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Native Americans, the National Parks, and the Concept of Historical Inevitability

Gary B. Nash

Ken Burns's twelve-hour documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009), is the latest series from the nation's nearly official documentary filmmaker. Viewers see lush, spectacular photography and hear sharply honed narratives. Threaded through each segment is a quiet sermon on protecting the national parks, adding to them, and fighting off the entrepreneurs and their political allies who would love to turn Yosemite into Niagara Falls and Zion into a mining camp. Viewers are also treated to a fascinating story of how the Park Service was created, grew, and had to fight political battles every step of the way. But in *America's Best Idea* we see very little about how most of the national parks were created at the expense of decimated Indian nations. One case in point is the glorious Glacier National Park. It was established in 1910, just after the Blackfeet people ceded most of their remaining land to the federal government, leaving them about 6 percent of the twenty-six million acres they possessed in 1855. By 1910, after the extermination of buffalo left them facing starvation and reduced to little more than a thousand in number, they caved in to the federal pressure to turn their land into Glacier National Park.

Two heroes of the Burn documentary are Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir. But it's worth remembering that while creating national parks and using

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his bully pulpit to spread the gospel of preserving the nation's natural resources, Roosevelt was also a leading Indian-hater of his generation.

Some readers of this journal will remember Helen Hunt Jackson's *Century of Dishonor*, issued in blood-red covers in 1881 but not read much anymore. It excoriated the federal government's Indian policies in the century following the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and was perhaps the first book to attract national attention to the genocidal policies of the US government. Jackson contested the notion that Native Americans must inexorably vanish from the continent, and she attacked the related notion that the victors had no responsibility for the vanquished.

Jackson's *Century of Dishonor* played a role in the establishment of the Indian Rights Association in 1882. It infuriated Roosevelt. He called the book "thoroughly untrustworthy from cover to cover" and warned that those who dallied with it were simply "amiable but maudlin fanatics" and "foolish sentimentalists" who "not only write foul slanders about their countrymen, but are themselves the worst possible advisers on any point touching Indian management."¹

Roosevelt spelled out his disdain for Native Americans at great length in his *Winning of the West* (1924), part of his multivolume history of the United States. Here he organized all of American history around the notion of "a series of mighty movements" that began in the Saxon forests of the previous millennium. All history moved teleologically toward the dominance of the English race. Tied to this premise, all Indian wars, from the early seventeenth century through the post-Civil War clashes on the Great Plains, were part of the inexorable "race-history of the nations," as Roosevelt called it.²

Contemptuous of Indians as a racial type, Roosevelt described the Plains Wars in the trans-Mississippi West as an updated version of the early colonial wars, where European settlers had reduced once-powerful Indian tribes to "a horde of lazy, filthy, cruel beggars always crowding into their houses, killing their cattle, and by their very presence threatening their families." If genocide was the fate of irredeemable Indians, "the conquest and settlement by the whites of the Indian lands was necessary to the greatness of the race and to the well-being of civilized mankind. It was as ultimately beneficial as it was inevitable." For Roosevelt, it was "wholly impossible to avoid conflicts with the weaker race." Moreover, the eradication of American Indians, in any event unstoppable, should be acknowledged with national pride because "the most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war against savages," for it establishes "the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people."³

This notion of historical inevitability, always a victor's argument, is as old as the stories of the ancient conquerors. It has permeated the history of Indian America, as told by white historians, and we are still today climbing out from

under its noxious message. David Muzzey's *The American People*, a best-selling high school textbook used from World War I well into the 1960s, reeked of it. When it came to Indian-white relations, Muzzey varied only slightly from earlier textbook interpretations that implicitly approved of Roosevelt's indictment of Indian character.⁴ Like his predecessors, he conditioned his readers to see Indian-white relations as predetermined. Sold by the millions, his textbook taught two generations of young learners about the "stolid stupidity [of Indians] that no white man could match" and how they "loved to bask idly in the sun, like the Mississippi negro of to-day." The Indians, he wrote, were a diverse lot in North America, but "nowhere had they risen above the stage of barbarism." Most were "sunk in bestial savagery." Those Indians who survived into the twentieth century, he advised students, were "a picturesque object of study," people who "have contributed almost nothing to the making of America." Indians, anyway, were hardly to be found when the Europeans arrived. "The New World," he wrote, "was a virgin continent for the European discoverers and their descendants to make of it what they would." Muzzey states, "It was impossible that these few hundred thousand natives should stop the spread of the Europeans over the country. That would have been to condemn one of the fairest lands of the earth to the stagnation of barbarism."⁵

This formula for telling the story of Indian-European history as a conflict of savagery versus civilization conforms to the critique of philosopher Isaiah Berlin that

the explanation, and in some sense the weight of responsibility, for all human action is (at times with ill-concealed relief) transferred to the broad backs of these vast impersonal forces—institutions, or historical trends—better made to bear such burdens than a feeble, thinking reed-like man. . . . Our sense of guilt and of sin, our pangs of remorse and self-condemnation, are automatically dissolved; the tension, the fear of failure and frustration disappear as we become aware of the elements of a larger "organic whole," of which we are variously described as limbs or elements.⁶

The organizing concept of historical inevitability thus becomes the salve of a troubled national conscience.

Between 1965 and 1973, four scathing critiques of textbooks made it clear that all but a few were filled with the disparagement of American Indian societies; had huge silences on Native American history and Indian-white relations; and were riddled with errors that tilted the story to the victor's side. Yet books were changing. By the 1970s, as the American Indian Movement gathered force, John Garraty's leading college US-history textbook was telling students that "the settlement of America ranks among the worst examples of naked aggression in human history."⁷ Other textbooks began leaving behind

the fiercely racist rhetoric so much a part of a triumphalist white history. We are not out of the woods yet, but historians are heeding Berlin's warnings that to argue that history happens inevitably is to deny all responsibility for its outcomes.⁸

Today we can recognize that the argument of historical inevitability is a profoundly undemocratic notion. Nearly every teacher tells his or her students that their lives count, they can become an army of one, history does not have them by the throat, and they are the makers of tomorrow's history. That message flies in the face of the notion of historical inevitability. If history unfolds inevitably, why vote, why enlist in reform campaigns, why even presume that the lone individual can make a difference?

It is also true that, with some exceptions, historians have abandoned the idea of a vast cultural gap portrayed in the polar opposites of civilization and savagery—the incubator of inevitabilist thinking. Instead, the reigning paradigm is of conflict, convergence, a meeting of cultures where almost nothing was inevitably determined and almost everything was contingent, negotiated, and, in the end, the result of human agency. It is very unlikely that textbooks will revert to earlier depictions of Indian “savages,” insist that Native Americans had little to contribute to the American mosaic, place the blame for three centuries of intercultural violence on inherent Indian characteristics, or insist that outcomes were inevitably determined from the first moment when Europeans clambered off wooden ships in the Americas. It is difficult to unring the tolling bell.

In November 2009, the National Parks Second Century Commission presented its report to Kenneth Salazar, secretary of the Interior, and then to Congress and the president. I was privileged to serve as one of the twenty-five commissioners who met at five national parks over a year's time to hammer out a set of recommendations that might, if followed, guide the National Park Service better to serve its mission in its second century of existence. One of the most eloquent speakers to address the commission was Gerald Baker, superintendent of Mount Rushmore National Park. Baker is the first Native American superintendent of a major national park, and anybody who hears him will know the reason why. He was full of wisdom and eloquent in expressing his commitment to telling multiple stories at Mount Rushmore, so that visitors understood its history from people looking west and people looking east. The National Park Service wants to attract dozens of Gerald Bakers, and the service is beginning to see them at the ranger level, especially at sites such as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, where one can find Sioux interpreters guiding visitors around Little Bighorn's 765 acres. That it bears that name—replacing its former name of Custer Battlefield National Monument—tells us that the wind is blowing differently nowadays. The newly

confirmed director of the National Park Service, Jon Jarvis, is committed to making sure that the wind will not reverse direction.

In its pursuit of a National Park Service that serves all Americans and reflects the nation's diversity in the composition of its workforce, the Second Century Commission report made these recommendations (among many others):

Cultivate close relationships with Native American peoples, and convey appropriate native understandings of national park lands, waters, resources, and stories through educational materials and programming.

Authorize, clearly define, and base fund a system of National Heritage Areas, in association with national parks where possible. [The appendices spell out how this applies to Native American heritage areas.]

Establish a task force that will "articulate the role of national parks in cooperation with national forests, national wildlife refuges, other federal agencies, state parks, and other public, tribal, and private lands and waters in carrying out the nation's conservation and preservation strategy."

Invite all Americans to build a personal connection with the parks, placing high priority on engaging diverse audiences through its operations and programming. [This is spelled out in greater detail in the appendices and has much to do with Native Americans.]

Ask Congress to prepare a new plan that would include attention to historic sites and cultural landscapes that broaden the diversity of the national narrative embedded in the parks.⁹

There is room for guarded optimism. Power holders of long standing do not yield ground easily and even gain ground, as we know from recent history. Many struggles remain. However, the ethos of the National Park Service has cleansed itself of the notion of historical inevitability. Yes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and lightning strikes in forested areas are beyond human control. Yet up and down the chain of command in the National Park Service the belief in general is that human interaction with the environment, human action with other humans, the protection of natural and cultural resources, and sensitivity to Native American history in creating narratives for the consumption of visitors at multiple national parks is always contingent on human desires, human actions, and human decisions.

The American Indian Studies Center at UCLA, one hopes, will be on the front lines as it moves toward its half-century anniversary.

NOTES

1. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 11 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), 275.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 388–89, 275.

4. For a full account of early textbook treatments of Native Americans and European-Indian relations see my “The Concept of Historical Inevitability in the History of European-Indian Relations,” in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 267–91.

5. David Saville Muzzey, *An American History* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1911), 25, 23; David Saville Muzzey, *History of the American People* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1927), 2. In his *American History for Colleges* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1943), Muzzey began to incorporate material on Native Americans. He touched briefly on the Bering land-bridge migration and the fur trade. His tone also changed. He wrote of Europeans as “invaders of their [Indian] lands,” of “Indian atrocities . . . in revenge for the treatment they received from the white man who regarded them as devils to be exterminated,” and of the “merciless” treatment of Indians that “forms a rather disgraceful chapter in our history” (23–25).

6. Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 7, 20, 38–39.

7. John Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 10.

8. Two recent schoolbooks that begin with “The First Americans” are Herman Viola, *Why We Remember: United States History through Reconstruction* (Menlo Park, CA: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1997); and Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, and James McPherson, *The American Journey* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997). Both of these books give limited space to American Indian history after the first chapter, but they do not plant in the minds of schoolchildren a story of inevitable clashes between civilized and savage peoples. My own *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*, first published in 1974 and now in its sixth edition, tried—with some success—to dismantle the reigning paradigm concerning Native American history and European-Indian relations.

9. *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Committee Reports* (Washington, DC: National Parks Conservation Association, 2009), n.p.