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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nt557fz>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 41(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2017-09-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.41.4.johansen

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Donald Trump, Andrew Jackson, *Lebensraum*, and Manifest Destiny

Bruce E. Johansen

ANDREW JACKSON AND DONALD TRUMP: PAST AS PROLOGUE

One of President Donald J. Trump's first interior decorating decisions in the Oval Office was to install a large portrait of Andrew Jackson, who served as the United States' seventh president between 1829 and 1837. The portrait became a familiar background fixture in photos of President Trump showing off his executive orders for the press. Formerly a no-nonsense Army general, Jackson led an insurgency of frontier farmers, miners, and traders (the "forgotten men" of the 1820s) to political victory against the East Coast elites supporting former president John Quincy Adams. Jackson had a temper and was generally intolerant of contrary opinion; he was accustomed to issuing orders, not seeking consensus. Jackson provided the Democratic Party with its iconic donkey, co-opting it after an opponent called him a "jackass."

Also a self-made millionaire (a multimillionaire in today's terms), Jackson profited by trading in the two most valuable commodities of his preindustrial time: real estate and human beings. Jackson's main campaign pledge was his deportation policy, called "Removal," which forced southeastern Native American peoples and others to march westward to "Indian Territory," now Oklahoma. Among many such forced marches, the best-known involved approximately 16,000 Cherokees, roughly a quarter of whom died on the trail. An equal number died of starvation and disease within two years of

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arrival in what was to them a foreign land. Men, women, and children were deprived of sufficient food, clothing, and shelter, and they died by the thousands.

Jackson had an inflated self-image, imagining himself as a friend of the Native peoples he was forcing into exile. Removal was an act of paternal kindness and certainly preferable to extermination, Jackson argued. In today's language, Jackson employed "alternative facts," and his "base," whose members stood to receive the lands that had belonged to the Native peoples, supported him fervently. "The safety and comfort of our citizens have been greatly promoted by their removal," he said. "The remnant of that ill-fated race has been at length beyond the reach of injury or oppression.... The paternal care of the Government will thereafter watch over them and protect them."¹ Jackson imagined an idyllic post-Removal life: "Your father has provided a country large enough for all of you. There your white brother will not trouble you. They will have no claim to the land, and you can live upon it, you and all of your children, as long as the grass grows, or the water runs, in peace and plenty. It will be yours forever."²

Jackson's racism is raw to our ears—no "political correctness" here. He also proclaimed that Native peoples were incapable of civilization, saying, "What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms ... filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion? The policy [of Removal] is not only liberal, but generous."³ President Jackson told American Indians that Removal would benefit them, a mighty application of ideological spin that rhetorically deploys what Jason Edward Black has called "the language of care."⁴

The Cherokees did not relinquish their homeland without opposition. When they sued the state of Georgia in the US Supreme Court, founding chief justice John Marshall's majority opinion largely upheld their position, which President Jackson then ignored. A constitutional scholar might argue that Jackson had engaged in contempt of the Supreme Court, an impeachable high crime or misdemeanor. Jackson, however, was no stickler for constitutional fine points. While there is no contemporary evidence that Jackson actually said, "The chief justice has rendered his decision, now let him enforce it," the outcome was the same. Despite considerable opposition to his defiance of the Supreme Court, Jackson was not impeached by the House of Representatives.

As today, the United States was deeply divided during the 1830s. One of the most divisive issues, especially among Jackson's southern base, was states' rights. When Jackson ignored the US Supreme Court in the Cherokee case, he was taking the side of the state of Georgia, which sought to seize Native peoples' land and give it away to non-Indians in a lottery. Had Jackson sided with the Marshall court's ruling in favor of the Cherokees, the Civil War might have ignited in the 1830s instead of the early 1860s. If today many Anglo-Americans still celebrate "Old Hickory" as the original Democrat who broadened participation in the political system, many Native Americans regard him as the author of a barbaric policy that victimized their ancestors.⁵

TRUMP, MANIFEST DESTINY, AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Throughout its history, the United States of America has displayed a powerful sense of its own special mission, a “manifest destiny” to bring its political system and economy to other peoples. This attitude has become institutionalized in United States foreign policy from the days of Andrew Jackson and his advocacy of American Indian Removal to Donald Trump’s sense of American exceptionalism. Today, the United States exercises its sense of nationalism through a network of more than one hundred military bases around the world. In terms of its language, culture, and military reach, it is the largest empire in human history. Domestically, the engines of nationalism have maintained these similar ideological attributes from the days of Jackson’s presidency. As president, Trump has chosen, every time he walks into the Oval Office, to look at the face of a man as preoccupied with Native peoples’ Removal as Trump has been with his own attempts to screen out Muslims and build a “great, great wall” along the United States’ border with Mexico.

The term *manifest destiny*, first coined by John O’Sullivan in the mid-nineteenth century, expressed a nationalist assumption believed by many Euro-Americans of the time that they were a divinely chosen race, and because they were so virtuous, the Americas were their God-bestowed promised lands. It is important to note that manifest destiny did not evoke a single date, destination, or event *per se*, but was a general ideology that had been present as part of the European westward movement from the first landfall of Columbus 1492 onward. While many Euro-Americans subscribed to this set of beliefs, it would be simplistic to accept that (1) all assumed that God had sanctioned colonization and subjugation; or (2) all Americans were staunchly, zealously, religious enough to buy into this. A reading of Walt Whitman, for example, poses almost a mirror-image. Despite some resistance, American Indians suffered greatly, and their population declined from bullets and disease as they lost all but a tiny fraction of their pre-1492 land base, together with languages and other attributes of culture.

In *Sharp Knife: Andrew Jackson and the American Indians*, Alfred Cave offers a full-frontal portrait of Jackson’s mind as, like Trump, he asserts that he will “Make America Great Again.”⁶ In exploring whether Jackson implemented “genocide,” Cave finds that the argument is largely semantic. The term *genocide* itself was not invented until many generations after Jackson and the many trails of tears. Defined after World War II, genocide law requires stated intent—such as Hitler’s vow to wipe out the Jews and others—which is absent in Jackson’s case. Regardless of legal definitions, the toll in human death and suffering was monumental, but not final. Native peoples survived, revived, and recovered.

THE NAZIS’ MANIFEST DESTINY

Jackson told non-Native Americans that Removal would benefit Native Americans. At the same time, Jackson told America that Removal would light the lamp of civilization. A century later, as Adolf Hitler set out to remove Slavs, Jews, and other non-Aryans from Europe, he paraphrased Jackson. Hitler’s political ideology is one of several that

John Mohawk examines as motors of oppression. In a masterfully written, wide-ranging historical account, Mohawk analyzes why utopian dreams so often turn into searing, nasty realities, writing, “Nazism was a revitalization movement, complete with its own vision of utopia, its rationalizations for conquest and plunder, and an ability to disarm ordinary people’s sense of morality and to plunge an entire nation ... into an orgy of violence and murder.”⁷

Some may find it far-fetched to cite Hitler’s writings in an American context. To seriously consider such parallels is, at the very least, painful for Americans’ self-image, especially considering that the United States went to war to *defeat* Nazism. Why, then, should we pull out the Nazi “card?” The comparison is necessary because it springs from Hitler’s own writings: Hitler subscribed to his own form of manifest destiny. Indeed, describing how Hitler compared the twentieth-century German thrust eastward across Europe to United States expansion westward during the nineteenth century, Yale historian Timothy Snyder writes, “The East was the Nazi Manifest Destiny.”⁸ If Hitler phrased his policy as *lebensraum*—literally “living room,” or territory into which to expand, in 1839 John O’Sullivan had framed American policy as “Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁹ Snyder notes that, “In Hitler’s view, ‘in the East, a similar process will repeat itself for a second time, as in the conquest of America.’”¹⁰

Although Hitler wrote with self-justifying simplicity and did not recognize the complexity of the history he examined, his statements should be examined nonetheless. As Hitler imagined the future, Germany would deal with the Slavs much as the North Americans had dealt with the American Indians. Hitler, as he went about killing the Jews, was supposed to have said: “Who, after all, speaks of the Armenians?” But it was the world’s proven indifference to the fate of the Apaches that gave him the confidence that he would get away with it.¹¹ Hitler himself said that the Volga River, in Russia, would become Germany’s Mississippi River.¹²

Additionally—given that Jim Crow laws were in place in the United States at the same time as the Nazi doctrine evolved and shaped the Nuremberg Laws, the centerpiece anti-Jewish legislation of the Nazi regime—in *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, James Q. Whitman has recently made the case that United States racial laws provided a blueprint for Nazi Germany. According to the publisher of Whitman’s monograph, “Whitman demonstrates that the Nazis took a real, sustained, significant, and revealing interest in American race policies,”¹³ while a reviewer of *Hitler’s American Model* wrote, “In spite of the Nazis’ disdain, to put it mildly, for our stated and evident liberal and democratic principles, they eagerly looked to the United States as the prime example for their own goals of protecting the blood, restricting citizenship, and banning mixed marriages.”¹⁴

As Whitman’s own summary explains,

The Nuremberg Laws were crafted in an atmosphere of considerable attention to the precedents American race laws had to offer. German praise for American practices, already found in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, was continuous throughout the early 1930s, and the most radical Nazi lawyers were eager advocates of the use of

American models. But while Jim Crow segregation was one aspect of American law that appealed to Nazi radicals, it was not the most consequential one. Rather, both American citizenship and anti-miscegenation laws proved directly relevant to the two principal Nuremberg Laws—the Citizenship Law and the Blood Law. Whitman looks at the ultimate, ugly irony that when Nazis rejected American practices, it was sometimes not because they found them too enlightened, but too harsh.¹⁵

In 1928, within two generations after the massacre at Wounded Knee closed the frontier (1890), Whitman finds Hitler admiring how the Americans had “gunned down the millions of Redskins to a few hundred thousand, and now keep the modest remnant under observation in a cage.”¹⁶ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described the United States as nothing less than “the one state” that has made progress toward the creation of a “healthy” racist order worthy of emulation in Germany’s own Nuremberg laws.¹⁷ Roland Freisler, who was known as the “hanging judge” of the National Socialist Peoples Court, said that as a model United States jurisprudence would “suit us perfectly.”¹⁸

“Awful it may be to contemplate, but the reality is that the Nazis took a sustained, significant, and perhaps even eager interest in the American example in race law,” observes Whitman, even as the United States constituted their “classic example.”¹⁹ For example, mass-circulation Nazi magazines carried detailed articles describing US miscegenation laws forbidding mixed-race marriage and intercourse, state by state, with maps. Some of the same magazines endorsed lynching of blacks to limit their population, as “the natural resistance of the *Volk* to an alien race that is attempting to gain the upper hand.” Nazi authors drew parallels between the United States’ “Negro problem” and its “Jewish problem,” and, rather commonly, the Ku Klux Klan was recognized as “the fascists of America.”²⁰ The *National Socialist Handbook on Law and Legislation* closed a chapter describing how to build a racially based state with a salute to the United States, alone in the world as the one nation that had achieved the “fundamental recognition” of racism’s “truths.”²¹

Whitman argues that the United States offered “the model of miscegenation legislation,” with thirty states legally forbidding interracial marriage and other forms of sexual liaison.²² Very few other societies criminalized interracial marriage. The United States, in various jurisdictions, not only deemed such acts a crime, but required prison terms as long as ten years. German jurists became eager students of the United States’ racial-sexual landscape through the studies of Heinrich Krieger, a young Nazi lawyer who assembled a compendium of US miscegenation laws by state that later was published in the *National Socialist Handbook on Law and Legislation*. In 1933–1934 Krieger spent two semesters as an exchange student at the University of Arkansas School of Law. Whitman develops this connection, which includes a detailed description of Krieger’s book *Race Law in the United States* and its influence on Nazi jurists as they formulated a new German legal code.²³

Hitler was attentive to American sports as well as its frontier history. According to a 1942 psychological profile of Hitler assembled by the Office for Strategic Services

(one of the forerunners of the Central Intelligence Agency), Hitler was a fan of American football, and had newsreels of games imported. Although popular imagination indicates that he borrowed his *sieg heil* salute from Mussolini's fascists, Hitler actually cadged it from American college football cheerleaders. According to a report in the London *Guardian*,

The profile relies heavily on the personal observations of one of Hitler's best friends in the 1920s, Ernst Hanfstaengl, whom the future Führer knew as "Putzi." Hanfstaengl observed in 1923 that 'He adored American football marches and college songs. The "Sieg Heil!" used in all political rallies is a direct copy of the technique used by American football cheerleaders. American college . . . music was used to excite the German masses who had been used to very dry-as-dust political lectures.²⁴

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Having traced some of the historical roots of President Trump's authoritarian tendencies and Hitler's admiration of the United States' westward expansion and its oppression of Native and African Americans, it is proper to step back, reflect, and indulge in some self-doubt. It is, after all, the liberal democratic sense of systemic self-doubt and contradiction that prevents the United States from slipping into the vise of totalitarianism that characterized Nazi Germany. We can give thanks that our Constitution stands, with its Bill of Rights—adopted after its author, Thomas Jefferson (a plantation and slave owner) wrote that if he had to decide between a government without newspapers and newspapers without a government, he would choose the latter. We in the United States thus draw inspiration from dissent, which stands in contrast to the blind obedience implied by the Nazis' totalitarianism.

Hitler cites United States history absolutely without nuance to support his own point of view. Even during the often-brutal nineteenth century, for example, the heyday of manifest destiny, the Ponca chief Standing Bear, whose dwindling cohort endured two forced marches from their homelands in Northern Nebraska to Indian Territory, brought a case in the United States District Court in Omaha with the aid of a US frontier general, George Crook, and in 1879 won the right to be treated under US law as a human being. So, yes, the United States has always displayed a fascist streak, one that Trump has inflamed. But, no, it likely will not grow in American soil. A solid majority of Americans adamantly oppose fascism, a state of mind to which Native American precedents have contributed as long as Europeans have been resident on Turtle Island.

Thomas Ingersoll has argued that Jackson's Removal policy sprang from fear that continued presence of substantial Native American peoples in the East would produce a truly alternative mixed society—the same sort of future that Jefferson celebrated.²⁵ Thus, Native peoples were "removed." The same competing pressures are evident in the United States today, as Trump plays the fears of his base against the "rainbow nation" that is flowering in many urban areas, which embraces racial and gender diversity and

equity. Without Native American matriarchal examples, for example, we might not be witnessing, in our own time, a surge of female resistance to male sexual misconduct, which to date has claimed the careers of such luminaries as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, and Bill O'Reilly, among many others. The same narrative hovers in the background of President Trump's biography, via accusations by a dozen women of unwanted kisses, crotch-grabbing, and breast-groping, a chronicle of creepiness that has yet to be fully documented.

What are the ramifications to the field of American Indian studies of the rise of white nationalism and Trump's rhetoric on American Indians? Any serious student of Native American history and culture knows only too well that indigenous peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere have suffered for more than 500 years from self-perceived European exceptionalism. Its roots precede President Andrew Jackson, reaching, in the case of the English, to the first arrivals in an area they renamed, with a singular lack of originality, "New England." When I began study of this history as a PhD student at the University of Washington during the 1970s, my only option in the History Department had a built-in bias: history of the "westward movement." I did not have to ask who was moving, or where.

In nearly fifty years, some things have changed, with far-sighted leadership from elders (Vine Deloria, Jr. comes to mind, but he was not alone). The number of Native professors and students has expanded, and Native American studies programs—even departments and majors—have grown in number. In this context, we must understand the "whitelash" behind Trump as a reaction to fundamental changes that have been shared by many people in academia (and elsewhere). The reaction has taken the form of a coup inside the shell of a hollowed-out US Constitution, aided by gerrymandering and voter suppression. Trump did not "win" the election; he lost it by almost three million votes. This was not a mandate, and it will not endure.

On a longer timeline, American culture and society generally has come to respect Native values—gender equity, sexual fluidity, ecological points of view, government by consensus, and the value of alliances. All of this is part of a changing paradigm that in 1952 Felix Cohen called "The Americanization of the white man."²⁶ Native peoples have been experiencing a renewal of languages and cultures as well. These changes will continue. Racism—the separation of people based solely on skin color and ethnic heritage—is a European import.

Changing such assumptions is never easy. Let me close with a quote from Frederick Douglass, during the 1850s, when the wounds of racism were much more evident than today:

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.²⁷

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