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The Extraction of the American Native: How Westward Expansion Destroyed and Created Societies

By Juan Francisco Pirir

When the first Europeans landed on the Americas in the 15th century, they encountered people already inhabiting this, so called, “New World.” These migrants soon established colonial settlements, which often led to territorial disputes and to the spreading of diseases that caused major epidemics among the indigenous population. In the colonies, many grew weary of their monarchic governments; thus, revolution against the European world emerged. The American Revolution, for example, declared its independence from the British Empire after several issues with the Royal Crown were not addressed. Having won the revolution against the British, many Americans felt a great sense of nationalism for their victory. It was because of that victory that Americans were able to start over and create a government that would leave the European structure of power behind. This new democratic government called for both freedom and progress—ideals met by expanding westward into Native American territory. Events of the 19th century determined the fate of the Native American people such as the Sioux and Nez Perce. The lack of a centralized government within bands of natives and no clear representation of Native American territory fueled racial supremacy amongst American settlers, which ultimately provided justification of westward expansion and the seizing of native lands.

Like many native tribes, the Nez Perce frequently interacted with white American settlers. In the interview *An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs*, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce gave insight into the rising tensions between natives and non-natives in the early 19th century North America. In this interview, the Chief talked about an encounter his father had with a white man named Reverend Spaulding. According to the Chief’s father, Reverend Spaulding shared the word of the “Spirit-Law” with the Nez Perce people in hope to convert them to Christianity. The interview then revealed what Chief’s father learned about the American settlers coming into Native American land. He recalls his father’s revelation of the white settler; “we soon found out that the white men were growing very rich very fast, and were greedy to possess everything the Indian had.”¹ The Nez Perce not only invited Reverend Spaulding into their band, they also allowed him to spread his religious practice among them. The perspective of Chief Joseph’s father provides a general overview of what many American settlers were trying to accomplish: converting the Natives into something more “civilized” with the use of their religion. This meeting between the reverend and the Nez Perce also reveals the American settler’s ability to expand westward through religious practice.

According to Chief Joseph’s account, the Nez Perce listened to Reverend Spaulding’s talk of the “Spirit Law” but as much as the reverend wanted to teach of his religion, would it have been possible for the Nez Perce to share their beliefs with the reverend? To that extent, could the belief systems of both native and non-natives have syncretized? Perhaps. But time, being the unpredictable entity that it is, did not allow such events to take course within this and other bands of American Natives. The spreading of Christianity became a powerful tool that would serve the colonists well when justifying their expansion

Westward. The teaching of Christianity to Native Americans, like the Nez Perce, dismantled culture in the attempt to create “civilized” Christian societies.

In Calloway’s *First Peoples*, the author mentioned that “Indians” adopted Christianity and intensive agriculture from white American settlers in which case the natives required less land and were able to transfer surplus lands to white settlers.² The learning of Christianity may have helped the natives create bonds with the settlers; however, this meant the natives would slowly lose their own cultural beliefs if they were not careful to withhold them. With the native’s adoption of intensive agriculture came the adoption of settlement for some Native American societies. Some societies even adopted bison hunting through the use of horses and found the technique so promising that they began herding horses themselves. Unfortunately for the natives, the adoption of settlement and horse husbandry came with detrimental effects.

In such groups like the Sioux, “epidemics decimated settled agriculturalists...the nomadic [Sioux] would then spread [these] infections” and would have sickened and killed many other natives.³ To make matters even worse, the vigorous “horse herding also depleted grasslands that supported bison populations” leading to a decline of the protein filled bison food stock.⁴ Although natives adopted some aspects of American culture and gave remaining land to Americans, it was not enough for the Anglo-American to consider them as equals.

It was Manifest Destiny that sparked a desire within Americans to expand and inhabit the lands of the “Western Frontier.” The West was responsible for important American ideals such individualism, political democracy, and economic mobility. The closing of the Western Frontier may have been a driving force for class conflict and social revolution such as the infamous Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676. The freedom to head west allowed people to have a fresh start, to emerge out of poverty and dive into wealth. By 1830, the United States created The Indian Removal Act, which called for the “federal relocation of five ‘civilized tribes.’”⁵ During this time, the United States sought to make treaties with tribes such as the Sioux and the Nez Perce.

The indigenous that lived in the west were reluctant to part with lands their tribes had for so long claimed as theirs. Due to much resistance from the natives, the United States found itself in a fiasco; however, they would find treaties to be the most efficient way to gain western territory. In 1851, the Sioux (among many other tribes) signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie, which “grant[ed] American settlers safe passage across the plains in exchange for an annual annuity” but some bands within the Sioux did not agree with the treaty.⁶ These bands were named “Non-Treaty Soldiers” which would try to fight against an expanding United States. The different bands within tribes however, made it difficult for the United States to negotiate with the natives. Since no form of centralized government existed within tribes, people of the United States perceived Native Americans as uncivilized, fuelling the justification of the seizure of native land.

The Nez Perce also gave the United States a similar conflict. A Nez Perce chief by the name of Lawyer signed a treaty that gave up native land that did not actually belong to his band of natives; the land he gave up was actually under another Nez Perce’s chief—Chief Joseph. Natives that did not agree with this treaty were given the name of “Dog Soldiers” and fought against the United States’ Cavalry. Due to the complexities of power amongst native tribes, the United States had no clear idea of which leaders they should negotiate with.

The United States became very intrigued by the idea that the Black Hills (part of native lands) might have had the most precious of metals—gold. The United States set out

a revised version of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 “clarify[ing] the 1851 treaty which reduces Sioux territory to the great Sioux Reservation.”⁷ With the treaty, the United States claimed to give up on the Black Hills and the Sioux were then allowed to leave their reservation to hunt. What the Sioux did not notice was perhaps the most important portion of the new treaty: “the Sioux will have to relinquish all claims to non-reservation lands at some point in the future.”⁸ This eventually led to the relocation of Native American tribes.

In the *Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners of 1885*, Merrill E. Gates believed that “there [was] an utter barbarianism in which property has almost no existence.”⁹ Many Anglo-Americans saw the natives as “uncivilized” and considered them “undeserving of such lands” since they were “not using the land properly.”¹⁰ Gates believed in assimilation. He believed that the American native “should become an intelligent citizen of the United States.”¹¹ He then categorizes the natives as “wards” of the government and the government itself as the responsible “guardian” that is in charge of educating and caring for the ward. Gates believed that their form of government and their way of life was the key to an advanced social, cultural, and moral development.

It is truly important to recognize that the events that occurred in the United States are not reversible nor will they ever be. These events provide an example of how two opposite cultures interacted in the fight for the West American territories. The conflicts between the Natives and American settlers seemed almost impossible to avoid. What fundamentally led the Natives to fail in resisting American Expansion was the absence of a unified tribal system, clear depictions of Native American territory, and unfortunately, the belief that a more “civilized” group of people are better than others.

Notes

¹ Chief Joseph, “An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs,” *North American Review* 128, no. 269 (April 1879): 416.

² Colin G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004).

³ Pekka Hämäläinen. “The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures.” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (2003): 833-862.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of American History* 65, no. 2 (1978): 319-43.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Merrill E. Gates, *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners* (1885).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.