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## WHITE NATIONALISM AND NATIVE CULTURES

David C. Stineback

To accept responsibility on the basis of race for the actions of predatory members of one's own group is as nonsensical as it is for members of an exploited group to accept responsibility on a racial basis for the ignorance or defenselessness of those who were exploited. *The American Indian, the white man, the Asian, the African, and the American Negro*, in whose name so many passionate speeches are being made, never did anything—neither inflicted nor suffered wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in the suffering-Indian, wicked white-man interpretation is the proposition that the American aborigine could have survived . . . As a moral injunction the idea takes on certain pristine clarity but it says little about the interplay of culture. Without drifting into the bog of historical inevitability, it must be said that any rearrangement of the forces of Indian-white relations in the early period does little to improve the native's chances.<sup>2</sup>

It is curious that scholars who are trained to take great pains to understand the thoughts and motives of non-western peoples are often the least willing to understand people of their own culture who happen to hold views different from their own.<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to understand Native American history from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries without confronting the ambiguities of white American nationalism. Historically, this nationalism has comprised two essentials: a tolerant conviction, based on the Old Testament, that all men and all races sprang from the same original parents; and an intolerant conviction that any acknowledgment of racial unity must be accompanied by total social conversion to white American culture. Both attitudes—theoretical racial acceptance and complete "Anglo-conformity"<sup>4</sup>—have been important facets of American Indian policy for the past four hundred years.

In these two centuries that policy has been indebted more to the New England Puritans than to any other group of European colonists. Contrary to the assertion of Gary Nash, the Puritans did not "have a special tendency . . . to regard the Indian as unreconstructable savages."<sup>5</sup> Precisely because Indians were considered by the Puritans to be in the clutches of Satan, they were defined as reconstructable. If one believed that Indians were

hopeless agents of Satan, then one was demeaning God's ability to do what he wished with the Devil; and Reformation theology made it clear that Satan had no control over God.<sup>6</sup> The conversion of Indians to Christian living, in all its social, economic, and religious aspects (which puritans complacently assumed would occur without any missionary effort on their part), would be evidence that God was keeping Satan in his place.<sup>7</sup>

How, then, do we explain the Puritans' wars of extermination against the natives in 1637 and 1675? Surely these wars contradict their faith in the reconstructability of Indians: a dead man, after all, cannot be converted. Puritans justified their preemptive attacks on Indian villages by arguing, sincerely, that the failure of Indians to convert automatically to Christianity without a missionary effort (much less with one, after 1646) was a clear indication that God had a new purpose for the heathen in allowing them to remain in Satan's grasp. Why, Puritan leaders asked, would He do that?

They found the answer in their own sense of communal destiny as the Lord's favorites, chosen by Him to build a New Jerusalem in the wilderness of North America. God, they decided, had permitted the Indians to resist the Puritan example because Puritan virtue was weakening and needed correction. Through the opposition of natives to Christian conversion and the sale of their lands, God would chastise Puritan sinfulness and provoke Puritan righteousness; in so doing, He would, in the words of John Cotton, "commission" a "lawful war" against the enemies of Puritanism.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Indians were being used by God to stimulate Puritans into asserting their own virtue by killing Indians. Whether the natives of New England converted to Christianity or died in a war of extermination, God was wresting them from Satan's control.<sup>9</sup>

Such convoluted logic could survive only among people with a strong sense of divine election. In the minds of New England Puritans, God had made a covenant with them—and only with them—as a group, which complemented the covenant of works He originally made with Adam as an individual and the Covenant of Grace He later made with all men through Christ. That third, "federal" covenant led Puritans to the conviction that Indians, as descendants of Adam, were worth conversion, but also that Indians, as agents of Satan and handmaidens of God, were occasionally worth exterminating.

The frightening ambivalence of this attitude also characterized American Indian policy in the

nineteenth century. As Thomas Jefferson's principle of voluntary assimilation of natives gave way to the practical pressures of "Manifest Destiny," Indians were presented with the choice described by a Chickasaw negotiator in 1826: (1) losing a homeland, or (2) "losing our name and language."<sup>10</sup> Neither option countenanced a continuity of native life and culture; and both required Indians to view themselves as undeserving of the status quo. Such a choice, if it can realistically be called that, had been the implicit offer of Puritanism to the native tribes of southern New England prior to 1636.

Beginning in 1830, however, most notably with the publication of an article by Lewis Cass, in the liberal *North American Review*, entitled "Removal of the Indians," nineteenth-century American Indian policy had begun to change in the direction that Puritan policy had changed after 1636, toward an insistence that Indians were inherently *incapable* of converting themselves into good Christian citizens. The Puritans had argued that God chose to permit Indian hostility to conversion in order to remind Puritans of their own backsliding and to give them an opportunity to redeem themselves by killing those Indians. The simpler nineteenth-century version of this theory was first given widespread expression in Cass's assertion that Indians

have resisted, and successfully too, every effort to meliorate their situation, or to introduce among them the most common arts of life. Their moral and their intellectual condition have been equally stationary. And in the whole circle of their existence, it would be difficult to point to a single advantage which they have derived from their acquaintance with the Europeans. All this is without parallel in the history of the world. That it is not to be attributed to the indifference of neglect of the whites, we have already shown. There must then be an inherent difficulty, arising from the institutions, character, and condition of the Indians themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Cass had been Governor of Michigan Territory since 1815 and, following the article's publication, became Andrew Jackson's Secretary of War, in charge of presenting the options described above to the southern Indian tribes once the Removal Bill of 1830 had been passed. He was a self-proclaimed authority on Indian culture and a patron of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's early ethnological investigations of the Chippewa in what is now Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Though a constant critic of James Fenimore Cooper's occasionally noble Indians, Cass had gained a reputation by 1830, through shrewd treaty negotiations

and eastern publications, as a knowledgeable friend of Native Americans.

The complacent fatalism of his statement about the "inherent difficulty" arising from Indian "character" not only reappears in Schoolcraft's seminal work on Chippewa ethnology, *Algonic Researches* (1839), but dominates the final scenes of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's extremely popular "Song of Hiawatha" (1855), which was itself influenced by Schoolcraft's research.<sup>12</sup> At the end of that epic poem, long taken as a model expression of noble savagery, Longfellow's hero has a vision of the Indians' hopeless future in America:

I beheld, too, in that vision  
All the secrets of the future,  
Of the distant days that shall be.  
I beheld the westward marches  
Of the unknown, crowded nations.  
All the land was full of people,  
Restless, struggling, toiling, striving,  
Speaking many tongues, yet feeling  
But one heart-beat in their bosoms.  
In the woodlands rang their axes,  
Smoked their towns in all the valleys,  
Over all the lakes and rivers  
Rushed their great canoes of thunder.

Then a darker, drearier vision  
Passed before me, vague and cloud-like:  
I beheld our nation scattered,  
All forgetful of my counsels,  
Weakened, warring with each other;  
Saw the remnants of our people  
Sweeping westward, wild and woful,  
Like the cloud-rack of a tempest,  
Like the withered leaves of Autumn!<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact that Longfellow, throughout the poem, had recorded the technological advances of all Indians under the leadership of Hiawatha prior to the coming of the white man, his conclusion is that American Indians, through some inherent vice and disloyalty (both undemonstrated in the poem), have no place in human history. The real sin of Longfellow's Indians, however, lies not in a demonstrable lack of unity or disobedience to Hiawatha, but in their ultimate resistance to the white man on his march westward, an act of pride that Longfellow could not bring himself to show. If he had done so, then American Indians might have seemed real in 1855, not mythical figures of a distant past.

The views of Cass, Schoolcraft, and Longfellow—all men with reputations of concern for Indians—reflect the same aversion to the idea of natives having a capacity for rational self-determination that is found in the Puritan theory of God's using Indians to punish Puritans. In the more secular nineteenth century, such thinking had no scriptural logic to support it. Thus Indian resistance to

the loss of culture and land was viewed fundamentally in racial terms: as a simple defect of character rather than as a purposeful manipulation of one's enemies by a just God. What had been a form of *de facto* racism in Puritan hands became a conviction of unmitigated racial inferiority in the minds of men like George Armstrong Custer, who insisted that Indians were "a race incapable of being judged by the rules or laws applicable to any other known race of men," since they had manifested "from time immemorial" a hostility to white men "inbred with the Indian character." If one views Indians as racially opposed to whites, not vice versa, then their extermination is not difficult to justify, as Custer demonstrates in his autobiography.<sup>14</sup>

Nowhere is this assumption of racial intractability more glaringly apparent than in the debates over whether or not to impose the General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887 on American Indians. As Loring Benson Priest has pointed out, the very unwillingness of tribes to have their lands allotted was taken by Washington politicians as a sign of their hopelessly stubborn nature and presented as grounds for coercion. References to the "inveterate obstinacy" of natives and the rock-like, as opposed to "plastic" or "elastic," nature of their race highlighted the congressional debates over allotment.<sup>15</sup> One Indian agent's statement on the question was accurate enough: "the truth is the Indians hate the white man's life in their hearts, and will not adopt it until driven by necessity." The agent was defining "hearts" as instinct and assuming that adoption was necessary.<sup>16</sup> Today, in retrospect, it is easier to see that allotment was an expression of the problem, not a solution to it, and thus *increased* the native hatred of white society.<sup>17</sup>

The Puritans and nineteenth-century Washington politicians had this in common: they could not accept the idea that Indians, for logical reasons, would not want to live as white men did. As a consequence, the whites were driven to interpret native resistance as an extra-human phenomenon, whether an act of God or an expression of innate, genetic savagery. And this conclusion was possible, finally, only because white American society viewed itself as coexistent with Culture. Such a sense of national destiny has been an indication, in the words of Vine Deloria, Jr., of "the utter failure of white society to comprehend the nature and meaning of culture."<sup>18</sup>

The first two epigraphs that begin this essay bring us to the question of how we, in 1976, ought to respond to the prolonged evidence of white

American society's refusal to grant Indian cultures minds of their own and of the genocidal tendencies that inevitably arise from such a refusal. If we cannot naively argue, as did Custer, that Indians were obsessive in their violence toward whites yet somehow "unprovoked" in doing so,<sup>19</sup> should we instead—if we are white Americans—shoulder the guilt of our ancestors merely because they were our ancestors? Margaret Mead says no and implies that we needn't consider any response other than guilt or innocence. And Bernard Sheehan concludes that the assumption of white responsibility, especially now, is a pointless condolence for tragic events that could not have occurred otherwise. Both are surely right in this sense: feelings of guilt for the past behavior of others accomplish little, and experiences that increase our guilt (such as the movie *Little Big Man*) ultimately make us feel better, not worse, about ourselves.

Perhaps, however, there is a third emotional alternative beyond vicarious guilt and belligerent innocence—a sense of cultural shame that can make us feel somewhat *better* about the past and somewhat *worse* about ourselves. That feeling will result, Bruce Trigger suggests in the third epigraph, if we look at both sides of the white-Indian conflict in America and realize that we would have acted, in all likelihood, exactly as they did in their circumstances.<sup>20</sup> We would have done evil things and suffered when they were done to us. In the process of experiencing shame rather than guilt or innocence, we will discover that we are not better people, not more enlightened, than our forefathers. (Surely the experience of native peoples in Alaska in the last ten years means no less than that.) How many of us, even today, can accept the idea that Native Americans have good reasons not to want to be full-fledged members of white American society? Do we not still assume, for the most part, that those Indians who are not functioning within the mainstream of American culture must not be able to do so?

## NOTES

1. Margaret Mead, *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (New York: Capricorn, 1966), p. x.
2. Bernard W. Sheehan, "Indian-White Relations in Early America: A Review Essay," *William and Mary Quarterly* 26 (October 1969):283.
3. Bruce G. Trigger, "The Jesuits and the Fur Trade," *Ethnohistory* 12 (Winter 1965):50.
4. See Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford, 1964), chap. 4, for an elaboration of this term, particularly pp. 103-05. For one of the earliest and most impassioned indications of

- white American nationalism, see the Puritan missionary tracts on converting Indians in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d ser., vol. 4 (1834).
5. Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 87.
  6. The most vivid presentation of the Reformation God's "sufferance" of Satan is found in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merritt Hughes (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), bks. 1-3.
  7. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston, 1853), 1:384, 386; *John Cotton on the Churches of New England*, ed. Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 279; *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser., 4 (1834):15, 21, 30, 38-41, 55, 75.
  8. John Cotton, "Gods Promise to His Plantations," *Old South Leaflets*, no. 53 (1896), pp. 5-6.
  9. For a general understanding of the Puritans' self-image as God's Chosen People in New England, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, from Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 19-26, and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 72-108. For a further exploration of this idea and the meaning it attributes to native resistance, see Roy Harvey Pearce, "The 'Ruines of Mankind': The Indian and the Puritan Mind," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (January 1952): 200-217, and *Savagism and Civilization* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 19-35.
  10. *American State Papers. Indian Affairs* (Washington, D.C., 1834), 2:722. The greatest of the "pressures" was the Louisiana Purchase, negotiated in 1803 by Jefferson's own agents.
  11. Lewis Cass, "Removal of the Indians," *North American Review* 30 (1830):72-73.
  12. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Algic Researches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839), pp. 34-35. Despite his own racist fatalism, Schoolcraft was for his day a liberal anthropologist. For a discussion of the more conservative "American School" of ethnology that popularized the concept of "polygenesis" (separate creations of individual races), see Reginald Horsman, "Scientific Racism and the American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *American Quarterly* 27 (May 1975):152-68. See also Linda K. Kerber, "The Abolitionist Perception of the Indian," *The Journal of American History* 62 (September 1975):288-89.
  13. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), p. 216.
  14. George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 24, 320, 336.
  15. Loring Benson Priest, "The Congressional Decision to Use Force," in Richard N. Ellis, ed., *The Western American Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 119-33, especially 121-22 and 127-33.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
  17. Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Assault on Indian Tribalism: The General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1975), pp. 28-31; Philip Borden, "Found Cumbering the Soil: Manifest Destiny and the Indian in the Nineteenth Century," in Gary B. Nash and Richard Weiss, eds., *The Great Fear: Race in the Mind of America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 96-97.
  18. Vine Deloria, Jr., ed., *Of Utmost Good Faith* (New York: Bantam, 1972), pp. 141-42.
  19. Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, pp. 29-30, 93, 109, 359.
  20. Indeed, they would have acted as we have recently toward natives in Alaska. The best source for complete data surrounding the Alaska Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971 is Michael Dorris, Chairman, Native American Studies Program, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.Y. 03755.