

Hero — or thug?

Recent portraits have depicted Geronimo as a freedom fighter. But this fascinating account paints a much more complex picture of a warrior capable of the most shocking violence

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GERONIMO

by ROBERT M UTLEY
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On April 27, 1886, the Peck family were at work on their remote homestead in the Arizona desert. A small band of Apaches on horseback appeared on the horizon, slowly approached, and began to kill at leisure. One warrior shot the young mother, then dashed her baby's head against a wall, a young girl was stolen, for future inhumanities. The father of the house was stripped naked and left alive — apparently for the Apache leader's amusement, at watching the poor pioneer discover the corpses of his kin.

When, 125 years later, US Special Forces were sent to Pakistan to kill or capture Osama bin Laden, they chose to code name their terrorist target after that band of Apaches' blood-soaked leader — "Geronimo". Their choice, however, was widely denounced: for many advocates of Native American rights, the original man was not a cold killer but a "freedom fighter", epitomising cunning, rugged survivalism and death-or-glory defiance. Why on earth, one Indian newspaper pondered, name the attack on public enemy number one after "a warrior who defended his people's homes and families; he was brave, fierce, elusive".

Robert M Utley's scholarly biography of "the most famous North American Indian of all time" is treading, therefore,

on sensitive ancestral ground — but strides in fearlessly. For this slender book is a potent challenge to Geronimo's status within the "heroic mold" of noble Indian chiefs such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Here we find a man accused of ordering the strangling of his own tribe's children (lest their screams alert nearby American troops), who also liked to leave one lucky survivor from his numerous massacres of hapless Mexican army patrols "because he would bring more to be slaughtered". As one member of his own tribe put it, "I have known

Geronimo all my life, and have never known anything good about him."

Born in roughly 1823 in the forested mountains of what is now New Mexico, Geronimo belonged to the Chiricahua Apache tribe, and was trained from youth to fight. He was sent on long runs over brutal terrain, holding a stone in his mouth to ensure he breathed efficiently through his nose, developed an astonishing expertise in mountain and desert manoeuvre and survival, and showed such an immediate aptitude for the Apache martial techniques of archery, lance and knife that his peers concluded he had magic killing powers. He was considered literally bulletproof and "could even make the night last longer", singing to the sun to delay dawn before an ambush. An early life engrossed in the Apache culture of raiding and war was defined by a Mexican military reprisal against his village in 1851, in which Geronimo's mother, wife and three children perished. From that day

on "my heart would ache for revenge against Mexico" and both soldiers and civilians would pay the price for 25 years — an elderly Geronimo would eventually summarise his life's work with a simple audit: "I have killed many Mexicans."

But this straightforward, bloody existence was confused in 1860 by the discovery of gold in Geronimo's hills, and the arrival of white Americans to mine it, sparking 17 years of complex machinations and negotiations over ownership of the land in which Geronimo and Utley both get rather lost. Narrative clarity is mercifully restored 50 pages later, when in 1877 Geronimo, still addicted to pillage and vengeance, is arrested by the US army, and forced to accept life as a "reservation Indian", trading rations and protection in return for an end to the raids. The following decade made his name.

On three occasions, Geronimo (earning the reader's twisted admiration) reverted to type, fleeing the tedium and humiliation of the reservation to escape into the mountains. But he was no lone fugitive: hundreds of men, women and children joined these flights, "pathetic survivors" torn between the malarial swamps the US Army had dumped them on and the deprivations of life on the run — marching day and night through probably the toughest terrain in the west, their camps attacked by their pursuers, the Mexican army lying in ambush over the border (more than 70 women and children perished in one such assault). Surrounded by enemies (even Mexican



villagers whom they believed to be friendly got them incapably drunk, then lined up and opened fire), the fugitives made desperate bids for independence. The longest of these lasted two years, and survived only because of Geronimo's breathtaking generalship, organising lightning retreats that more than once involved the refugees abandoning all their possessions, to sleep rough in the sub-zero peaks and canyons of the High Sierra.

In this miserable context, the most infamous aspect of Geronimo's escape bids — the bloody raids on American and Mexican farms and ranches (as befell the Pecks) that the American press recorded in every sensational detail — takes on a different character. One begins to revalue this outlaw's audacity — perhaps most in his almost suicidal decision in 1882 to double back and attack his own, heavily guarded reservation in order to press-gang more Apaches into joining the outbreak. As Utley puts it, Geronimo's reputation begins to settle somewhere between “two extremes — thug and hero”.

As often happens with Native American biographies, this antihero's tale ends in anticlimax. Pursued in 1886 by Nelson A Miles, the finest “Indian fighter” in the US Army, Geronimo (by now in his sixties) finally conceded defeat and accepted confinement for life. He reached a depressing accommodation with modern America, appearing as a celebrity at exhibitions and parades, and even accepting an honorary commission as an Indian scout in the US Army. In his seventies, he cracked a fire-side joke about staging one last outbreak, and the panicked army scrambled two cavalry troops to stop him, but in truth his defiance had gone: “The sun rises and shines for a time and then it goes down and is lost. So it will be with the Indians.” In 1909, while drunk, Geronimo fell from his horse, slept in the snow and died of pneumonia.

It is a melancholy end to a fascinating life, and Utley has dissected it with forensic rigour. This work is perhaps a little short on passion — a flash of rage that, after Geronimo's surrender, the

Chiricahua were subjected to “one government betrayal after another” is notable for its rarity, when one considers the destruction of this tribe, 3,000 souls at Geronimo's birth, but barely 300 by his death. Utley's temperate prose, though, matches his doughty scholarship — and if you are intrigued by the real Apache behind the burning ranches and scattered corpses of Cormac McCarthy's novels or John Ford's films, then this is a valuable and recommended read.

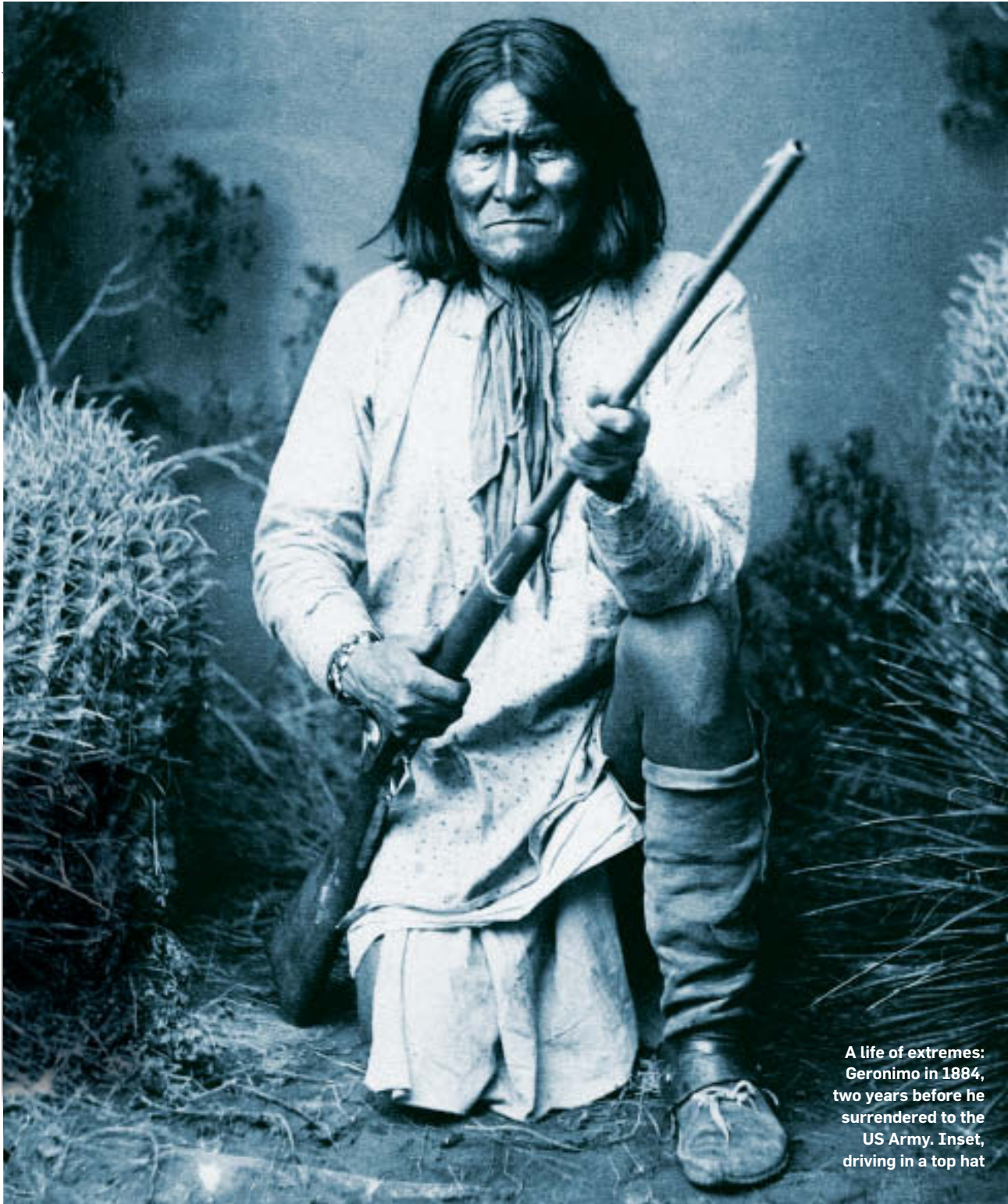
Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £17.50 (including p&rp) on 0845 271 2135

Yearning for home

In his final years, Geronimo embraced modern America, developing a passion for the cinema, converting to evangelical Christianity and penning a bestselling celebrity memoir. He was the star attraction at the 1905 inauguration parade of Theodore Roosevelt (though kept under armed guard while near the president, even in his eighties). But the friendship between the two men still couldn't secure the great Apache his final wish — a return to his Arizona mountain homeland, where ‘I might die in peace’.



ROBERT G LEWIS COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES



**A life of extremes:
Geronimo in 1884,
two years before he
surrendered to the
US Army. Inset,
driving in a top hat**