Tewa, Tano, Jémez, Picuris, and Keres pueblos, who had seized Spanish weapons, armor, and horses during the Pueblo Revolt and encroached into Ute territory to hunt deer, elk, and bison. In return, Utes shared with Comanches their land, their horses, and their knowledge of the political and ecological intricacies of the Spanish borderlands.¹¹

As the union solidified, Comanches turned their course west and crossed the Front Range into Ute territory.¹² There, in the eastern Colorado Plateau, they entered a period of spectacular change, reinventing themselves within a few years technologically, economically, militarily, and socially. Living with and learning from their Ute allies, they adjusted to their new homeland, an ecological patchwork that extended from the Great Plains–Rocky Mountain foothills ecotone across the densely forested Sangre de Cristo and Jémez ranges, featuring snow-covered alpine mesas, deep, glacier-carved valleys, spruce-fir, juniper, and pine forests, and semiarid grass and shrublands.

The diverse environment supported an equally diverse economy. Utes and Comanches spent the fall, winter, and early spring in small bands, hunting ante-

lopes; trapping jack rabbits; and gathering berries, nuts, and yampa roots. In the spring, the scattered bands congregated into larger units and traveled eastward to the upper Arkansas River valley, where they hunted bison and lived as tipidwelling plains nomads. Summer was the main season for warfare and raiding, witnessing Ute-Comanche squadrons moving into Navajo country and northern New Mexico. Utes also introduced Comanches to New Mexican markets, and soon the two allies were regular visitors at Taos and San Juan where, under temporary truces, they bartered robes, meat, and Navajo slaves for maize, horses, pottery, and cotton blankets at great fall fairs. Although most Utes and Comanches followed this general yearly pattern, there were significant variations among different bands. It was probably here in the Great Basin that the Comanches began to distinguish among three broad subdivisions, whose names evoke diversifying economic and dietary frontiers: Yamparikas (Yap Eaters), Kotsotekas (Buffalo Eaters), and Jupes (People of Timber).¹³

While initiating Comanches into the complexities of their new home territory, Utes also ushered them into a new technological age. They provided their new allies with horses as well as the knowledge of how to use them in transportation, hunting, and warfare. By the 1710s, only a generation after obtaining their first horses, Comanches were lashing northern New Mexico with uncontainable mounted raids. But the raids were only the most visible manifestation of a profound material revolution that came with horses. A horse could carry two hundred pounds on its back and drag up to three hundred pounds on a travois, four times as much weight as a large dog could move, and it could cover at least twice the distance in a day. With the rise of equestrianism, Comanches could transport more hides, meat, and household utensils, and they could search for prey over a wider range and kill the animals more effectively. Their reach of trade was multiplied, as was their ability to wage war, plunder, and defend themselves. In almost an instant, the world became smaller and its resources more accessible.¹⁴

Behind these practical advantages, however, was an even more fundamental change. More than a mere hunting and transportation tool—a bigger and stronger dog—the horse represented a new way to tap energy. Dogs used plants, the most prolific reserve of processed solar energy available for animals and humans, only indirectly, by consuming the flesh of herbivorous animals their owners fetched and fed them. Horses, in contrast, drew their strength directly from plant life, allowing their masters to eliminate one arduous phase in their search for power. A conduit between immense, abstract solar energy and concrete, immediately available muscle power, the horse redefined the realm of the possible, bringing Comanches a step closer to the sun, "the primary cause of all living things."¹⁵

Utes also introduced Comanches to European crafts. Having traded regularly in New Mexico since the 1680s, Utes had accumulated enough guns and metal tools to pass some of them on to their Comanche allies, who now moved, literally overnight, from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. Although Comanches used the new technology to replace their traditional tools and elaborate on their old techniques, not to realign their basic economic system, it was a momentous leap nonetheless. Iron knives, awls, needles, and pots were more durable and effective than their stone, bone, and wooden counterparts, making the daily chores of hunting, cutting, scraping, cooking, and sewing faster and easier. Spanish laws prohibited the sale of firearms to Indians, but the ban was widely ignored in New Mexico's trade fairs, especially in the northern parts of the province. The few guns available at the fairs were cumbersome and fragile flintlocks, but they nevertheless profoundly changed the nature of intertribal warfare. Firearms allowed Comanches to kill, maim, and shock from the safety of distance and to inflict wounds that the traditional healing arts of their enemies were unaccustomed to treating. And like horses, firearms gave Comanches access to an unforeseen source of energy—gunpowder—further expanding the world of new possibilities.¹⁶

With Ute assistance, Comanches incorporated themselves into the emerging slave raiding and trading networks on New Mexico's borderlands. By the time Comanches arrived in the region, commerce in Indian captives was an established practice in New Mexico, stimulated by deep ambiguities in Spain's legal and colonial system. Although thousands of Pueblo Indians lived within the bounds of the Spanish-controlled New Mexico, strict restrictions prohibited their exploitation as laborers. *Encomienda* grants of tributary labor, the economic keystone of early Spanish colonialism in the Americas, were abolished in New Mexico in the aftermath of the Pueblo Revolt. The *repartimiento* system of labor distribution continued, allowing the colonists to pool and allot Pueblo labor for public projects, but that system operated on a rotating basis, making Indian laborers a communal rather than a personal resource. Most Pueblo Indians, furthermore, were at least superficial Christian converts, whose exploitation was strictly regulated under Spanish law. Eager to obtain personal slaves to run their kitchens, ranches, fields, and textile workshops—and to reinforce their fragile sense of honor and prestige—Spanish elite turned to captive trade in *indios bárbaros*, savage Indians. Spanish laws specifically prohibited the buying, selling, and owning of Indian slaves, but the colonists in New Mexico cloaked the illegal traffic as *rescate* (ransom or barter), whereby they purchased captive Indians from surrounding nomadic tribes, ostensibly to rescue them from mistreatment

and heathenism. In theory, these ransomed Indians were to be placed in Spanish households for religious education, but in practice many of them became common slaves who could be sold, bought, and exploited with impunity.¹⁷

Utes had first entered New Mexico's slave markets as commodities seized and sold by Spanish, Navajo, and Apache slave raiders, but the allied Utes and Comanches soon inserted themselves at the supply end of the slave traffic. When not raiding New Mexico for horses, Utes and Comanches arrived peacefully to sell human loot. Their raiding parties ranged westward into Navajo country and northward into Pawnee country to capture women and children, but their main target were the Carlana and Jicarilla Apache villages in the upper Arkansas basin at the western edge of the southern plains. Traffic in Apache captives mushroomed in New Mexico. By the late seventeenth century, the people in New Mexico possessed some five hundred non-Pueblo Indian captives and were emerging as major producers of slave labor for the mining camps of Nueva Vizcaya and Zacatecas; they even sent slaves to the tobacco farms in Cuba. By 1714 slave trade had become so widespread in New Mexico that Governor Juan Ignacio Flores Mogollón saw it necessary to order all Apache captives baptized before taken to "distant places to sell." Many of those Apaches were purchased from Utes and Comanches, whose mutually sustaining alliance had put them in a position of power over their neighboring Native societies.¹⁸

By the early eighteenth century, the Ute-Comanche coalition dominated the northern borderlands of New Mexico. The allies shut off Navajos from the prime trading and raiding locales in New Mexico and treated the colony itself as an exploitable resource depot. They alternatively traded and raided in northern New Mexico, sometimes bartering slaves and hides for horses, maize, and metal goods, sometimes making off with stolen livestock and foodstuffs. Spain's shallow imperial control of its northern frontiers could not keep the villages united, and the region began to disintegrate socially and politically. Utes and Comanches traded and intermarried with the Native inhabitants of Ojo Caliente, San Juan, and Picurís—many of whom were former slaves of theirs—while at the same time raiding Taos, Cochiti, and other settlements for plunder. By 1716 Ute and Comanche raiders had so exhausted northern New Mexico's horse reservoirs that the settlers were not able to "march out in defense."¹⁹

Short of men and money, Spanish officials in Santa Fe were powerless against these exploitative policies. Voicing their growing frustration, one official demanded in 1719 that "war should be made upon the Ute nation and Comanche nations, who, always united, have been committing robberies of horseherds in the name of peace."²⁰ But by the time the Spaniards started to take cognizance

of the threatening situation in the far northern frontier, Utes and Comanches had begun to shift their ambitions elsewhere—to the vast grasslands opening to the east.

Comanches had discovered unexpected riches and opportunities in their adopted homeland, but the same forces that helped them prosper in the valleys and mountains of the southern Rockies also pushed them out of the region. The more tightly they geared their lives around mounted hunting, slave trade, and European markets, the more they felt the pull of the great eastern grasslands. By the 1720s, a mere generation after their arrival, they were gone. It might be tempting to imagine that the Comanche exodus onto the southern plains was inspired by the endless horizons and unlimited opportunities opening to the east, but it is more likely that the migration—which also pulled several Ute bands away from their mountain homelands—began as extended slave raids. As the attacks of Comanche and Ute slavers intensified around the turn of the century, the Jicarillas and Carlanas sought refuge deeper on the plains and abandoned their old campgrounds at the headwaters of the Arkansas and along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Rather than bringing relief from raids, however, the retreat drew Comanche and Ute slavers into the very heart of *Apachería*. Tracking the fleeing Jicarillas and Carlanas to the plains, Comanches and Utes turned the upper Arkansas basin into a war zone. In 1706 a Spanish expedition led by Juan de Ulibarrí encountered near the Arkansas valley a small group of Penxaye Apache refugees who were trying “to join all the rest [of the Apaches] who live along those rivers and streams in order to defend themselves together from the Utes and Comanches.” Ulibarrí also learned that Comanches and Utes had recently attacked two Apache villages near the headwaters of the Purgatoire River, more than a hundred miles south of the Arkansas corridor. When assessing the Comanche-Ute invasion in 1719, New Mexico Governor Antonio Valverde y Cosío wrote that the allies were drawn into the upper Arkansas valley and the outlying plains “by the interests they have in robbing the enclosures that exist in the *rancherías* [villages] of the Apaches.”²¹

By the time Valverde penned his report, the transitory slave raids of Comanches and Utes had already escalated into a full-blown colonizing project, which was aimed at carving out a new home territory in the plains and displacing the resident Apaches. Behind that shift in purpose was a shift in vision: if opportunities for slave raiding had drawn Comanches and Utes to the open plains, a promise of a new life made them stay there. During their extended forays into *Apachería*, Comanches and Utes came to realize the plains’ immense possibilities for a mounted way of life. The Spanish horses they had pilfered in New

Mexico and then rode onto the plains found a nearly perfect ecological niche on the southern grasslands. Descendants of the North African Barb stock, the resilient, smallish Spanish mounts had been bred to survive in desert conditions, to live entirely off grass, and to cover enormous distances between water sources. They were, in other words, pre-adapted for life on the relatively arid southern plains, whose thick layer of buffalo and grama grasses provided an abundant, year-round supply of forage, and whose scattered streams and playa lakes yielded sufficient water for the hardy desert animals.²²

It was this auspicious match between horses and the plains environment that lured Comanches and Utes out of the mountains. The deeper they pushed onto the grasslands and the longer they stayed there, the more their horses flourished, growing rapidly in numbers. This in turn allowed Comanches and Utes to transform the plains’ most immediately striking bounty, the seemingly inexhaustible bison herds, into an accessible and predictable resource. Moving their belongings on horseback, the newcomers could follow and find the dispersed, ever-moving herds with relative ease and, once they reached them, bring down the large beasts from the safety of horseback. Liberated and empowered by the horse, the Comanches and Utes moved to the plains to organize their lives around the bison.²³

The possibilities of mounted bison hunting were the plains’ primary attraction, but there was another enticement: commerce. When Comanches acquired manufactured goods from New Mexico and the Utes in the late seventeenth century, they soon found themselves in a quandary. Impressed by the efficiency and durability of the new weapons, tools, and utensils, they were anxious to obtain more, but northern New Mexico, with its limited reserves of manufactured goods, failed to meet their needs. The plains, on the other hand, bristled with commercial opportunities, which centered on the upper Arkansas valley, the Comanche entryway to the grasslands. When Comanches followed the river valley to the east, they stepped into an ancient, vigorous trading niche. Stretching between the urban centers along the Río Grande and the farming villages of the southern prairies, the Arkansas valley had for centuries been a major entrepôt of trade, a transition point where plains hunters bartered hides and meat for maize and other village products in east and west. By the time Comanches arrived in the Arkansas valley, moreover, its potential had already been discovered in French Louisiana. French merchants began westbound journeys soon after 1700, trading guns and metal to Apaches, and turning the Arkansas channel into a major artery of colonial commerce.²⁴

Responding to various economic incentives, Comanches and their Ute allies moved in masses to the southern plains during the second and third decades of

the eighteenth century. The result was a drawn-out and deadly conflict with the many Apache groups, whom Spaniards knew as Palomas, Cuartelejos, Penxayes, Carlanas, Sierra Blancas, Jicarillas, Pelones, and Lipans, and who controlled the entire western plains south of the Platte River. These Apaches had little to do with the later stereotype of the plains Apaches as a doomed, feeble people incapable of resisting the Comanche onslaught. By the time that the wars with the Comanches erupted, in fact, the Apaches were in the midst of an expansionist burst of their own.

If the Comanche expansion was fueled by the shift to bison-centered equestrian hunting and consequent economic specialization, the Apache expansion was driven by a contrasting process of economic diversification. Like Comanches, Apaches had expanded their horse herds during the Pueblo Revolt, when the Pueblo Indians seized Spanish horses and traded them to other Native groups, but unlike Comanches, only a few Apache groups specialized in mounted hunting. While experimenting with more intense equestrianism, Apaches also accelerated their conversion to agricultural production. Many Apache bands had practiced light farming for generations, but it was not until the turn of the seventeenth century that agriculture permeated the Apache way of life. Shaken by a series of droughts that decimated bison herds and inspired by the expertise of Pueblo farmers who had sought refuge in *Apachería* during the second Pueblo uprising in 1696, Apache groups across the plains took up systematic farming. They built small irrigation works in streambeds, lined river valleys with flat-roofed mud houses, and began to cultivate crops of maize, beans, squash, watermelons, and pumpkins. The new hybrid economy required a careful seasonal balancing of farming and hunting, but its rewards were compelling. Profusely supplied with proteins and carbohydrates, the Apaches enjoyed a steady population growth in an environment where droughts and European microbes constantly threatened the viability of Native societies.²⁵

Internal strength translated into external expansion. On the central plains, the Cuartelejo and Paloma Apaches kept the Pawnees out of western hunting ranges, and farther south, around the Big Bend of the Arkansas and the forks of the Red River, the Jicarillas, Carlanas, and Sierra Blancas forced the Wichitas to move their villages out of prime bison range. The main course of Apache expansion was south of the Red River, where the Lipans clashed with the Jumanos, ethnically diverse seminomadic hunters and farmers who had built a bustling long-distance trade network between the Río Grande and the Caddo villages on the southern prairies. Apache-Jumano wars raged until the mid-1710s when the Jumanos, weakened by disease and droughts, moved into Spanish missions or joined the Lipans. From then on, the Apaches possessed a virtual monopoly over

the western hunting ranges below the Platte as well as on the Spanish markets in eastern New Mexico and western Texas. Their various bands traded regularly at Taos, Pecos, La Junta, and San Antonio, bringing in hides, skins, and Caddo captives. During the dry spells that repeatedly scourged the Southwest, interrupting trade and diplomacy, they raided the same settlements for maize and livestock. Spanish officials responded with punitive campaigns, which were frequently transformed into slave raids, and Franciscan priests pleaded with the Apaches to embrace Catholicism and mission life, but both met with little success.²⁶

By entering the southern plains, therefore, Comanches set themselves on a collision course with another expanding people, entangling themselves in a war that raged for more than half a century across the entire southern plains. Comanche-Apache wars are often depicted as a primal Hobbesian struggle for land fueled by ethnic hatred, but they began as a strategic contest over specific locations and resources. The main contention point was the control of river valleys. Both groups needed these precious zones for their survival, which gave rise to a war over microenvironments. During warm seasons, Apaches needed the stream bottoms for their maize fields and irrigation systems while Comanches needed them for the grass and low-saline water they provided for their growing horse herds. The contest became even fiercer in winters when both groups became utterly dependent on the river valleys, the only places on the open plains that offered relief from the harsh elements. The bluffs and cutbanks gave shelter against blizzards, the dense groves of cottonwood yielded fuel for heating and supplementary forage for horses, and the streams provided reliable water at a time when the rains often dwindled almost to nothing.²⁷

Intertwined with this conflict over river bottoms was a commercial rivalry over New Mexico's markets and food exports. After committing to full-time hunting on the plains, Comanches could no longer concentrate on gathering with the same intensity they had maintained in the mountains. They continued to collect berries, nuts, fruit, and root vegetables, but gathering no longer formed a major economic activity; one estimate suggests that Comanches lost two-thirds of their plant lore upon moving to the grasslands. The corollary of this economic streamlining was a chronic nutritional imbalance: the new bison-based diet was high in protein but desperately low in carbohydrates. An extremely high-protein and low-carbohydrate diet can be hazardous for pregnant women and fetuses, causing miscarriages, lowered birth weight, and cognitive impairment. If the protein intake exceeds 40 percent while the intake of both carbohydrates and fat drops—as could easily happen on the plains during late winters when bison's body fat plunged—the entire population could become susceptible to protein poisoning.²⁸ Comanches had two basic options in solving such dietary dilemmas.

One was to follow the Apache example and undertake streamside gardening, but this option was unfeasible because it would have tied them to a place and compromised their mobile military effectiveness. The second, and strategically sounder, alternative was to further intensify their hunting economy, eliminate the Apaches from New Mexican markets, and then exchange their surplus meat, fat, and hides for maize and other carbohydrate products at the Pueblo fairs. In essence, then, the Comanche-Apache wars were fought over carbohydrates.

It was because the conflict revolved around life's essentials—food, water, shelter—that the fighting became so unforgiving. By the late 1710s an all-out war had engulfed the upper Arkansas basin and was rapidly spilling over to the adjacent areas. Comanches soon dominated the war and kept up the pressure until the last Apache villages disappeared from the southern plains. They often operated as a single unit with their Ute allies, relying on combined force, whereas the numerous Apache villages tended to act independently. The Apaches were also divided. The Jicarilla, Carlana, and Sierra Blanca bands were caught in an on-and-off war with the Faraone Apaches, who had specialized in the late seventeenth century in captive and livestock raiding, attacking in all directions from their homelands in the Sandia Mountains. But the Apaches' main weakness was their mixed hunting and farming economy, which now, when they were at war with the Comanches and Utes, turned from an economic asset into a military liability. Tied to the soil at exact times of the year, Apache farmers were defenseless against their mounted rivals who turned the once-protective farming villages into deathtraps. Capitalizing on their long-range mobility, Comanches and Utes concentrated overwhelming force against isolated Apache villages, raiding them for crops and captives or obliterating them with devastating guerrilla attacks. As organized as they were mobile, Comanches were also proficient in defensive warfare, as one observer reported in the 1720s: "the nation of the Comanches . . . conserves such solidarity that both on the marches which they continually make, wandering like the Israelites, as well as in the camps which they establish where they settle, they are formidable in their defense."²⁹

Comanches and Utes also used their mobility and range to sever Apaches' trade links. They attacked New Mexican fairs during Apache visits, disrupting the seasonal pattern of the commerce. In 1719 one Spanish official deplored how Comanches and Utes "go about together for the purpose of interfering with the little barter which this kingdom has with the nations which come in to ransom. They prevent their entrance and communication with us." At the same time on the opposite side of their shrinking domain, Apaches lost touch with Louisiana's French merchants, whose western operations were undercut by the monopolistic trade policies of the formidable Osages and the Wichita confederation—the

Lawakonis, Taovayas, Iscanis, and Kichais—who controlled the lands between the Mississippi valley and the Apache territory. The collapse of Apaches' trade network not only weakened their ability to repel the Comanche-Ute onslaught; it also left them vulnerable in their old rivalries with the Wichitas and Pawnees, rivalries that had intensified markedly around 1700 when Wichitas and Pawnees began to sell Apache captives to French traders.³⁰

Caught between two violent fronts and cut off from their economic lifelines, Apaches lost their ability to muster effective resistance. Facing imminent collapse, Jicarillas fled to Taos where they asked for protection and, for the first time, pledged to accept Christianity. "I am, Sir, in a mission called San Gerónimo de los Taos," an astonished Father Juari de la Cruz wrote to the viceroy in 1719, "so close to heathenism, that, as is commonly said, we are shoulder to shoulder. A tribe of heathen Apache, a nation widely scattered in these parts . . . have come to ask for holy baptism." The Apache offer, exactly because it mixed strategic and religious elements, appealed to Spanish authorities, who in August held a war council in Santa Fe and decided to side with the Apaches and declare war on the Comanche-Ute bloc. A stronger Apache nation on the plains, the council reasoned, would shield New Mexico from Comanche and Ute raids, which had grown increasingly destructive during the preceding years. Above all, a Spanish-Apache coalition would protect New Mexico and the mining districts of northern Mexico against the anticipated French invasion—an old threat that had become acute with the outbreak of a European conflict, the War of the Quadruple Alliance, in late 1718. "It is necessary to hold this [Apache] nation," the viceroy instructed from Mexico, "because of the hostilities which the French have launched" and because "the Apache nation aided by ourselves could inflict considerable damage on the French and block their evil designs."³¹

So, in fall 1719, New Mexico Governor Valverde personally led an expedition of some six hundred presidial troops, militia, and Pueblo auxiliaries into the Arkansas valley, hoping to "curb the boldness" of Comanches and Utes and punish them for the "hostilities, murders, and robberies they have made upon this realm." Rather than curbing the momentum of Comanche-Ute expansion, however, the campaign revealed that the Spaniards had already missed their window of opportunity. Signs were ominous from the start. On their way to the Arkansas war zone, the Spaniards encountered several fleeing Jicarilla and Sierra Blanca bands. One group told the governor that Comanches and Utes "had killed many of their nation and carried off their women and children captives until they no longer knew where to go to live in safety," and another depicted an episode of an indigenous total war: "the Comanche and Ute enemies had attacked a ranchería of their nation, causing sixty deaths, carrying off sixty-four women and children,

burning and destroying a little house in the shape of a tower which was there, and even the heaps of maize. There were none of their possessions that were not destroyed." Eager to obtain Spanish assistance, Jicarillas agreed to "receive the water of holy baptism" and loyally serve the governor whom they accepted as their "father." On his part, Valverde handed chocolate and tobacco to the refugees and recruited them as auxiliaries for his march toward the Arkansas. Adhering to long-standing Spanish laws, he did not even consider giving guns to Spain's new Indian allies.³²

As the expedition drew closer to the river, they entered a wasteland of deserted Apache villages and burned maize fields the Comanche-Ute invasion had left in its wake. Apaches, Valverde noted, "live in constant alarm and at night they leave their houses and retire to the hills to insure their lives." Comanches and Utes, however, were nowhere to be found, and Valverde's idle expedition transformed into a mobile ritual ground where the Spaniards and Apaches tried to buttress their tentative alliance through Catholic ceremonies and ritual killings of mountain lions, wildcats, and bears. After weeks of futile search, the expedition learned from a band of several hundred Apache refugees that Comanches and Utes had sacked El Cuartelejo, a fabled Apache settlement a few miles north of the Arkansas valley. It was a devastating blow, for El Cuartelejo—"fortified building"—had become a key seat of Apache power in the late seventeenth century, when disgruntled Pueblo apostates escaped there and introduced the Apaches to horses and new farming techniques. A few days later a wounded Paloma chief brought more bad news. Along the Platte River, "on the most remote borderlands of the Apaches," the French had built "two large pueblos, each of which is as large as that of Taos," among the Pawnees. The French and Pawnees had then attacked the Palomas "from ambush while they were planting corn" and seized their lands. Adding insult to injury, the French had called the Spaniards "women" and encouraged the fleeing Palomas to bring them into Pawnee country to fight them. Valverde's expedition returned to Santa Fe after having spent some two months on the plains. By the year's end, as rumors transformed into reports, Spanish officials in Mexico City found themselves dealing with dispatches stating that there were six thousand Frenchmen within 180 miles of Santa Fe.³³

In a roundabout way, the French penetration onto the central plains also affected the outcome of Comanche-Ute-Apache struggle over the Arkansas basin. Fearing that New Mexico was threatened by an imminent French invasion, Spanish officials redirected their efforts against the French-Pawnee coalition on the central plains, ignoring the Apache situation farther south. In June 1720, Lieutenant General Pedro de Villasur led forty-five presidial soldiers and sixty Pueblo auxiliaries north to oust the French from Pawnee country. The campaign

was a fiasco: thirty-two soldiers, a third of the strength of the Santa Fe garrison, perished at the hands of the Pawnees and their Otoe allies. The Villasur catastrophe, coupled with a peace between Spain and France in Europe later that year, made Spanish officials reluctant to invest men and money to help the Apaches in what appeared more and more to be a lost cause. The officials debated for several years whether to build a presidio at El Cuartelejo or closer to New Mexico among the Jicarillas, but they took no action.³⁴

As Spain's support faded so too did Apaches' hopes of maintaining a foothold in the Arkansas valley. By 1723 a series of Comanche attacks had eliminated what remained of their resistance. In November of that year a delegation of Jicarilla and Sierra Blanca chiefs reported at the Governor's Palace in Santa Fe that Comanches "had attacked them with a large number" and "with such daring and resolution that they killed many men, carrying off their women and children as captives." Desperate to obtain Spanish help, Apache chiefs made an unprecedented offer. While earlier only an occasional Apache band had accepted Christianity and vassalage to Spain, the chiefs now spoke of a sweeping political, religious, and cultural conversion, "pleading that the sacrament of holy baptism be administered to them together with all those of their rancherías," and promising "to come together to live in their pueblos in the same form in which the Christian Indians of this kingdom dwell." In return for their "entire docility," they petitioned the Spaniards to build a garrison at La Jicarilla, a large Sierra Blanca, Paloma, and Jicarilla village on the Canadian River, some 110 miles northeast of Santa Fe. The offer sent Spanish imaginations running. A belt of loyal sedentary Indians on New Mexico's eastern front, a rapidly convened war council concluded, would "serve as a bulwark for this kingdom, for its greater security from French arms." Moreover, the colonization of Apachería would allow Spain to extend its authority to the plains and create a barrier against the Comanches. "It will be wise to continue the conquest until all the enemy be exterminated," Juan de Olivan Revollo, a royal inspector in Mexico City, wrote.³⁵

In November 1723 Governor Juan Domingo de Bustamante rode out with fifty soldiers—more than half of Santa Fe's presidial troops—to inspect La Jicarilla. Apaches welcomed him with engravings of the Virgin Mary and renewed pledges of subordination. But the Comanches, alarmed by the possibility of a double war with both the Spaniards and the Apaches, stormed La Jicarilla in January of 1724 with the intention to destroy it. They besieged the village for four nights and five days and demanded that the Apaches give up all their women and children. When the Apaches relented, they opened fire on the men and threatened to eat their bodies, forcing them to flee. In March, upon learning about the battle, Bustamante led an expedition deep into Comanche territory and re-

trieved sixty-four captives. But whatever momentum Bustamante had managed to create evaporated when the officials in Mexico City failed to decide whether or not to colonize La Jicarilla. While Mexico City hesitated, Comanches lashed the Apache villages with relentless attacks, which culminated in a ferocious nine-day battle at El Gran Sierra del Fierro in the present-day Texas Panhandle.³⁶

Beaten by the Comanches and Utes and abandoned by Spain, the Apaches vacated all the lands north of the Canadian River, which became the southern border of the Comanche-Ute domain. Some Jicarilla bands crossed the Sangre de Cristo Range to seek protection among the Navajos, while others crossed the Cimarron and Canadian rivers to the south, hoping to find refuge in the Llano Estacado, an extensive tableland of trackless plateaus, deep canyons, and playa lakes that encompasses modern-day eastern New Mexico and western Texas. Some Jicarillas also settled on the Río Trampas near Taos, where Franciscans built them a mission in 1733. When Governor Gervasio Cruzat y Góngora "cut off their trade in hides," however, the Jicarillas abandoned the mission. Some of their members reportedly "dispersed themselves among the Utes and Comanches."

The Palomas, Cuartelejos, and Sierra Blancas survived a while longer on the grasslands, buoyed by a short-lived truce that the French mediated in 1724 between them and the Osages, Pawnees, Iowas, Otoes, and Kansas. Three years later the French were reported to be moving with "a great force of Apaches of the nations Palomas, Cuartelejos, and Sierra Blancas to look for the Comanches (a people widely scattered because of the numerousness of their nation) to see if they could force them to leave these regions." Nothing came of that effort, however, and by the decade's end the Palomas, Cuartelejos, and Sierra Blancas had given up resistance and dispersed. Some sought shelter in the Pecos River valley beyond the Mescalero Escarpment, which still fell outside of Comanche reach, and by the 1730s the Apaches had developed close ties with Pecos. Others crossed the Canadian River and pushed deep into the Llano Estacado, following Jicarilla refugees who had fled before.³⁷

If there was a pivotal event in Apaches' defeat, it was Spain's decision not to colonize La Jicarilla. The final decision on the colonization scheme had fallen on Brigadier General Pedro de Rivera who in 1724 had been sent as a special crown official to inspect northern New Spain's formal defenses. A newcomer to the frontier, Rivera took a critical look at New Mexico's Indian policy and found it lacking. Adopting a panoramic strategic view while at the same time making every effort to cut spending, he concluded that Spanish settlers and resources were already too thinly spread for launching further colonizing projects. "If every proposal for the foundation of presidios for reduction were acceded to," he

warned, "the treasury of Midas would not suffice," and he urged New Mexicans rather to "conserve that which is acquired, to enjoy the fruit which has been cut, than to augment the dominions without any hope."³⁸

Rivera's report had a lasting legacy in New Mexico, prompting the authorities to suspend further colonizing efforts on the plains and cut off military support to the Apaches. Turning inward, Spanish New Mexico focused on consolidating its hold over the Río Grande valley, its demographic, economic, and political heart. But for all its fiscal and strategic acumen, Rivera's report contained a massive miscalculation. By withdrawing from the plains, Spain left the door wide open for the Comanches, who within a generation would sweep through the southern plains and press against the entire length of Spain's far northern frontier from New Mexico's northern tip down to central Texas.

The conquest of the upper Arkansas basin in the 1720s marked the end of the first phase of Comanche expansion. Instead of riding the momentum into the Llano Estacado to pursue the already dislodged Apaches, Comanches halted their conquering campaign. The relentless war had sent the Apaches fleeing, but it had also fulfilled the Comanches' immediate territorial ambitions and economic needs. Temporarily satisfied, they concentrated on solidifying their hold on their new plains homeland for nearly a decade.³⁹

Stretching from the Arkansas valley in the north to the Cimarron River in the south and from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the west to the plains-prairie ecotone at the ninety-eight meridian in the east, that home range provided a superb setting for Comanches' emerging equestrian hunting-based way of life. The sprawling, gently rolling meadows proliferated with pasture and bison, and the broad valleys of the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers provided water, firewood, and shelter for Comanches and their herds. The most valuable portion of the nascent Comanchería was the Big Timbers of the Arkansas, a thick grove of cottonwood trees stretching over some sixty miles downriver from the Purgatoire junction. Known to Spaniards as *La Casa de Palo*, "the house of wood," the Big Timbers was a winter haven for horses. The trunks of the cottonwoods formed sheltering walls against cold breezes and their bark and twigs provided an alternative source of food when grasses failed or were buried under snow. These were crucial advantages, for the plains winters could be vicious even in the south, exposing horses to hypothermia and starvation.⁴⁰

With their herds flourishing in the shelter of the Big Timbers, Comanches completed the conversion to full-blown equestrianism with remarkable speed. They were still only partially mounted in the late 1720s, using both horses and dogs to move their belongings, but within a decade they had accumulated so

many horses that they had to break into numerous small bands to accommodate their herds' foraging needs. A local residential band of one or more extended families, *numunahkahnis*, became the basic social unit. These bands—or *rancherías* as Spaniards called them—could include anywhere from one to a few dozen *numunahkahnis*, and their size ranged from twenty or thirty to several hundred people. Regardless of size, kinship was the fundamental unifying force: a *ranchería* was a social extension of a single headman, *paraibo*, whose kinship ties, political influence, and personal charisma held the unit together.⁴¹

By the 1730s, the Comanches had accumulated enough horses to put all their people on horseback, thus reaching the critical threshold of mounted nomadism. They adopted bigger travois and tipis and developed a practice of seasonal migrations conditioned by the availability of bison, horse pasturages, wood, and water. It was also the period when Comanches began to employ the mounted bison chase, which would later become the quintessential symbol of the material prosperity and cultural flamboyance of Plains Indian cultures. In its fully matured form, the chase was as dramatic as it was effective. Riding in full speed alongside a fleeing herd and firing arrows into selected animals, a group of hunters could bring down two to three hundred bison in a single chase that took less than an hour. It was enough to keep several hundred people sheltered, clothed, and nourished for more than a month.⁴²

Comanches also seized the vacant trading niche that had opened in northern New Mexico after the Apache retreat. They restored their war-worn ties with Taos and established new links with the villages in the Chama district west of Taos. The villages soon became sites for closely regulated trade fairs, which attracted large numbers of Comanches who traveled annually to the mountain-nestled settlements, following the sheltering Purgatoire valley. The main hub of the burgeoning exchange was Taos, where Comanches came to barter during summer months under "peace of the market." Comanches found in the pueblo a ready clientele for their bison hides, tanned skins, dried meats, salt, and, above all, captives. Sitting in New Mexico's far northeastern corner, Taos lay beyond the effective reach of Spain's colonial authority, allowing its inhabitants to engage relatively freely in the officially prohibited captive trade. Slave traffic was well established by 1730, and in 1737 Governor Henrique de Olavide y Michelena tacitly approved it by ordering that the citizens should notify the proper officials before engaging in ransoming. Taoseños designated specific dates for the *rescate*, and Comanches brought in vast numbers of captives they had taken during long-distance slaving expeditions. By 1740 the human traffic had become so extensive that former Indian captives, *genízaros*, were granted permission to form their own community on the border because the Spaniards could

not absorb all the captives into their households as laborers. In exchange for captives, Taoseños supplied Comanches with crucial necessities for their newly conceived plains life—carbohydrates, horses, metal tools, and guns. Comanches responded by quelling their raids everywhere in New Mexico, giving the colony a much needed respite from violence.⁴³

The peace lasted on the plains until the closing years of the 1730s, when Comanches pushed onto the Apache lands south of the Cimarron valley. The immediate impetus for the renewed expansion was probably demographic. Comanches' successful shift to mounted hunting and nomadism, together with their practice of incorporating captive women and children into their families, sustained a rapid population growth, which may have exceeded the carrying capacity of their bounded territory. In 1740 one observer reported that the upper Arkansas valley alone was dotted by fifty to sixty Comanche camps, which together must have contained some ten thousand people. Those camps, moreover, had to live "scattered about, caring for the many horses they get from New Mexico." Comanches, it seems, had become too prosperous for the confines of the Arkansas basin.⁴⁴

The reactivation of Comanche expansion was also tied to the borderlands' increasingly intricate requirements of exchange, production, and raiding. To sustain their lucrative trade in northern New Mexico, Comanches needed, first of all, a steady access to Apache slaves. Equally important, they had to refrain from plundering New Mexico for horses, lest they jeopardize their access to the colony's slave markets. Raiding Apache villages in the south brought a solution on both counts, yielding captives for exchange and horses for domestic use.

But warfare was never a purely material affair for Comanches whose motives to fight ranged from material and strategic to cultural and social; accordingly, it is likely that the new round of expansion had an internal sociocultural element. The consuming wars of the 1710s and early 1720s had probably accentuated the martial aspects of the Comanche culture, fostering a process that would in the late eighteenth century culminate in a rank society in which men could gain considerable social status through war exploits. Increasingly, the inner workings of the Comanche society required violent external action, creating a compelling dynamic that may have come into play in the late 1730s. With the cessation of the Apache wars more than a decade earlier, there had emerged a cadre of young warriors who lacked the military records of the previous generation and consequently found their road to social prestige closed. For those men the resumption of fighting may have been a welcome development that unlocked the frozen social hierarchy.⁴⁵

Before the late 1730s, Comanche war parties were assaulting the Jicarillas and

other Apache groups across the northern Llano Estacado, relying on the same tactics that had earlier served them so well farther north. Often cooperating with Utes, they overran Apache villages with quick surprise attacks, seizing women and children, destroying everything from dwellings to crops, and disrupting the carefully orchestrated farming cycle. The odds were tilted against the Apaches even more heavily than before, since Comanches had by now developed an advanced equestrian war machine. They fought with long metal-tipped spears and short bows that were specially designed for mounted warfare and shielded their mounts and their own bodies with thick leather armor. They moved flexibly between small-scale guerrilla raids aimed at plundering and massive frontal attacks aimed at destroying the enemy.⁴⁶

Unable to hold off the Comanche onslaught on their own, the Apaches fled toward New Mexico, seeking protection in the vicinity of Taos, Picuris, Pecos, and Galisteo. Spanish officials, however, were unwilling to reenter Comanche-Apache wars, in part because they were following Rivera's advice of nonparticipation and in part because the first Family Compact between Spain and France seemed to have given New Mexico a measure of safety against French encroachments from Louisiana. Many Spanish colonists also profited handsomely from the rekindled Comanche-Apache wars, which brought more captives to their slave markets: the number of Apache baptisms in the colony more than doubled from the 1730s to the 1740s, jumping from 136 to 343. Yet, little by little, New Mexico was drawn into the conflict. Spanish officials avoided direct involvement, but the fact that they harbored Apache refugees near Pecos and other border towns put the colony on a collision course with the Comanches, who must have regarded the Spaniards as anything but neutral. Spanish authorities further alienated Comanches when they started to enforce the hitherto often ignored laws that prohibited Pueblo Indian trade with unconquered Indians. Their apparent aim was to exclude the Pueblos from the increasingly lucrative slave business, but their efforts also interrupted the critically important food trade between New Mexico and Comanchería, pushing Comanches to rely on raiding.⁴⁷

On a more abstract level, Comanches and Spaniards clashed over the proper way of doing things on the frontier that both connected and separated them. When the two groups had first come in contact, their ideas of basic forms of cross-social interaction—cooperation, exchange, violence, loyalty—were nearly incomprehensible to one another. In the Comanche worldview, gifts, trade, and kinship were inexorably linked; they formed a central cultural metaphor that made peaceful relations and material exchange possible. Exchanges of gifts transformed strangers into fictive kinspeople and brought them into the familial

circle where people provided for each other's needs and where goods circulated relatively freely, flowing from affluence toward deficiency. Trade was not a mechanism to create wealth but a means to seal attachments and a way to build social and political networks that protected their members against poverty and need.⁴⁸

Spaniards, in contrast, made a clear distinction between social and economic ties. They, too, framed trade with social rituals but insisted that the actual mechanics of exchange should be governed by the logic of the market; the balance between supply and demand—not the buyer's relationship with the seller—should determine what was exchanged and at what rates. Spaniards believed that bargaining and fluid exchange rates were an essential part of trade for they helped determine the balance between supply and demand, whereas Comanches saw trade as a form of sharing between kinspeople who took care of each other's needs and therefore did not haggle. These were more than semantic differences. If Spaniards bargained for better prices, they acted as strangers, placing themselves outside the circle of kinship where sharing and exchange took place. And if they refused to participate in gift giving, they did not merely strip exchange from a decorative, trivial framing; they negated the very rationale that enticed Comanches to trade in the first place.

This cultural chasm narrowed in the 1720s and 1730s as Comanches met with Spanish merchants at Taos and other border towns, but a genuine, mutual compromise was still remote in the 1740s. For example, the practice of distributing political gifts had not been coded into New Mexico's official policy, which meant that the colonists' adherence to Native forms of diplomacy shifted from one governor and one *alcalde mayor* (district magistrate) to another, leaving Comanches variously confused, frustrated, and furious. At the fairs, Spanish traders exchanged gifts with Comanche visitors and participated in ceremonies and rituals, but they also violated Comanche codes of proper behavior by haggling over prices, pushing inferior commodities, and refusing to sell certain goods, such as guns.⁴⁹

The tensions arising from disputes over political neutrality, trading privileges, and exchange protocols erupted into open hostilities in the early 1740s. Comanches and Utes launched a fierce raiding war on New Mexico, plunging the frontier above Albuquerque into a steep decline, and Spanish officials responded with sporadic punitive expeditions. The war took an unexpected twist in 1746, when Governor Joaquín Codallos y Rabál learned about a startling threat: despite the escalating violence across the frontier, the inhabitants of Taos were rumored to be informing Comanches of the movements of Spanish troops. While shocking to Spanish authorities, this kind of collaboration was quite plausible

in the fluid social milieu of Spain's far northern frontier. Having reaped great profits from Comanche commerce for years, many Taoseños may have concluded that maintaining close ties with the powerful Comanches was a better policy than yielding to the controlling measures and tribute demands of the provincial center. Betraying his anxiety over the alleged collaboration, Governor Códallo banned the Comanches from the Taos fairs in 1746 and decreed a mandatory death penalty for any Taoseño venturing more than a league from the pueblo without a license. The next year, after a flurry of Comanche attacks that nearly "destroyed the region of Abiquiú," Códallo finally put together a large-scale punitive expedition. Riding out with more than five hundred soldiers and Indian auxiliaries, he overpowered a large Ute and Comanche camp along the Chama River, slaying 107 people, carrying 206 into captivity, and seizing nearly one thousand horses.⁵⁰

It was a shocking defeat, but the worst was yet to come. In the aftermath of the carnage, Comanches found themselves in a serious military crisis: routed by Spanish forces in the west, they faced mounting dangers in the north and east as well. In the north they had inherited the Apaches' on-and-off border conflict with the Skidi and Chaui (or Grand) Pawnees along the Loup River, a conflict that by the late 1740s had escalated into a bitter raiding war in which Pawnees plundered horses from Comanche rancherías and Comanches raided Pawnee villages for slaves and retribution. Comanches also clashed on the northern border with the Arapahoes, who ventured south from their central plains homelands to raid horses. But the situation was even more perilous in the east, where the Comanches clashed with the Osages, a powerful nation of hunters and horticulturists that dominated the tallgrass prairie borderlands between the lower Missouri and Arkansas rivers and had a secure access to French markets in the Illinois Country, or Upper Louisiana. Driven by the French demand for bison robes and slaves, empowered by French guns, and propelled by a rapid population growth, Osages had launched in the early eighteenth century a forceful expansion to the west and south. By the mid-1740s, they had forced all Wichita communities save two adjoining Taovaya villages to relocate from the middle Arkansas southward to the Red River, and their path onto the western buffalo plains and into the Comanche range appeared wide open.⁵¹

This was the Comanches' most critical hour on the southern plains. Their half-century expansion had drawn them into disastrous multifront wars that engulfed them on three sides. But the mid-1740s also saw Comanches reconfiguring their overall foreign political strategy in a way that allowed them to maneuver out of the military crisis. Eschewing war for diplomacy and treaty-making, they fashioned in rapid order an elaborate alliance network that not only stabi-

lized their northern and eastern borders but also gave them access to weaponry with which they were able to turn their military fortunes in the west.

The cornerstone of that alliance system was an accord they formed in 1746 with the Taovayas, the strongest member of the Wichita confederation and the only Wichita tribe that still clung to the middle Arkansas valley region. Comanches had shared a border with Taovayas since their conquest of the upper Arkansas basin in the 1720s, but the two groups had had limited contact until the mid-1740s when symmetrical interests drew them together. The Comanche-Taovaya alliance was probably brokered by French agents who hoped to extend Louisiana's commercial reach to the west by pacifying the Arkansas channel, but it was in design and substance an indigenous creation. As a military union, the alliance allowed Comanches and Taovayas to join their forces to repel the unrelenting Osage forays from the east and north; as a commercial partnership, it complemented the resource domains of both groups. Comanches offered Taovayas horses, bison robes, and Apache captives, the bulk of which Taovayas resold to Louisiana, and Taovayas supplied Comanches with guns, powder, ammunition, and iron tools they obtained from French traders as well as with maize, beans, and squash they cultivated in their riverside fields. This symbiotic food trade was critical to Comanches who had lost their traditional source of carbohydrate products with their 1746 ban from the Taos fairs.⁵²

The Comanche-Taovaya-French trading alliance turned the Arkansas valley into a busy commercial avenue, with Comanche and Taovaya trade convoys constantly moving back and forth. When traveling to Comanchería, Taovayas often escorted French traders, who had paddled to Taovaya villages in canoes before continuing on land toward Comanche rancherías. As the ties solidified, Comanche camps along the upper Arkansas valley began to take the shape of a trade center. In 1748 Spanish officials were alarmed to learn that thirty-three Frenchmen had visited the Comanches northeast of Taos and purchased mules with "plenty of muskets." Soon a wide variety of commodities circulated at the Comanche fairs. Spanish officials in New Mexico fretted about how the French carried in "rifles, gunpowder, bullets, pistols, sabers, coarse cloth of all colors" and returned to Louisiana with "skins of deer and other animals, horses, mules, burros, and a few Indian captives whom the Comanches have taken as prisoners from other tribes with whom they are at war." Spanish officials grasped the overall structure of the trade, but they underestimated the extent of the slave traffic. In 1753 the governor of Louisiana concluded that the colony held so many Apache slaves that it was becoming difficult to maintain the old trade and alliance network with the Apaches.⁵³

Virtually overnight, the Comanche-Taovaya alliance shifted the balance of

power in the Comanche-New Mexico war. Armed with French muskets, iron axes, and metal-tipped arrows and lances, Comanches reversed the momentum the Spaniards had enjoyed since 1747. Together with Utes, they hit Pecos and Galisteo with incessant attacks, delivering debilitating blows to the outlying villages; one report claimed that 150 Pecosenos died at Comanche hands between 1744 and 1749. Farther north in the Chama district, the terror of Comanche-Ute raids—which often were nocturnal—drove the settlers to abandon the recently established villages of Abiquiu, Ojo Caliente, and Quemado. By 1748 Comanches had gained the upper hand, and Governor Codallos reinstituted their trading privileges at Taos. Codallos was replaced the following year by Tomás Vélez de Cachupín, who made the Comanches New Mexico's foreign political priority: while fortifying Pecos and Galisteo with towers, gates, and entrenchments, he also began seeking peace with the Comanches and their Ute allies.⁵⁴

This shift in Spanish policy was as much a reaction to Comanches' war-making as it was a response to their vigorous diplomacy, which had altered the strategic chemistry of the Southwest borderlands to Spain's disadvantage. The Comanche-Taovaya alliance had put New Mexico in a precarious geopolitical position by unlocking the southern plains for French merchants and, as Spanish officials saw it, French imperialism. In the late 1740s and early 1750s Spanish officials nervously monitored French activities on the plains and especially among the Comanches, whom Cachupín described as a "powerful tribe that dominates the others." The French, he continued, were gathering "practical knowledge of the land adjacent to our settlements which they freely travel by permission of the Comanches." The governor bitterly condemned the commercial operations of the French, whose livestock markets in Louisiana stimulated Comanche horse raiding in New Mexico. "The trade that the French are developing with the Cumanches by means of the Jumanes [Wichitas]," he warned, "will result in most serious injury to this province. Although the Cumanche nation carries on a like trade with us, coming to the pueblo of Taos . . . always, whenever the occasion offers for stealing horses or attacking the pueblos of Pecos and Galisteo, they do not fail to take advantage of it."⁵⁵

The situation was humiliating to Cachupín, but his hands were tied by a delicate play-off dynamic: he could not punish the Comanches by banning them from the Taos fairs, since that risked losing the Comanche nation and, by extension, the southern plains entirely to the French orbit. While lamenting the "perverse nature" of the Taos fairs, Cachupín stressed throughout his tenure the importance of maintaining "friendship and commerce with the Comanche tribe, [and] diverting as much of it as possible from the French, because the Comanche tribe is the only one that could impede [French] access to that ter-

rain and be the ruin of New Mexico." The governor found particularly troubling the gun trade chain that extended from Louisiana through the Taovayas to the Comanches; it had the potential, he argued, of becoming "our great detriment, especially since this kingdom is so limited in armaments and its settlers too poor to equip themselves and too few to sustain the burden of continuous warfare." Finally, Cachupín was loath to use force against the Comanches simply because New Mexico needed their trade for its economic well-being. With war, he insisted, "an extremely useful branch of trade would be lost and the French of New Orleans would acquire it in toto."⁵⁶

Instead of pressuring the Comanches, then, Cachupín tried to win their loyalty by offering more goods and better terms of exchange at Taos. Born out of desperation, his decision turned the Taos fairs into frenzied events. "When the Indian trading embassy comes to these governors and their alcaldes," Fray Andres Varo reported in 1751, "all prudence forsakes them." Driven by an explosive mix of greed and fear, said Varo, the governor and other high-ranking officials amassed "as many horses as they can" and "all the ironware possible" for exchange with Comanches: "Here, in short, is gathered everything possible for trade and barter with these barbarians in exchange for buffalo hides, and, what is saddest, in exchange for Indian slaves, men and women, small and large, a great multitude of both sexes, for they are the gold and silver and the richest treasure of the governors, who gorge themselves first with the greatest mouthfuls from this table, while the rest eat the crumbs."⁵⁷

But even more shocking to Varo was the Comanches' behavior at the fairs. Before handing over female captives, he reported, they "deflower and corrupt them in the sight of innumerable assemblies of barbarians and Catholics . . . saying to those who buy them, with heathen impudence: 'Now you can take her—now she is good.'" The horrified priest attributed such acts to Comanches' "unbridled lust and brutal shamelessness," but it is likely that the public rapes were a way to generate markets for captives. The serial rapes were a graphic forewarning of the horrors captive women would—at least supposedly—endure in Comanche hands should Spaniards refuse to ransom them. Brutality, in other words, helped legitimize slave markets in Spanish eyes. In 1751, indeed, the inspector of war in Mexico City called the New Mexican *rescate* a "laudable work" of "ransoming . . . the little Indian slaves." "By means of this exchange," the inspector reasoned, "these captive children can be educated and brought into the fold of this church, and if the traffic should discontinue, the Cumanches would kill them."⁵⁸

In late 1751, two years into his term, Governor Cachupín desperately needed a breakthrough with the Comanches, whose play-off maneuvering, raiding-and-trading policy, and rough trading tactics were demoralizing the New Mexicans,

from priests and officials to ordinary settlers and Pueblo Indians. But as much as New Mexico needed peace, Spanish officials were not accustomed to negotiating with Natives from a position of weakness. In November, however, an unexpected military coup removed political barriers from peace. After yet another Comanche attack on Pecos, this time by three hundred warriors, Cachupín chased the raiders with ninety-two troops, militia, and Indian auxiliaries and, with the help of *genízaro* scouts, besieged them in a box canyon on the Llano Estacado. It became a close-range pitched battle, something the Spaniards were familiar and comfortable with and the Comanches were not. The fighting lasted for hours and by nightfall the Comanches had no arrows or gunpowder left. Spanish soldiers set fire to the thicket and lashed the illuminated Comanches with volleys of musket fire "which brought on their ruin and destruction." One hundred twelve Comanches died and thirty-three surrendered. The survivors, Cachupín reported, wept "from pain" and made a wooden "holy cross, which they presented to me with great veneration, putting it to their lips and mine." The spectacular victory let the governor open negotiations with the Comanches from a more equal footing, and he wasted no time. He kept four women as hostages, but released all the other Comanches, sending them home with a gift of tobacco and an offer of peace. He promised the Comanches free trade in Taos and asked them to return all the Spanish captives they had carried off from Abiquiú in 1747.⁵⁹

During the first half of the eighteenth century, Spanish officials rarely stopped to study the people who were frustrating their colonial ambitions in the Southwest, and in those few cases when they did write about the Comanches in any length, they invariably depicted them as barbarians with immense capacity for violence and minimum capacity for social order.⁶⁰ But now, in the first formal peace talks between the two peoples, a different image of the Comanches began to surface. Although the idea of Comanches as savages persisted, Spanish reports reveal a sophisticated Comanche political organization, complete with distinctive hierarchies, established procedures for broadly inclusive decision making, and effective communication systems.

In December 1751, when the survivors of the disastrous battle brought Cachupín's peace offer among the Comanches, the chiefs from various *rancherías* sent out messengers to summon a grand council. That council, apparently sponsored by a chief called Nimiricante (Man Eater?), became an arduous one. The chiefs of various *rancherías* debated heatedly over Cachupín's peace offer, struggling to reach consensus. One hurdle involved the fate of five Spanish captives—three women and two boys—whose return Cachupín had made a precondition for peace. Nimiricante's brother refused to give up one of the captive

women he held, and Nimiricante intervened, ordering his brother to leave the council ground "or suffer their punishment." Eventually, the council reached an agreement and decided to make peace "and take advantage of the profit of the fairs." Chief El Oso (The Bear), depicted as "the little king of all of them," declared that he would bring his followers to Taos if the Spaniards "should not deny them the items that may please them." The council sent a message to "all the *rancherías* that they were to be friends of the Spaniards and do them no injury by stealing horses or committing other hostilities and that those who had Spanish women captives should turn them over to be returned."⁶¹

In spring 1752, several delegations of Comanche chiefs visited Governor Cachupín in Taos and Santa Fe, forging personal ties that sealed and symbolized good relations between societies. Cachupín sent each delegation home with gifts "because it is indispensable for these people" and released the four female hostages taken in the November battle. Yet, the process toward peace was tenuous, jeopardized by continuing Comanche raids. A delegation sent by El Oso apologized for the attacks, explaining that "some Comanches were so deceitful that, although their chiefs warned and counseled them, it was not sufficient to prevent such from committing crimes." Through these personal interactions and exchanges of gifts, captives, and words, Comanches and Spaniards gradually forged a peace that ended more than a decade of unrelieved violence.⁶²

The final peace agreement—the first between Europeans and Comanches—was highly favorable for the latter. In return for their chiefs' personal promises to prevent their followers from raiding, Comanches received several important concessions. Cachupín granted them unrestricted access to Pecos fairs and the right to resume the *rescate* at Taos, a privilege that effectively quashed the attempts of New Mexican slave raiders to monopolize the slave traffic. Cachupín also issued a meticulous diplomatic protocol that catered to Comanche sensibilities. Under the new code, the New Mexico governor in effect became a mediator who maintained the peace through ceremonial acts and by protecting the Comanches against the greed and rough business tactics of the colonists. More broadly, the treaty recognized the Comanches as a sovereign nation—a concession Spaniards denied many smaller Native societies—thereby setting a precedent that Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the United States would later follow. Cachupín sensed that peace for Comanches was not a static state of coexistence two parties agreed on once, but rather a tenuous condition that needed to be continuously reaffirmed through words and deeds. To appeal to this premise, he instructed New Mexico's governors to personally attend trade fairs, "sit down" with Comanche chiefs, "command tobacco for them," and use "various expressions of friendship and confidence which discretion and wisdom

suggest to learn their desires." He even offered advice on gestures and appearances. "Exterior acts and circumstances of one's looks influence considerably the idea that they [Comanches] ought to form," he advised his successor. "You should introduce yourself with skill and with expressive words, maintain in your looks a mien, grave and serene, which they may observe and thus continue the faithful friendship." Finally, Cachupín specified how Spanish officials should minister to Comanche trading parties. Soldiers were to protect Comanche horse herds during fairs and governors should personally adjudicate any disputes. With an eye for detail, he ordered the settlers to keep any livestock they did not wish to trade outside town limits during fairs, for a refusal to sell could anger the Comanches. Without fully realizing (or admitting) it, Cachupín had begun adjusting Spanish trading practices to Comanche principles, which demanded that material possessions should flow freely among friends and allies. In Comanche culture, reluctance to share signified more than stinginess; it was tantamount to enmity.⁶³

During the peace talks, moreover, Cachupín yielded to Comanche rule over the Great Plains east of New Mexico and cut back Spain's support to the Apaches. He persuaded the remaining Carlana, Cuartejejo, and Paloma villages to relocate from the open plains to the immediate vicinity of Pecos, thus clearing the northern Llano Estacado for Comanche use. Separated from the bison range by the Sangre de Cristo and Mescalero ranges, Carlanas, Cuartejejos, and Palomas managed from then on only sporadic hunts to the grasslands. They attached themselves so closely to Pecos that when they went for their brief hunting forays they often left their women and children behind in the town. When Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, a soldier and mapmaker who had visited Comanchería several times, prepared in 1758 a map of the kingdom of New Mexico, he identified the buffalo plains east of the Pecos River as simply "tierra de Cumanches" and placed all Apache rancherías to the west of the Pecos valley. Those Apaches who did not seek refuge in New Mexico migrated to the south and east to join their Lipan cousins on the Texas plains. With the Apaches either clustered near Pecos or relocated south, the Comanches now controlled the entire western plains from the Arkansas valley down to the Red River.⁶⁴

At the same time that Comanches made peace with New Mexico and usurped the Apache lands on the northern Llano Estacado, they also achieved vital diplomatic and military victories on their northern and eastern borders. By 1750 their detente with the Taovayas had carried them into an alliance with both the Skidi and Chaui Pawnees, close relatives of the Taovayas. These connections secured Comanches' northern border while also augmenting their ability to combat the Osages in the east. The Comanche-Taovaya-Pawnee alliance had a clear anti-

Osage stance. All three nations felt threatened by the Osages and sought to combine their forces against this nation whose war parties moved across a wide range stretching from the Missouri to the Canadian River. In 1751 the allied Comanches, Taovayas, and Pawnees launched a massive assault on their common enemy, killing twenty-two chiefs and delivering a devastating blow to the Osage nation.⁶⁵

The joint war served Pawnees and Comanches better than it did Taovayas, whose isolated villages on the middle Arkansas bore the brunt of Osage attacks. Taovayas' resistance collapsed in 1757, and they retreated some two hundred miles south to the Red River, where they built new villages just west of the Cross Timbers, a north-south sliver of scraggy oaks stretching between the Red and Brazos rivers. To prepare for future Osage raids, the Taovayas built their grass houses close together and encircled their villages with deep trenches and thick, twelve-foot-tall wooden and earthen ramparts. Comanches, meanwhile, managed to keep their newly seized territory intact. Osages failed to edge onto the bison-rich shortgrass plains, and the Comanche-Osage border on the middle Arkansas, Cimarron, and Canadian rivers became a no-man's-land which both groups entered only reluctantly, risking death. Created by mutual fear, this neutral ground lasted well into the nineteenth century: when U.S. Army officials inspected the southern plains in the 1830s, they noted its existence.⁶⁶

The treaty of 1752 between the Comanches and New Mexico had a mixed legacy. While it pacified the Comanche-Spanish relations and helped put an end to the protracted Comanche-Apache wars on the Llano Estacado, it also led to the collapse of the long-standing union between the Comanches and the Utes. The Comanche-Ute alliance was in shambles by the early 1750s, having lived out its usefulness in the fluid, rapidly changing world. Then other things happened—Cachupín retired, the French and Indian War broke out, a little captive boy rejected redemption—and the Comanche-Ute conflict exploded into a sprawling war that engulfed the borderlands.

The sources provide only fragmentary glimpses into deteriorating Comanche-Ute relations. The first signs of trouble surfaced in 1749, when a Ute band asked in Santa Fe for Spanish military support against the Comanches. And when Comanches opened peace talks with New Mexico two years later, they did so without the Utes, who began their own negotiations with Governor Cachupín, reaching a separate accord in 1752. By the end of that year, Spanish sources suggest, Comanches and Utes had clashed in several battles.⁶⁷

That the Comanches' and Utes' half-century-old alliance would disintegrate just as their joint war against the Apaches and Spaniards came to an end was

not a coincidence. The war, it appears, had been the glue that held the alliance together, and its end brought latent tensions to the surface. The main point of contention was access to New Mexico's markets, which suffered from a scarcity of trade goods, an affliction Comanches and Utes themselves had aggravated. Although constantly subsidized by Mexico City, New Mexico had grown increasingly poor during its long wars with the Comanches and Utes, and by the late 1740s the colony was facing difficulties in generating enough goods for all its Native customers. Clashes between Comanches and Utes at and around trade fairs ensued, prompting Cachupín to instruct his successor to carefully coordinate Comanche and Ute visits to Taos in order to avoid violent confrontations between the two.⁶⁸

But Comanche and Ute interests had not only overlapped and clashed; they had also diverged. Unlike Comanches, Utes never fully committed to life on the plains; only one of their subtribes, the Muaches, made a serious effort to develop a plains culture. While Comanches quickly severed their ties to the Rocky Mountains, Utes continued to migrate seasonally between the mountains and the grasslands. They joined Comanches in raiding eastern New Mexico during the warm months but spent the cold season in the shelter of the Rockies. The detachment deepened further in the late 1740s and early 1750s when Comanches built their plains-oriented alliance network, an independent maneuvering that wrenched them away from their union with the Utes, who were not included in the new political arrangements with the French, Taovayas, and Pawnees. The Comanche alliance system shut off the Utes from the plains commerce and diplomacy, locking the two groups in contrasting foreign political trajectories. Comanches turned themselves into key players in the imperial drama that unfolded in the contested borderlands between the Río Grande and the Mississippi valley, a repositioning that set them increasingly apart—politically and geographically—from the more locally oriented Utes.⁶⁹

Comanche-Ute conflict started out as a clash between two former allies but soon escalated into a major borderland war. Utes, while having tutored Comanches in equestrianism, now found themselves powerless against Comanche cavalry and in their distress solicited Spanish support and protection. Governor Cachupín managed to balance between the two groups without committing to either, but the tenuous peace did not survive his departure in 1754. The new governor, Francisco Marín del Valle, lacked his predecessor's grasp of multipolar cross-cultural diplomacy and allowed the critically important personal ties with Comanche leaders to unravel; Comanches would later lament that "they had come with their hearts full of kindness to establish peace but . . . that governor . . . never wished to hear them speak directly to him." Valle also limited Indian

by issuing a *bando* that prohibited the sale of firearms, knives, and other weaponry. Alarmed by Comanches' growing horse wealth, a wealth that fueled their arms trade with French Louisiana, he prohibited the sale of breeding horses, studs, and donkeys and set a high price of fifteen hides for high-quality killings.⁷⁰

Before long, Comanches resumed raiding, pillaging Pecos, Galisteo, and other border villages for horses and captives. In response, Spaniards formed a loose anti-Comanche coalition with the Utes and refugee Apache bands reeling on the New Mexico border. At the same time, however, Spaniards also kept their markets open for Comanches out of the fear that complete alienation would intensify their raids. The borderland war that gradually gathered force in the shadow of the sprawling Seven Years' War was thus a confusing multisided conflict in which the distinction between enemies and allies was often blurred and in which terror was a key weapon.

In spite of escalating Comanche raids, Taos continued to welcome Comanche traders, apparently with official Spanish approval; Fray Pedro Tamarón y Romeral reported how Comanche trade convoys came every year to Taos fairs, as did the governor of New Mexico and "people from all over the kingdom." To Tamarón's disgust, Comanches often paid for the maize and metal tools they received from Taoseños with horses and other goods they had stolen from other New Mexican settlements. When confronted about the raids, he noted, Comanche leaders claimed nonparticipation with vicious bravado. "Don't be too trusting," one chief said. "Remember, there are rogues among us, just as there are among you. Hang any of them you catch." Such statements did not necessarily reflect existing divisions in Comanche ranks. As the events that followed suggest, they seem to have been calculated rhetoric aimed at confusing Spanish officials and keeping the Taos markets open.⁷¹

The summer fair of 1760 in Taos was even more unruly than usual, featuring not only lively bartering but also a ritual dance in which the Taoseños displayed twenty-four fresh scalps. When the Comanches were about to depart, the townspeople, as if to test the sincerity of Comanche statements that the "rogue" raiders could be killed at will, revealed that the scalps had been taken from Comanches. The Comanches left the pueblo peacefully but returned with an enormous military force. In a remarkable display of unity and organization, a reported three thousand Comanche warriors attacked Taos with the apparent "intention of finishing" the pueblo. The attackers, failing to penetrate the town's thick walls, then launched a destructive raiding spree down the Taos valley. They burned twelve ranches near the Spanish village of Ranchos de Taos and sacked the local stronghold, the fortified hacienda of Pablo Francisco Villalpando, kill-

ing seventeen people and carrying fifty-six women and children into captivity. The region never fully recovered. When visiting the Taos valley sixteen years later, one observer noted "a number of ruins of very good ranchos."⁷²

The following year, 1761, brought even more violence and turmoil. In December a Comanche embassy of fifty-eight tipis arrived in Taos to ransom some of the captives they had taken a year before. Led by their "principal man," Onacama, ten Comanche captains entered the pueblo to meet with Manuel del Portillo Urrisola, the interim governor. The talks collapsed when one of the captives, a nine-year-old boy, refused to leave his captors. Portillo seized the boy and the Comanche captains. Overcoming their guards, the Comanches struggled free and barricaded themselves in a stable inside Taos. Portillo ordered his troops outside the pueblo and, "invoking the Queen of Angels and men," unleashed them on the unwary Comanche camp. Among Portillo's force was a group of Utes who had pledged to fight with the Spaniards "until death."⁷³

The result was one of the worst military catastrophes in Comanche history. Dazed by volleys of cannon and shotgun fire, the warriors fled the battle scene, leaving most of their women and children behind in the camp. Portillo led his men into pursuit, but the Ute warriors broke away and stormed the Comanche camp, carrying off "more than a thousand horses and mules and more than three hundred Comanche women, large and small." Portillo's troops meanwhile continued the chase until they reached "a place impossible to pass." There, he reported, "we kept killing Comanches. Those fields were covered with their bodies, for none of them were willing to surrender alive." He reported four hundred dead Comanches. Upon returning to Taos, he ordered the stable with the trapped Comanche chiefs inside it to be burned. Two captains came out. One was shot on the spot; the other escaped, wounded and bleeding.⁷⁴

A Ute captive who was among the Comanches at that time but managed to escape later described the battle's aftermath in Comanchería. Overcome with horror and grief, the surviving Comanches, numbering only thirty-six, "set fire to everything they had, they killed all their herd of horses, they cut their ears, and they went fleeing." The pain engulfed everyone, but it must have been especially excruciating for those men whose wives, children, and relatives were among the dead or captured. According to Comanche social code, a man's honor depended on his ability to protect and expand his kinship network, and losing one's wife or children to enemies was a source of unbearable shame, resulting in a loss of masculine respect. Such a loss brought a social stigma that could only be removed by retrieving the relatives, by replacing them with the captors' women and children, or by symbolically covering the dead with enemy bodies. Massive grief and loss, in other words, demanded massive retribution.⁷⁵

It was into this frontier chaos that Cachupín returned in January of 1762 for his second gubernatorial term. Shocked to find the peace he had so carefully built dead and alarmed by rumors that Comanches were preparing for a general war against the colony, he immediately released six Comanche women and sent them home "as ambassadors to their nation." Cachupín's detailed reports, which also include Comanche testimonies, provide a stereoscopic view into the complex negotiations that ensued. When the six female ambassadors arrived in Comanchería with the peace overture, they found the Comanches "in council discussing the safest means of making war upon the Spaniards." When learning about Cachupín's return to New Mexico, however, the council quickly adopted a new agenda. The chiefs and elders decided to send nine secondary chiefs, two of whom had the right to give "opinions in their government," to meet with the governor. Escorted by sixty warriors, the emissaries arrived a few weeks later in Taos, from where they were ushered to Santa Fe. Along the way, on Cachupín's orders, Spanish officials showered the Comanches with presents "so that they would understand our kindness and good faith." The emissaries arrived at the Governor's Palace carrying a tall cross, wearing smaller crosses on their necks, and "well armed with French rifles," delivering a mixed message that at once underscored Comanches' willingness to negotiate and their military power and international reach. Significantly, Cachupín recognized several of the nine chiefs from his previous term that had ended eight years earlier, which indicates that the Comanche political system was based on institutionalized leadership positions.⁷⁶

Comanche emissaries opened the talks by listing grievances that ranged from Governor Portillo's unprovoked attack in 1761 to chaos at the Taos fairs and the restrictions on Comanche trade in New Mexico. Cachupín's response was a combination of remorse, reconciliation, and patent Spanish paternalism. He declared that the recent hostilities had violated, but not annulled, the bonds of friendship that had been established in 1752. Both sides, he regretted, "had acted in an insane manner in making war upon one another when they ought to have been the best of friends." He then laid out his peace proposal. He promised to restore Comanches' trading privileges and invited them to visit New Mexico "frequently, without fear or lack of confidence." He also suggested that both sides return their captives, thus deftly eliminating a fundamental cause behind borderland violence—the pain that arose from losing one's relatives into captivity and other peoples' kinship networks. Visibly satisfied, the Comanches promised to take the terms "before the notice of all their chiefs and principal men of the nation," and Cachupín lavished them with presents so that "they might smoke and consider well their resolutions in regard to my purposes."⁷⁷

ing Indian people and carrying fifty-six women and children into captivity. The region never fully recovered. When visiting the Taos valley sixteen years later, one observer noted "a number of ruins of very good ranchos."⁷²

The following year, 1761, brought even more violence and turmoil. In December a Comanche embassy of fifty-eight tipis arrived in Taos to ransom some of the captives they had taken a year before. Led by their "principal man," Onacama, ten Comanche captains entered the pueblo to meet with Manuel del Portillo Urrisola, the interim governor. The talks collapsed when one of the captives, a nine-year-old boy, refused to leave his captors. Portillo seized the boy and the Comanche captains. Overcoming their guards, the Comanches struggled free and barricaded themselves in a stable inside Taos. Portillo ordered his troops outside the pueblo and, "invoking the Queen of Angels and men," unleashed them on the unwary Comanche camp. Among Portillo's force was a group of Utes who had pledged to fight with the Spaniards "until death."⁷³

The result was one of the worst military catastrophes in Comanche history. Dazed by volleys of cannon and shotgun fire, the warriors fled the battle scene, leaving most of their women and children behind in the camp. Portillo led his men into pursuit, but the Ute warriors broke away and stormed the Comanche camp, carrying off "more than a thousand horses and mules and more than three hundred Comanche women, large and small." Portillo's troops meanwhile continued the chase until they reached "a place impossible to pass." There, he reported, "we kept killing Comanches. Those fields were covered with their bodies, for none of them were willing to surrender alive." He reported four hundred dead Comanches. Upon returning to Taos, he ordered the stable with the trapped Comanche chiefs inside it to be burned. Two captains came out. One was shot on the spot; the other escaped, wounded and bleeding.⁷⁴

A Ute captive who was among the Comanches at that time but managed to escape later described the battle's aftermath in Comanchería. Overcome with horror and grief, the surviving Comanches, numbering only thirty-six, "set fire to everything they had, they killed all their herd of horses, they cut their ears, and they went fleeing." The pain engulfed everyone, but it must have been especially excruciating for those men whose wives, children, and relatives were among the dead or captured. According to Comanche social code, a man's honor depended on his ability to protect and expand his kinship network, and losing one's wife or children to enemies was a source of unbearable shame, resulting in a loss of masculine respect. Such a loss brought a social stigma that could only be removed by retrieving the relatives, by replacing them with the captors' women and children, or by symbolically covering the dead with enemy bodies. Massive grief and loss, in other words, demanded massive retribution.⁷⁵

It was into this frontier chaos that Cachupín returned in January of 1762 for his second gubernatorial term. Shocked to find the peace he had so carefully built dead and alarmed by rumors that Comanches were preparing for a general war against the colony, he immediately released six Comanche women and sent them home "as ambassadors to their nation." Cachupín's detailed reports, which also include Comanche testimonies, provide a stereoscopic view into the complex negotiations that ensued. When the six female ambassadors arrived in Comanchería with the peace overture, they found the Comanches "in council discussing the safest means of making war upon the Spaniards." When learning about Cachupín's return to New Mexico, however, the council quickly adopted a new agenda. The chiefs and elders decided to send nine secondary chiefs, two of whom had the right to give "opinions in their government," to meet with the governor. Escorted by sixty warriors, the emissaries arrived a few weeks later in Taos, from where they were ushered to Santa Fe. Along the way, on Cachupín's orders, Spanish officials showered the Comanches with presents "so that they would understand our kindness and good faith." The emissaries arrived at the Governor's Palace carrying a tall cross, wearing smaller crosses on their necks, and "well armed with French rifles," delivering a mixed message that at once underscored Comanches' willingness to negotiate and their military power and international reach. Significantly, Cachupín recognized several of the nine chiefs from his previous term that had ended eight years earlier, which indicates that the Comanche political system was based on institutionalized leadership positions.⁷⁶

Comanche emissaries opened the talks by listing grievances that ranged from Governor Portillo's unprovoked attack in 1761 to chaos at the Taos fairs and the restrictions on Comanche trade in New Mexico. Cachupín's response was a combination of remorse, reconciliation, and patent Spanish paternalism. He declared that the recent hostilities had violated, but not annulled, the bonds of friendship that had been established in 1752. Both sides, he regretted, "had acted in an insane manner in making war upon one another when they ought to have been the best of friends." He then laid out his peace proposal. He promised to restore Comanches' trading privileges and invited them to visit New Mexico "frequently, without fear or lack of confidence." He also suggested that both sides return their captives, thus deftly eliminating a fundamental cause behind borderland violence—the pain that arose from losing one's relatives into captivity and other peoples' kinship networks. Visibly satisfied, the Comanches promised to take the terms "before the notice of all their chiefs and principal men of the nation," and Cachupín lavished them with presents so that "they might smoke and consider well their resolutions in regard to my purposes."⁷⁷

The Comanche response came some months later when another embassy—four chiefs, seven warriors, and ten women and children—arrived in Santa Fe. “Dispatched by the two superior chiefs” of their nation, the emissaries informed Cachupín that an order had been sent to “all rancherías of their tribe to hold a council and hasten the return of all Spaniards, large and small, whom they held prisoners.” The four chiefs then requested that Cachupín return to each of them a captive, “some relative or his own woman whom perhaps they might find,” so that they would have proof of his “estimation” for the Comanche nation. Cachupín ordered thirty-one women and children to be brought before the chiefs, each of whom then “selected the relation closest to him.” These acts sealed the peace by transforming the violent, disruptive potential embedded in the captive institution into a cross-cultural bridge. As the chiefs reunited with their loved ones, restoring fractured kinship networks, a major cause behind the Comanche-Spanish conflict disappeared. As a result of this action, the governor later exulted, the chiefs showed “undeniable satisfaction and pleasure; all embraced me around the neck and gave me repeated thanks. They now said that their tribe had no reason any longer to fear or follow any other dictate than the observance of a real peace and firm alliance with the Spaniards.”⁷⁸

These proceedings—which mirrored and built on the negotiations ten years earlier—were more than peace talks: they were an attempt to create a political and cultural middle ground between two nations. When Cachupín painstakingly documented Comanche customs and political practices, he was not only quenching Spanish bureaucracy’s thirst for detail; he was writing a manual for cross-cultural communication. And when he gratified Comanches with gifts, he was not merely trying to create goodwill; he was appealing to the Comanche belief that real peace could not exist without gifts, which turned enemies into friends and strangers into metaphorical kinspeople. Anticipating a profound shift in Spanish Indian policy that would reconfigure Spain’s northern frontier in the 1780s, Cachupín had realized that peace with Indian nations depended on gifting and personal bonds rather than institutional ties. It required yielding dreams of cultural supremacy to the reality of cultural accommodation and exchange.⁷⁹

But Spaniards were not the only ones making concessions. Equally eager for peace, Comanches too compromised, paving the way for deep, mutual accommodation. They did not insist on framing the alliance with fraternal kinship metaphors but accepted, at least on the surface, Cachupín’s patriarchal notion that they had yielded to “obedience and vassalage to the great and powerful captain of the world, the king and lord of the Spaniards.” This was a fictional interpretation that ignored the real balance of power on the ground, but it

was a fiction shared by both sides, albeit for different reasons. For Cachupín, the patriarchal formulation was a political necessity, the only acceptable way he could justify to his superiors in Mexico City and Madrid an alliance with “savage” Indians. Comanches, too, interpreted the alliance through their own cultural prism. They expected persons in authority to be generous guardians, not autocratic rulers, and it is likely that they expected the king of Spain to be a benefactor who would provide them with presents, protect their trading privileges, and shield them against such atrocities as Governor Portillo’s 1761 attack. Comanches also seem to have respected—if not accepted—the notion that New Mexico was not a collection of autonomous communities with whom they could maintain separate, even contradictory relations. For several years after the accord they refrained from their long-standing raiding-and-trading policy in New Mexico and maintained a universal peace with the province.⁸⁰

Besides pacifying the Comanche-New Mexican border, the 1762 accord also sealed the outcome of the decade-long Comanche-Ute war. With Spaniards and Comanches now united, Utes could no longer rely on Spanish support in their struggle to maintain a foothold on the plains-mountain ecotone. The Muaches, the most plains-oriented band of the Utes, withdrew west and shifted their trading operations from Taos to Abiqui and Ojo Caliente, both of which had been resettled in the 1750s. Abiqui and Ojo Caliente were separated from Taos by the Río Grande and Chama River, which meant that the Muaches were now removed from Comanche range of interest. Muaches retreated deep into the mountain parks to join the other Ute bands, leaving New Mexico’s eastern borderland for the Comanches, their former allies and kin who had grown out of their union.⁸¹

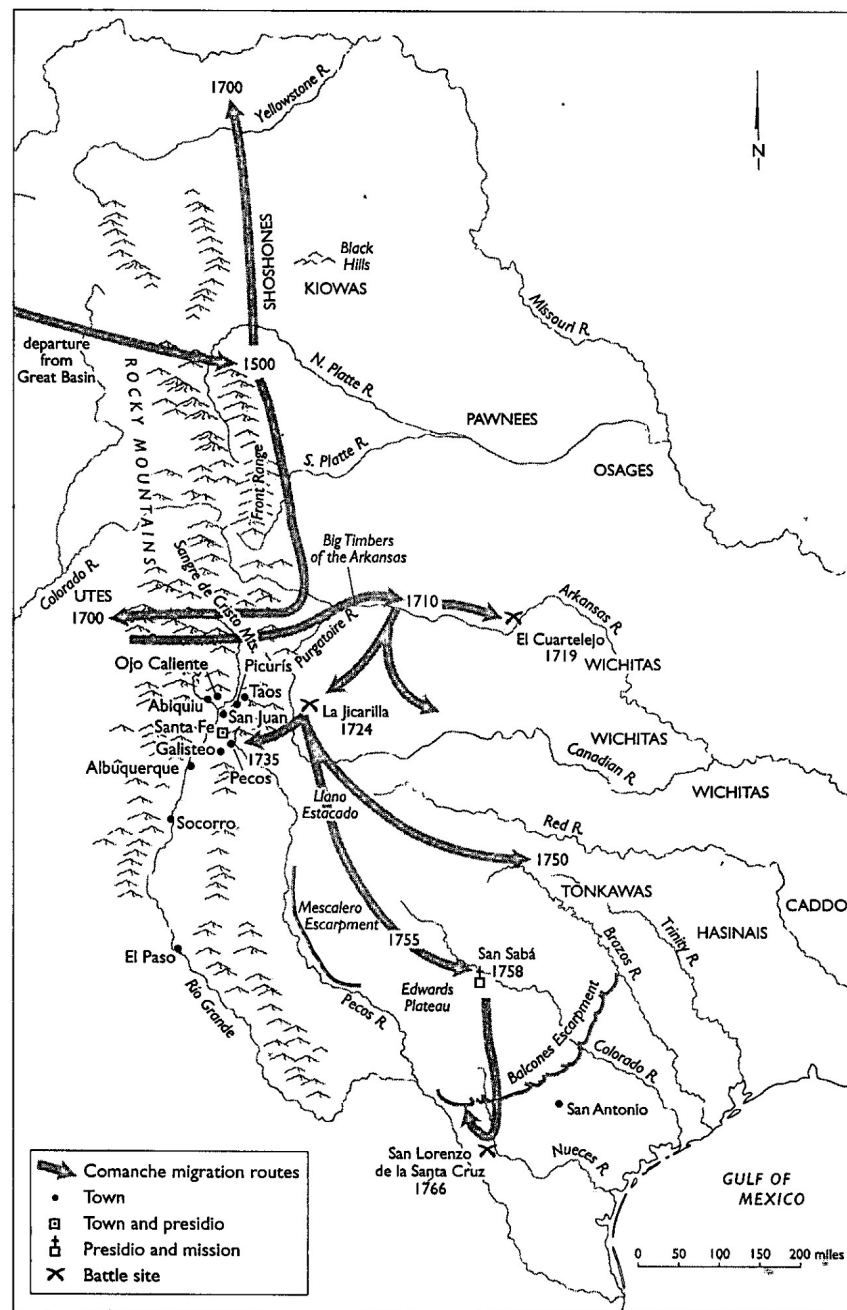
Contrary to Spanish hopes, the 1762 treaty did not stop Comanche expansion. At the time Comanches solidified their dominance over the grasslands east of New Mexico in the 1762 accord, the next—the third—distinctive phase of their expansion was already well on its way. In the early 1750s, with the wars of the previous expansionist phase still raging on the Llano Estacado, several Kotsoteka bands plunged south, crossing the vast table of the Edwards Plateau to the Balcones Escarpment, where the high plains dissolve into the lowlands of Texas. It was one of the most explosive territorial conquests in North American history. In less than a decade, the entire Texas plains—a huge spread of undulating hill country and plains stretching from the Pecos River in the west to the Cross Timbers in the east and from the Red River in the north to the Balcones Escarpment in the south—became a Comanche dominion. This expansionist burst turned the Comanches into a territorial superpower. The Comanchería that emerged

covered some quarter of a million square miles, casting a long shadow on European imperial designs in the continent's center.

The Comanche conquest of the Texas plains was fueled by several factors. In part, it was a repeat of the familiar dynamic. A need to expand their horse-and-bison economy had driven the Comanches to grasslands around 1700 and now, half a century later, the same need pushed them into the Texas plains. By the 1750s Comanches had completed their shift to mounted hunting and nomadism and in the process drastically simplified their economy. The mounted chase became the foundation of their economy, overshadowing other subsistence strategies. Gathering decreased, eating fish became a taboo, and fowl was reduced to an emergency food eaten only when other provisions failed. But now everything hinged on their ability to keep their horse herds large and growing, and it was this imperative that drew them south. Spanish Texas was dotted with horse-rich but often poorly manned missions, presidios, and civilian ranches, which were a reasonably easy prey for mounted guerrilla attacks. An even greater incentive were innumerable wild horses roaming in the hill country just north of the Texas frontier, perhaps more than one million in all, ready to be seized and tamed.⁸²

The invasion may have also been motivated by changing geopolitics. The late 1740s witnessed the emergence of yet another anti-Comanche coalition—this time between Spanish Texas and Lipan Apaches. Since the founding of first permanent Spanish colonial settlements in San Antonio and Los Adaes in the late 1710s, Spaniards had been struggling with the Lipans who raided Texas for the European technology they could no longer acquire from New Mexican markets. It was a consuming on-and-off raiding war, characterized by Lipan livestock poaching, Spanish reprisals, and mutual captive seizing. But in 1749, after several aborted efforts, the two sides made peace in San Antonio in a three-day ceremony, which climaxed in a ritual burial of weapons, a live horse, and the war itself. The accord was prompted by the rising Comanche threat. Lipans, who had recently incorporated large numbers of Jicarilla refugees from the north, stated during the peace talks that they wanted Spanish support and weapons to fend off the Comanche war bands that had started to infringe upon their lands. Equally alarmed by Comanche expansion, Spanish officials seized the opportunity. By arming the Lipans, they reasoned, it would be possible to create a barrier between their young colony and the expansionist Comanches. Comanches, whose hunting and scouting parties had frequented the Texas plains since the early 1740s, were probably aware of the new threat from the outset.⁸³

Finally, the Comanche sweep into the Texas plains may have been a response to a changing commercial geography. The expulsion of their Taovaya allies from the Arkansas to the Red River in the 1750s under Osage pressure prompted



1. Comanche migrations and expansion. Map by Bill Nelson.

French traders to refocus their operations from the Arkansas channel to the lower Red River, where an important trading satellite, Fort St. Jean Baptiste aux Natchitoches, had been established in 1716. This sudden shift in commercial gravity must have been a strong incentive for Comanches to relocate south as well, for they had grown heavily dependent on the French-Taovaya trade axis, their principal source of maize, guns, and metal.⁸⁴

The Comanche invasion of the Texas plains unfolded on two levels—diplomatic and military. When they arrived in the Red River valley, Comanches first integrated themselves into the region's alliance network. They reestablished their trade relationship with the Taovayas, who then brought them in touch with the Tonkawas, a multiethnic group of nomadic hunters between the Colorado and Trinity rivers. Comanches also forged tentative ties with the Hasinai confederacy, the westernmost extension of Caddo people, who lived in large urban communities between the Ouachita and Neches rivers and made annual hunting excursions to the southern plains. This emerging coalition, which Spaniards would come to label as *Norteños*, was founded on shared foreign political interests. Taovayas, Tonkawas, and Hasinai—like Comanches—were alarmed by the Lipan-Spanish pact, which threatened to exclude them from Texas markets and leave them vulnerable against the Apaches. Taovayas and Hasinai were also engaged in a losing war with Lipans over hunting ranges and were eager to enlist the support of the formidable Comanches. Although Spanish officials would later blame French agents for promoting an anti-Spanish *Norteño* coalition, the immediate motivation for the Comanche-Taovaya-Tonkawa-Hasinai alliance was Spain's decision to ally with the Lipans at the exclusion of the other Native groups.⁸⁵

Thus strengthened by new allies and arms, Comanches launched in the early 1750s a systematic offensive against the Lipans. It was a near repeat of the previous Comanche-Apache wars. Like their northern relatives, Lipans had gradually taken up small-scale riverside farming, which now undermined their ability to confront the wide-ranging Comanche war parties. Fixed to their fields and short of horses—a severe drought had devastated their herds in the 1740s—the Lipans were powerless to halt the Comanche advance. In 1755 they invited the Comanches to peace talks along the Guadalupe River. The two groups “sang together and touched weapons in token of friendship,” but the peace did not last. Lipans then turned to Spaniards for military support, vowing to accept Christianity, give up their nomadic ways, and take on full-time farming. The offer was received excitedly by the colonists who, after decades of frustrating missionary efforts, could finally start fulfilling their assigned role within Spain's imperial system: turning nomads to neophytes and building a buffer zone of pacified Indian

farmers to protect the silver mines of northern Mexico against foreign invasion. The construction of a new mission-presidio complex began in the spring of 1757 in the San Sabá valley.⁸⁶

The San Sabá scheme epitomized in microcosm the kind of strategic miscalculations that had encumbered Spain's North American ventures from the outset. The first miscalculation involved the site itself, which at first glance seemed an auspicious choice. The San Sabá valley had a broad, irrigable bottom that was suitable for farming, and it had prospects of mining. Separated from the principal political and population center, San Antonio, by 135 miles, San Sabá also could have become a protective bastion for Texas deep on the interior plains. But that middle distance also meant that the mission-presidio complex would be an isolated outpost at the edge of Comanche range, where it stood defenseless in a conflict its very presence provoked. (Lipans, it seems, were fully aware of this: in June 1757 a massive party of some three thousand visited the construction site, but in the end only a few families stayed with the Franciscans; the rest, leaving, protested that the site was too close to Comanche territory.) San Sabá was also poorly designed for defense. To prevent sexual interaction and cohabitation between Spanish soldiers and Indian women, the friars had insisted that the presidio be built three miles upriver from the mission complex, which thus lay utterly exposed to attack. But perhaps the most serious miscalculation was financial. Although the mission was funded privately by a mining magnate, the presidio, designed to lodge four hundred people, absorbed men and funds that would have been needed elsewhere in poverty-stricken Texas. In the San Sabá scheme, then, Texas tied its limited resources in an improbable venture that virtually invited enemy assault.⁸⁷

That assault came in March 16, 1758, when an estimated two thousand allied Comanches, Taovayas, Tonkawas, and Hasinai appeared at the gates of the San Sabá mission, announcing that "they had come with intention of killing the Apaches." The bulk of the force broke into the mission compound and began looting it and searching for Apaches, while the rest approached the presidio. When the presidial soldiers opened fire, the Indians retreated and gathered in and around the mission. Their faces "smeared with black and red paint," equipped with lances, cutlasses, helmets, metal breastplates, and "at least 1,000" French muskets, and led by a Comanche chief clad in a French officer's uniform, they set fire to the buildings—"so quickly that it seems probable that they were prepared in advance to do so," one soldier recalled—and gunned down those who failed to find shelter. The body count, made by the presidial soldiers who had been too terrified to confront the overwhelming Indian force, revealed eight casualties.⁸⁸

If the loss of life was limited, the psychological aftermath was enormous. The attack was a military operation aimed at eliminating an enemy encroachment, but it was also a symbolic act laden with political messages. The attackers openly declared their nationality, perhaps to stake territorial claims or perhaps to proclaim that they were not afraid of Spanish reprisals, and their French weapons, by all accounts manifestly displayed, bespoke of far-reaching commercial and political connections. The violence itself, it seems, was staged for maximum impact. The attackers slaughtered oxen and other animals, destroyed church ornaments and sacred jewels and pictures, and overturned and beheaded the effigy of Saint Francis. They left behind stripped, scalped, eyeless bodies and placed the beheaded body of a friar on the church altar. If the intention was to use strategic violence to coerce the Spaniards to cut off their support to the Apaches, it worked. "Intent as they are on robbery and blunder," Father Manuel de Molina testified, "they will not desist from such activities, nor cease to carry out their diabolic schemes. Therefore I consider it impossible to reduce and settle these Apache Indians along the San Sabá, or for many leagues roundabout, even with the aid of the King's forces." The bare facts of the assault—the size of the coalition, its abundant French weaponry, its apparent organizational capacity—sent shock waves across Spanish Texas. The Indians were so superior "in firearms as well as in numbers," one officer declared, "that our destruction seems probable." Seeing French intrigue behind the attack, other officials feared that the attacks would be repeated as long as French traders and French guns poured west from Louisiana. The destruction of the San Sabá mission also left the Apaches demoralized, although none of their kin had died in the attack. Realizing that Spanish presidios and soldiers could not protect them on the plains, the Lipans began to retreat south and east and established new villages along the Colorado, Guadalupe, and Frio rivers on the edge of the grasslands.⁸⁹

With the Lipans fleeing the plains and the San Sabá mission lying in ruins, Spaniards found themselves fighting a war that had lost its strategic rationale. But instead of seeking peace with the Norteños, the officials in Mexico City decided to continue the war. Motivated more by a desire to restore Spanish honor than tactical reasoning, they ordered the presidio of San Sabá to remain occupied. When Spanish officials convinced some Lipan bands to settle down in the vicinity of the presidio, Comanches responded with constant attacks. Then, in August 1758, Spanish authorities dispatched Colonel Diego Ortiz Parrilla, the desecrated commander of the San Sabá presidio, with 360 presidial soldiers and volunteers, 134 Apache scouts, and 42 other Indian auxiliaries to the north. Parrilla's force scored a sensational victory on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, where it ambushed an isolated Tonkawa camp and killed 55 and captured 149

men, women, and children. Heady from the unexpected triumph, the party pushed ahead to the Red River valley, where they came upon the heavily fortified Taovaya village, which also hosted some Comanche bands. Parrilla ordered his troops into a frontal attack, but mounted Taovaya and Comanche warriors launched an equally organized countercharge, firing repeated volleys from horseback. Other Taovaya and Comanche men fired upon the attackers from the village's elevated palisades, pausing only to ridicule the bewildered troops. After four hours of futile attempts, and with the death toll rising at alarming rate, Parrilla ordered a retreat, leaving two bronze cannons behind.⁹⁰

It was only in the wake of the Parrilla disaster that the Spaniards began to question the rationale of their anti-Comanche policy and the idea of an Apache barrier on the plains. In 1760, Texas Governor Ángel Martos y Navarrete suspended campaigns against the Norteños, who responded in kind, halting their attacks on the Apaches and Texas. Two years later, Franciscans established two unauthorized missions, San Lorenzo de la Santa Cruz and Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria del Cañon, on the upper Nueces River. Situated almost ninety miles south of San Sabá, the missions provided an asylum for the Apaches far from Comanche domain.⁹¹

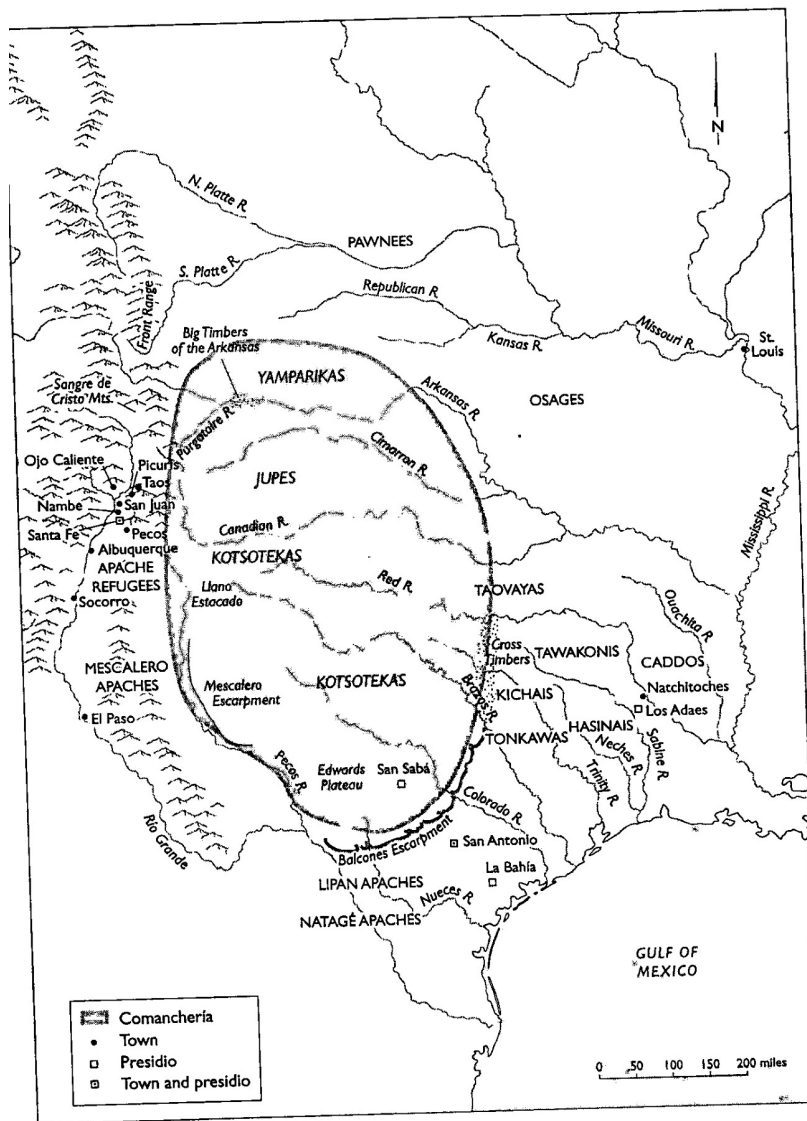
But the realignment of Texas's frontier policy remained incomplete, for the colony still kept troops at the San Sabá presidio and even provided military escorts for Apache hunting parties onto the plains. Spaniards also harbored Apaches near San Antonio, which prevented the Norteños from trading in the villa. The indecisiveness of Texas officials nearly destroyed their colony. Incensed by the continuing support to their enemies, Comanches and their allies began a fierce raiding war. They attacked Apache villages and Spanish settlements relentlessly, creating a broad, triangle-shaped shatterbelt extending from the San Sabá to San Antonio and the Nueces missions. The attacks culminated in January 1766, when four hundred Comanches, Taovayas, Tonkawas, and Hasinai sacked San Lorenzo, sending the Lipans fleeing in panic; after the assault not "a single Indian" remained in the mission. Although the campaign ended in disaster when the returning Norteños ran into a Spanish ambush and suffered heavy casualties under cannon fire, the massive show of force quashed Lipan hopes of maintaining a foothold even at the outskirts of the plains. Within a year, all Lipans had retreated to the coastal plains of Texas, the deserts around the Río Grande valley, and the mountains of Coahuila, where they joined their Natagé cousins to build a new economy on poaching Spanish villages and ranches in southern Texas, Nueva Vizcaya, and Coahuila. The Apache diaspora from the plains was now complete, and a largely depopulated hundred-mile-wide buffer zone separated the Apache realm from the southern border of Comanchería.⁹²

With the destruction of San Lorenzo mission, Texas's frontier strategy had come to a dead end. Yet, true to the pattern, it took an outside intervention to nudge long-standing practices and policies on a new course. That intervention came in 1767 when *marqués de Rubí* extended his famous two-year inspection tour of northern New Spain's frontier defenses to Texas. Like Pedro Rivera in New Mexico forty years earlier, Rubí found in Texas a battered, overstretched colony struggling under Comanche pressure. Comanches and their allies, he discovered, were "bordering our settlements, which are weak, ill-placed, and incapable . . . of making opposition to a torrent of enemies who in reality are appreciable in strength and number." And like Rivera, Rubí offered some drastic solutions. Determined to stamp out the "credulity and the shameful indulgence" of Texas officials with a strong measure of *realpolitik*, he urged them to seek peace with the powerful Comanches and dissolve the "unfortunate" Lipan alliance, which only provoked Comanche aggression against Texas. If necessary, Rubí advised, Texas should consider "the total extermination" of the Lipans, who had taken up raiding in southern Texas while at the same time "spoon-feeding us with their deceitful friendship and supposed desire to be reduced."⁹³

Rubí's proposals did not receive official crown approval until 1772, but the officials in Texas promptly put them in practice. In 1769, at Rubí's recommendation, they finally removed the presidio from the San Sabá River and adopted a conciliatory policy toward the Comanches. Much after the fact, Spaniards began to reenvision their plains borderlands as a bipolar world where there were two great powers, the Comanches and Spain, and no room for the ailing Apache nation.⁹⁴

"We shall have, it is undeniable, one day the Nations of the North as neighbors; they already are approaching us now," Rubí warned in 1768, trying to advocate the removal of the Apaches from the plains that separated Texas from the expanding *Comanchería*. Rubí's warning was as pertinent as it was dated: by the time he filed his report, Comanches had already arrived at the Texas border, and their realm was staggering in size.

With the Lipans beaten and routed, the Comanches controlled almost all of the southern plains, flanking and fencing off Spain's far northern frontier nearly across its entire arc. Western *Comanchería*, the domain of the *Yamparika*, *Jupe*, and *Kotsoteka* divisions, pressed against New Mexico from Taos down to Albuquerque. Eastern *Comanchería*, primarily a *Kotsoteka* realm, was separated from San Antonio, the main population center of Texas, by the distance of one day's ride. Rather than the seat of a grand colonization project, San Antonio



2. Comanchería in the 1760s. Map by Bill Nelson.

had become the frontline on a Spanish frontier that had caved in at the center, folding itself around Comanchería.

Comanche colonization, moreover, had dislocated thousands of Apaches from the Great Plains south and west of the Río Grande, where they joined other Apache groups in raiding Spanish villages, haciendas, and ranches. By midcentury the Apaches had forged an immense war zone that stretched 750 miles from northern Sonora through Nueva Vizcaya to Coahuila, posing a severe threat to northern New Spain's mining districts. Rubí's ultimate goal had been a solid northern frontier anchored in New Mexico and Texas, but by the late 1760s the sister colonies had become narrow and isolated ribbons pinched between two rapidly expanding indigenous dominions. Indeed, if Spanish troops and travelers wanted to reach Santa Fe from San Antonio, they struck *south* and circled to their destination by way of Saltillo in southeastern Coahuila and El Paso in the middle Río Grande valley, carefully skirting the newfound Comanchería and the transplanted Apachería.⁹⁵

When those new geopolitical realities suddenly dawned on Spanish officials—and when the officials in Texas and New Mexico compared the stunning success of their Native rival to their own failures to extend Spanish authority to the North American interior—the Comanches and their colonizing campaign became the objects of intense scrutiny. To many Spanish observers, analyzing the Comanches' ascendancy from obscurity into regional dominance was also an exercise in excruciating self-criticism. In the far north, more completely than anywhere else, Spaniards had failed in the critical prerequisite of their colonial project—preventing large-scale diffusion of European technology among nonconquered, nonsedentary Indians. Across the northern frontier from New Mexico to Texas, Spanish colonists faced Comanches who fought on horseback with flintlock muskets and iron-tipped lances, using Spanish technology to contain Spanish imperialism. That techno-military turn, coupled with Comanches' assumed intrinsic cruelty, explained the Comanche rise to dominance in Spanish minds. In 1778 Miera y Pacheco offered a typical assessment in a series of map legends. "This nation is very warlike and cruel," read one of the legends, describing the Comanches, while another depicted the Comanche colonization of the southern plains as epic military conquest: "They acquired horses and weapons of iron, and they have acquired so much skill in handling both that they surpass all nations in agility and courage. They have made themselves the lords of all the buffalo country, seizing it from the Apache nation, which formerly was the most widespread of all known [Native nations] in America. They have destroyed many nations of them [Apaches], and those which remain they have pushed to the frontiers of our King's provinces."⁹⁶

Accounts such as this capture an elemental truth: Comanches were superior fighters who had matched and then surpassed Spaniards in mounted combat. Their swift, wide-ranging guerrilla attacks, refined during the protracted wars against the Apaches, wreaked havoc against Spanish settlers and soldiers who preferred to fight in closed places and in tightly organized formations. Extraordinarily mobile, Comanches could strike unexpectedly and distract and disable their enemy with seemingly unorganized individual charges before abruptly breaking off and riding hard for dozens of miles into safety. If chased, they scattered across the trackless grasslands, forcing their pursuers to choose among multiplying targets. Yet the explanations that emphasize raw fighting ability alone miss a fundamental point: Comanches' overwhelming military power stemmed from a dynamic economic, social, and cultural core. Beneath the martial surface were adaptable people who aggressively embraced innovations, subjecting themselves to continuous self-reinvention.

Comanches' power complex was much more than a military creation; it was also, and indeed primarily, a political construction. Their colonization of the southern plains was a military enterprise built on astute and pragmatic diplomacy. As they swept across the southern plains, Comanches forged a series of strategic alliances, which buttressed their own strength while leaving their competitors variously defenseless and divided. They defeated the Apaches and their Spanish allies in several successive wars, and in all those wars they fought with powerful allies of their own. They sustained their long-standing union with the Utes for decades, only to detach themselves from the alliance in the 1750s, when the collapse of Apache resistance on the Llano Estacado turned Utes from useful allies into rivals. Exploiting existing rifts among Spanish colonists and their subject peoples, Comanches nurtured close ties with Taoseños, who supplied them with horses and weapons even when an open war raged between New Mexico and Comanches. Twice, in the early 1750s and in the early 1760s, Comanches also negotiated highly favorable peace treaties with New Mexico, blending diplomatic persuasion with the threat of violence to force the Spaniards to modify their aggressively paternalistic frontier policy toward a more accommodative approach.

The pinnacle of Comanches' diplomacy was the sweeping alliance network they forged in the early 1750s with the Taovayas, Skidi and Chaui Pawnees, Tonkawas, Hasinai, and French Louisiana. That cluster of alliances turned the nascent Comanchería from an isolated, militarized landscape into a nexus point of multiple trade routes while leaving the Apaches and Spaniards politically and commercially marginalized. It gave Comanches an access to guns, powder, lead, and other European goods and allowed them to play the Spaniards off against

their French rivals. It also enabled them to mobilize large multinational military campaigns, which crushed the remains of Apache resistance and forced New Spain to accept a new geopolitical order on its northern borderlands.

But Comanche ascendancy was also rooted in economics: there was a direct link between territorial expansion and productive power. As the first people on the plains to fully commit to mounted nomadism and hunting, Comanches enjoyed a decisive advantage: they could exploit the vast reserves of bioenergy stored in the plains' bison herds more thoroughly than any of their competitors. By reinventing themselves as mounted bison hunters, Comanches dramatically simplified and intensified their economy; few societies in history have relied so totally on a single food source, and few have experienced such a sudden increase in total caloric intake as the early eighteenth-century Comanches did. This in turn made possible a rapid and sustained population growth, the single most important factor behind the Comanchenization of the southern plains.

Though punctuated by several lulls, the Comanche-Apache conflict was a drawn-out, half-century-long war of attrition in which the linkages among demography, production, and military power became increasingly pronounced. Where Apache population growth stagnated and then turned into a sharp decline, the Comanches grew rapidly in numbers, even while absorbing major losses. They suffered repeated and devastating losses to war—most notably in 1747, 1751, and 1761 when Spanish troops engaged war bands traveling with families and forced them into pitched battles—and yet the population growth continued unabated. According to one estimate, there were fifteen hundred Comanches in 1726 (probably an underestimation), but by 1750 their population seems to have exceeded ten thousand and was probably approaching fifteen thousand. For Apaches, Comanche invasion must have appeared like a swelling, unstoppable human tide that swept the southern plains, brushing aside their way of life with its sheer force of momentum.⁹⁷

But if full-time equestrianism offered such obvious economic, demographic, and military advantages, why did only the Comanches make the shift? Why did the Apaches cling to their fields and villages even after it had become clear that their commitment was pushing their plains civilization into oblivion? At least part of the answer can be found in the two groups' divergent evolutionary trajectories and the resulting differences in their attitudes toward innovations and culture change. When the Comanche-Apache wars erupted in the early eighteenth century, the Apaches were in the midst of a long process of transforming themselves into agricultural people. Having begun at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this process had gathered considerable force in the early eighteenth century. By then, the farming complex—its distinctive annual cycle,

labors, social relations, beliefs, and ceremonies—had permeated the very core of the Apache culture, making a return to full-time nomadism and hunting all but unthinkable. External political pressures further narrowed Apaches' options, for every Spanish offer of military assistance against the Comanche onslaught was contingent on the premise that they give up even part-time hunting, settle down for good, and become full-time farmers.⁹⁸

For Comanches, in contrast, the equestrian shift was nearly effortless. Viewed broadly, equestrianism represented to them merely a stage in an expedited evolutionary continuum that had witnessed them migrating from the central plains to the southern Rocky Mountains and, in the space of a few years, transforming themselves from stone-and-bone-using pedestrian hunters into horse-mounted, gun-and-metal-using slave and livestock raiders and traders on the Spanish borderlands. Against this backdrop, the shift to full-blown mounted nomadism on the southern plains was less a cultural revolution than a phase in a great adaptive spurt. Already remolded by a sweeping migration, the Comanches entered the southern plains as an extraordinarily adaptive people ready to exploit the possibilities of a mounted way of life to the full.

In the end, then, the dazzling equestrian maneuvers and fearsome guerrilla attacks that fired the contemporary imagination were simply an application of overwhelming economic and demographic power made available by adaptive fluency. Athanase de Mézières, a French and later Spanish career officer who observed the changing power relations on the southern plains at close range, noted as much in 1770. Instead of stressing military prowess as the building blocks of Comanche ascendancy, he listed prosaic economic factors ranging from manpower and economic independence to pasturelands and animal bounty. For him, the Comanche conquest of the southern plains was a case of demographic and economic imperialism. Comanches, he concluded, "are scattered from the great Missuris River to the neighborhood of the frontier presidios of New Spain. They are a people so numerous and so haughty that when asked their number, they make no difficulty of comparing it to that of the stars. They are so skillful in horsemanship that they have no equal; so daring that they never ask for or grant truces; and in the possession of such a territory that, finding in it an abundance of pasturage for their horses and an incredible number of cattle which furnish them raiment, food, and shelter, they only just fall short of possessing all of the conveniences of the earth, and have no need to covet the trade pursued by the rest of the Indians whom they call, on this account, slaves of the Europeans, and whom they despise."⁹⁹