

# Modoc War more complex than first appears

No clear heroes, villains

By **TODD KEPPLE AND RYAN BARTHOLOMEW**  
Guest Commentary

There are many benefits to be gained from the study of human conflicts in the past, but there are many pitfalls in trying to place blame for those conflicts without an in-depth understanding of the facts and circumstances. The Modoc Indian War, fought in the Klamath Basin in 1872-73, is a prime example.

A resolution being considered by the Oregon Legislature seeks to bring new attention to the Modoc War. Such attention is welcome, as the Modoc War is often overlooked in general histories written about the American West.

One reason the Modoc War is little known by the general public, we believe, is that it was a long, complicated and tragic affair with no clear heroes or villains.

Senate Concurrent Resolution 12 admirably seeks to honor the dozens of people who lost their lives in the Modoc War, including

Modoc Indians, Warm Springs Indians scouting or fighting for the Army, Army officers and soldiers, and civilians.

The resolution's original language, as submitted by state Sen. Fred Girod of Stayton, included a statement of "regret" over the Army's execution of four Modoc leaders. That statement was removed from the Resolution as approved by the Senate, and sent to the House.

It was wise to delete the declaration of regret for now. We state this not because we think Captain Jack, Schonchin John, Black Jim and Boston Charley deserved to be executed. Rather, we think the complexity of the Modoc War, and the wide range of perspectives on the historiography of the conflict, call for a more thoughtful and deliberate process before the Oregon Legislature takes a vote on a resolution that includes some measure of redress.

Put another way, some historians might affirm that the Army's execution of the Modocs for the murders of Army General E.R.S. Canby and the Rev. Eleazar Thomas was within the norms of military justice

of the time. Others, however, would undoubtedly posit that the federal government has far more to regret than the executions that occurred on Oct. 3, 1873, at Fort Klamath.

In our opinion, the most regrettable aspects of the conflict were the several missed opportunities to prevent the war entirely.

For instance, the government might express regret for ignoring the Modocs' grievances against the Klamaths during the time they were living together on the Klamath Indian Reservation.

The government might express regret that it did not heed the impassioned plea from an Army Officer in the field that the Modocs be provided a separate reservation as they had long sought.

Regret might also be expressed for not adequately protecting four Modoc prisoners of war who were senselessly murdered at Adams Point a week after hostilities had ceased.

There are numerous other examples of regrettable actions committed by various parties in the Modoc



KLAMATH COUNTY MUSEUM PHOTO

Kintpuash, or Captain Jack, leader of the Modoc Tribe is seen in this U.S. Army prisoner photo.

War, which was of course only one of many conflicts in which the federal government used lethal force to suppress Native Americans across the Klamath region, the state of Oregon, and the breadth of the continent.

Study of the Modoc War has many things to

teach us. The inappropriateness of rushing to judgment without an in-depth knowledge of the facts should be one of them.

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