

From Spirit to Machine: American Expansion and the Dispossession of the Native Americans

By Alan Kyle

American expansion westward is undoubtedly one of the most controversial times in United States history. By examining the details of certain historical events during this time, the morally questionable practice and policy that occurred is justified by various factors; the role of ideology, struggle for resources, propaganda, and myth all played a major part in the subjugation of the indigenous population. Given these factors, the question of how it is that the Indians were subjugated rather than integrated can be answered.

For the tribes that did assimilate to Euro-American ways, expansionist forces targeted those tribes for relocation due to the fact that their adoption of intensive agriculture made them competitors for land. Apart from competition over the land, another reason why Indians could not be integrated into American society was because of conflicting ideals. The Indians had a naturalistic approach to their way of life, such as prayer to animal spirits and the belief in a great spirit chief that rules and cares for the land. They had no system of land ownership, so when asked to sell or move from their ancestral lands, the Indians responded with resistance. Thunder Traveling Over The Mountains, also known as Young Joseph, describes his father Joseph Senior's last words, "My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother."¹ The Native Americans were so invested in the land they occupied that when confronted by outer forces it led to one of the bloodiest times in American history.

The contemporary US ideology was of bringing modern advancement and all that is morally good to the West. This meant bringing their perceived superior qualities such as bureaucracy and modern political practice. As it turns out, bureaucracy was a great enabler for debasing the Indian way of life.

In the case of General Miles, whom some say was a sympathizer, he promised the persecuted Nez Perce at Bear Paw that they could go back home to the Pacific Northwest if they surrendered.² About being told that Miles's promise could not be kept, Joseph said: "I believe General Miles would have kept his word if he could have done so. I do not blame him for what we have suffered since the surrender. I do not know who is to blame."³ Whether General Miles had good intentions for the Indians or not does not matter, Miles was forced to adhere to his chain of command and so it was that the dispossession continued.

The ability for different political actors to negotiate independently with the Native Americans caused much confusion and even separation, as noted with the Nez Perce splintering into treaty and non-treaty groups due to differences in interpretation of American negotiations. Young Joseph gives his own view of American bureaucracy when he states, "Other law chiefs came to see me and said they would help me to get a healthy country. I did not know who to believe. The white people have too many chiefs. They do not understand each other. They do not all talk alike."⁴ This American dynamic of selective

deal-making also turned out to be useful in coercing Indian tribes to turn against their own beliefs.

When the Nez Perce were being chased to Canada in what is known as Joseph's retreat (May 1877), they stopped by the northern Crow territory looking for help but were turned away. The Crow were presumably friends with the Nez Perce but years of trading with white men had encouraged the Crow to be more interested in the benefits of trade supported agrarianism. Another example of US impact on inter-Indian relations is in the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1851), where the intention of the US was to make peace between feuding local tribes to insure accountability and safe passage through the Black Hills. Feuding tribes included the Kiowa, Crow, and Sioux. In negotiations, however, the dominant presence were the Sioux (through threats and violent means), and so the Black Hills were subsequently labeled Sioux territory. Historian Richard White states, "it is ethnocentric history to contend that Fort Laramie treaty allowed the Americans to divide and conquer. Fundamentally divided at the time of the treaty, the plains tribes continued so afterward."⁵ While it would be biased to say the Americans set up the treaty specifically to divide and conquer, the original intention of the treaty was indeed out of self-interest. The result of the treaty marked the highest point of Sioux political power that would give them the confidence to fight war with the Americans years later.

While the American settlers had an obvious impact on the Indians during western expansion, the indigenous population underwent large changes long before the US began its mission west. In the late fifteenth century, the Columbian exchange, in which natives traded with the newcomers, marked the beginning of change in the new world. One important trade was the exchange of horses. Horses allowed tribes to be more mobile, making them more dynamic in war and able to follow animal populations. One of the most prominent tribes to adopt equestrianism were the Comanche of the southern plain. The introduction of horses made the Comanche immensely powerful among other tribes and able to easily raid and hunt bison. To support their growing herds, the Comanche needed reliable access to grass and water. In 1723 they invaded Apache land from the river valleys where crucial resources were available year-round.⁶ The adoption of equestrianism by the select tribes that could support horse populations (Sioux, Lakota, Comanche) is what set them on the path of greatest conflict with the US. By the time the Americans arrived, these horse tribes naturally went to battle over the lands resources. This narrative of inter-native conflict dismisses the contemporary and historical myths that Indians fought with the US for reasons other than their own self-preservation.

Myths and propaganda were extremely useful in American expansion on the Great Plains. One major enabler for US expansion was the belief that expansion was good for all. By perpetuating its righteousness as the superior race and superior way of life, the US could continue its subversion of the Indians. It is the idea of Manifest Destiny that outlines America's duty to move west and bring civilization. This idea is supported by John Locke's 1689 Treatise on Government, where he writes that citizens can "establish private property rights by improving the market value of common, uncultivated lands."⁷ The settlers held the belief that the Indian land was not being put to good use and saw it their mission to show them right. Any failure to learn their ways only sped up the Indians' inevitable fate. The lies propagated by the media at the time gave the settlers comfort at the sight of this dying race and a sense of righteousness as they continued west. In the end the ultimate cause of Indians vanishing, was the belief in Indians vanishing.⁸

The United States westward expansion can be summed up into a general dynamic of deception, competition, and idealism. The spread of rampant misinformation stemmed from a disagreement of ideals that often culminated in violence. Underlying precursors of equestrianism and struggle for resources shaped later interactions with the Americans. The introduction of a mechanized bureaucracy into the spirit-led plains brought about confusion and deception. It is with these characteristics that the US was able to take the West.

Notes

¹ Chief Joseph, "An Indian's View of Indian Affairs," *North American Review* 128, no. 269 (April 1879): 418.

² Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, "Dynamics of Expansion" Lecture, Merced, CA, January 28, 2014.

³ Chief Joseph, "An Indian's View," 429.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁵ 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 (December 1978): 340.

⁶ Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures," *The Journal of American History, Organization of American Historians* 90, no. 3 (January 2003): 837.

⁷ Wolfe-Hunnicut, "Dynamics of Expansion."

⁸ *Ibid.*