

## On the Edge: Spirits, Ghosts, and History's Courageous of the Southern Plains

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In anticipation of historian Michael Beschloss speaking here on Nov. 12, I've been reading two of the presidential scholar's books, "The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany" and "Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America, 1789-1989," publications that suggest the spirits of particular American political figures continue to influence our national life.

I carried those books with me this past weekend when I spent two nights on America's southern border, at the edge of the Southern Plains in the Big Bend country of West Texas, and just a few days before we celebrate Halloween I spent some time thinking about the spirits and ghosts of the men and women of this part of the Southwest whose actions continue to influence life here.



**Traveling through the Big Bend country of West Texas offers visitors a glimpse into one of the rugged landscapes of the American West that made settlement of the region a struggle.**

Beschloss writes about the courage, and sometimes hardheadedness, of men such as George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Abraham

Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, and in the preface to his "Presidential Courage" he writes that his book is about brave leaders who "took risks of different kinds and magnitude on major, abiding issues--war and peace, human rights, the proper balance of power between the federal government and American business and finance."

In the history of the Southwest, leaders here were not dealing with the national and global issues that our nation's presidents were, but the late 19th and early 20th century acts of many of those who led the way to settling this frontier were just as courageous and had lasting consequences on life here.

Take for instance the actions of Col. William Shafter, a soldier who, following his tours on the Southern Plains, would go on to lead American troops in Cuba during the Spanish-American War of 1898. While stationed at Fort Davis and Fort Concho in West Texas 30 years earlier, Shafter led buffalo soldiers across land west of the Pecos River and into Southeastern New Mexico. In fact, he led the troops that did the first mapping of this corner of New Mexico some 40 years before the territory became a state in 1912.

Shafter was here in the early 1870s to pursue Native Americans--Comanches and Apaches--and to insure the safety of American settlers moving into some of the last wilderness in the American West.

Some of those expeditions that Shafter led were heroic on several levels, the troops not only encountering hostile forces but also struggling to find water on the semiarid land covering several hundred square miles. On their expeditions there

were numerous incidents in which the outcome for the troops was not certain, occasions in which many could have perished.

Shafter was making decisions about two of Beschloss' "abiding issues," civil rights, of which the Native Americans had little, and war and peace, with Shafter following his orders to force the natives off of their traditional hunting grounds and onto reservations.

Driving through much of the territory that Shafter covered last weekend, I was struck again and again by the ruggedness of the terrain, the land inhospitable even with super highways and conveniences at regular intervals.



**The land has not changed much for thousands of years.**

Some 40 miles north of the Mexican border at a small mining town named for Shafter, the hilltops offer views of several hundred miles in all directions, the river to the south, the Chisos Mountains to the east, the Chinanti Mountains to the west, and the Davis Mountains to the north. It's an enchanting spot to view some spectacularly beautiful land, but it certainly did not look beautiful to Shafter and his troops in the 1870s.

Thirty miles North of Shafter, once a ghost town, is the little community of Marfa where James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor

performed in the filming of the 1956 movie "Giant" and where now reside artists of several nationalities, where tourists can have a cafe latte at the Marfa Book Company or buy art work at one of several galleries before they retire to the restored Paisano Hotel where both Dean and Taylor slept during the filming of their movie.

Twenty miles north of Marfa sits the little town of Fort Davis with a beautifully restored and replicated fort that Shafter commanded. The fort is now a National Historic Site, and the town is a tourist destination with international visitors.

Life on the land over which Shafter rode is radically different today, and it was only through the work of men like Shafter that life here today is possible. Reading the log of his travels out from Fort Davis, he made numerous courageous decisions that could have cost him his life, decisions that showed he was more interested in doing what he felt was right for his country, rather than what was safest or what conventional wisdom might have said they should be doing.

Only in a very general historical sense was Shafter making decisions that would have a global impact, which was the case with the figures Beschloss discusses in his books about American presidents, even though the occupation and settlement of the American West did have a tremendous impact on the character of the nation that would become the dominant political and economic force in the world.

However, Shafter and other courageous leaders transformed the West and made it possible for the settlement of an expansive frontier.

I think one of the ways we Americans are different today has to do with today's communication technologies and also with how

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many there are of us as compared to even sixty years ago when the country entered World War II. It's much easier to identify with local leaders than it is to identify with national figures, who increasingly appear far away and isolated from everyday life and working people. Washington is a long way off, and our political and military leaders who live there appear to be working in a world far removed from our communities, almost as if the nation's capitol is a kind of fort with thick, impenetrable walls surrounding it.

That's not true of the historical men and women who built the towns and counties in which we reside. I have a much easier time envisioning Col. Shafter as a flesh and blood soldier than I do the colonels and generals coordinating the wars America is fighting on the other side of the world.

That is one of the qualities of the two Michael Beschloss I have read that make me appreciate his research and his writing. When I was through with his chapters on Washington, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman, I felt like I knew something about the flesh and blood men that they were.



**Lovington's Bob Carter (with hat in center) visits with one of the veteran Marines, a truly courageous American hero, riding across the country on special three-wheeled cycles in an effort to raise money for veterans' services. They met at Harry McAdams Park in Hobbs in August.**

These were extraordinary men in the things they accomplished for their country, but they were also made of the same stuff we are all. Often they had to make decisions that were opposite of what their advisors recommended or that went against the grain of public opinion.

Their courage helped transform America, just as the courage of Shafter insured that his spirit would still be riding the Southern Plains 140 years later.