

## **Ethnic Minorities: Native Americans and their Identity Crisis**

*Etnikai kisebbségek: Amerikai indiánok identitásválsága*

BRIAN VOGL

Erasmus student (USA)

There are presently around 3 million Native Americans living in the United States today, which accounts for approximately 0.9% of America's population. They live mostly on reservations, which are known to be some of the worst locations of realty in the country. Native Americans have a long history of war, genocide, and hate against them, and for that reason The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was founded. The BIA is a federally appointed government organization that looks out for American Indian rights.

The United States has only been called thus since the colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1775. However, before the colonies, the Americas were home to a native population that has occupied the greater territory for as long as 12,000 years. This population, though once many nations strong, now known simply as Native Americans, or American Indians, is one of the country's least populated minorities.

Today there are 564 federally recognized American Indian tribes, but it is speculated that there were once thousands more that were either entirely wiped out or cheated out of recognition. The most populated areas of the United States were on the Atlantic or Pacific coastlines. This is where the most prominent and powerful tribes built their cities, some hundreds of thousands strong, equipped with hereditary hierarchy, a policing system, and a military. These types of tribes prospered from systematic agricultural farming and fishing; the Indian diet was known to be greater than that of any European settlers. The majority of Native tribes were nomadic, consisting of anywhere between a dozen to a few hundred Indians. These were the types that use the infamous Indian "tipis," which were easy to set up and take down, much like a modern tent. They relied mainly on hunting for food and clothing, but constantly being on the move kept their numbers relatively low.

At the time of colonization, there are thought to have been ten to twelve million Native Americans within the current geographic boundaries of the United States, and their opinions of the white settlers varied by tribe. Some tribes saw a threat to their lands and attacked, while others welcomed the newcomers and helped them survive in the "New World." Jamestown, Virginia was the first successful English colony built in 1607 and it owes its success to the Natives. They had an immense knowledge of their surroundings, viewing the Earth as their mother and all living creatures within as their siblings. The Indians helped the Jamestown colonists survive by giving them food and protection from other hostile tribes and in return the colonists gave them iron and guns.

By the end of the century, the British had colonies along the entire eastern seaboard, and the French, Dutch, and Spanish had tapped into the colonial market as well. Relations between the Europeans and Native Americans were growing seemingly as both sides benefited from new trade. However, by the 1630's the colonists had become self-sufficient and did not need the Natives' food or protection. As more and more settlers moved in, the colonies expanded and disease took hold.

In 1633, the first Native case of the smallpox virus occurred in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Natives never had encountered the virus before and therefore had no immunities to it. The virus did not spread all at once but did eventually reach through the entire Americas killing eight to nine out of ten Native people. By 1662, virtually the entire Native population of the East Coast had been eliminated.

As the colonists moved and developed westward; disagreements of land ensued between colonial countries. Thus the French-Indian War (also called the Seven-Years War) began in 1754. Although the war was between the French and the British, the British still had many Native allies who fought alongside of them. The British, with the Indians' help, won the war and it was King George's orders to cease colonial advancement west of the Alleghenies, a section of the Appalachian Mountains, so the Natives could keep their land and remain Britain's faithful allies. This law is known as the Royal Proclamation of 1763. However, the law was not policed and settlers continued to move west.

As the colonists won their independence from England in 1783, their relations with the Natives had begun to dwindle. As some Natives were still upset with all of the land that had been taken from them, scarce instances of theft and murder occurred. Though rare, it became a popular opinion among the settlers, most of whom had never met a Native, that they are brutal savages. The United States at this point, still young, had not passed west of the Mississippi River. Most Natives in the Eastern area had died from disease or moved west, but still some tribes remained. This was until Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States and known for truly hating the Native population, implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830 stating that all Indian Tribes east of the Mississippi River were to be relocated to present-day Oklahoma. Though fighting with the Indians had stopped and all were living relatively peacefully for the time being, the "Five Civilized Tribes" Chippewa, Seminole, Cherokees, Creeks, and Chickasaws were moved by force hundreds of miles northwest in 1832. This became known as "The Trail of Tears" as thousands of Indians left their homes ill-prepared to march on foot. Approximately 4,000 Indians died on their way to America's first reservation, and many escaped into the mountains to continue living without the white man's knowledge or dictations.

This became a common occurrence as the new Americans moved westward. As the railroad phenomenon took infrastructure to a whole new level, the white Americans were expanding west faster than ever and the land was either taken by deceit or force. Then word spread of gold sightings from Colorado to

California and so began the Gold Rush. Thousands of settlers hurried towards the Pacific coast, but the Natives there had heard of the white man's atrocities and were better prepared. The Western Indian Wars ensued, mostly between the U.S. and the collaboration of the Cheyenne, Lakota, Sioux, and Arapaho. The United States military began attacking unsuspecting villages and encampments even when they are unarmed or have already surrendered. Such an instance was the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 where Colorado militia, an unofficial military regiment, attacked a Cheyenne and Arapaho camp that was waving the flag of truce, killing over 150 women and children. The tribes got together, and under the command of chief Black Kettle, started making successful raids on American settlements throughout Colorado and Nebraska. Four years passed before retaliation from the U.S. Military commenced as what is known as the Battle of Washita River. Washita River is located on a U.S. designated Indian Reservation, meaning that all Indians are legally allowed to be there. The infamous Commander Custer and his 7th Cavalry contingent attacked the encampment, again killing mostly women and children. Nearly a decade passed without any battles, but hostility never ceased.

In 1876, perhaps the most famous Indian battle of all time erupted called The Battle of Little Bighorn. Ten thousand Indians attacked Commander Custer and his cavalry, killing nearly all of them including Custer himself. Two years later, the remaining 7th Cavalry under the command of Colonel Whiteside found a Lakota encampment in South Dakota. They surrounded it and approached peacefully. They ordered all Indians to give up their weapons, but one man named Black Coyote was deaf and could not hear the orders. When they tried to take his gun by force, he would not let go claiming that he paid a lot for it. In the scuffle, the rifle went off and the entire 7<sup>th</sup> regiment opened fire on the Lakotas. They shot every man women and child and pursued those who fled. Over three hundred Indians died at the "Battle" of Wounded Knee, the vast majority again being women and children. Thirty one cavalry troops died.

The U.S. Government continued to increase military pressure and pursued all Natives who were not on reservations. Chief Blackwater was eventually defeated and the great Cheyenne tribe was relocated to a reservation in southern Montana. Natives, forced to live on undesirable plots of land with little food or game to hunt, were completely reliable on the United States for survival. Tribes who were yet to be relocated were usually hostile and became fugitives. Non-subdued Indians were seen as a threat for White settlers and were hunted.

Once virtually all surviving Natives were moved to their respected reservations, a study was done to see how they were living. This study, conducted in 1928, was called the Meriam Report, and it concluded that Indians were living in complete filth. Five years later, as President Franklin Roosevelt was elected, he initiated the Reorganization Act of 1934, which became a nationwide law. The law declared that each tribe has the right to its own constitution and the ability to conduct its own government within its reservation. America stopped encroaching on reservation soil and two million dollars was given to the Indians

for their land as well as ten million dollars in loans. Also during this time the BIA was founded to protect these new Native rights.

To this day there are 310 reservations split among 564 federally recognized tribes. However, many tribes that still exist continue to go unrecognized. The Native Americans Rights Fund (NARF) is an organization that was founded in 1970. This organization has and will continue to fight for the identity of tribes who are not recognized. Once a tribe is recognized they are entitled to an amount of undeveloped land and a decent sum of money. For example the Passamquoddy and Penobscott Indians of Maine received 300,000 acres of land and 27.5 million dollars thanks to the NARF.

Today the Indian population is nearing three million people, but their quality of life has hardly improved. Indians have the right to leave the reservation whenever they want and can join American society as a citizen, but most tend to stay with their tribe on the reservation. Generally, the majority of Indians on reservations is unemployed and live in poverty. Their reputations involve heavy alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Many Americans surrounding the reservation have become racist towards the Natives as rumors of drug abuse and senseless violence circulate the regions. However, a select few Natives have become wealthy while staying on the reservation. Due to having the rights to their own laws, reservations located in states that prohibit gambling have opened up casinos that attract gamblers from all over that state. Casinos provide employment for many Natives and are commonly the biggest financial resource a reservation has.

About half of Native American jobs are founded through the BIA, and about 60% of their population's compensation owes its existence to the BIA. Benefits like these are only offered to certified Native Americans, which causes a lot of turmoil and confusion when it comes to defining who is and who isn't a Native American.

All officially recognized Indians who are eligible for Native benefits carry a Certified Degree of Indian Blood (CBID) card, which dictates that the carrier has at least 25% Native blood. This is often difficult to track. For example: if one's mother is 40% Native, and the Father, whom needs to be at least 10% for the child to be eligible for a CBID card, is unsure what Native blood, if any, he has, it may be frivolous to attempt Native nationality. Aside from eligibility, it is not certain that one will be a distinguished Native once he can prove he has at least 25% ethnicity. He must apply to his specific tribe, which must be one recognized by the United States, and the respected government within that tribe will decide if he should be an official Native.

Native Americans have one of the most tragic and unforgiving pasts any one nationality has endured. It is a saying among white Americans that no Indian can live today without regretting that he was born Indian. Although their history is now celebrated for being a peaceful and an eminently spiritual people who were undeniably wronged by European settlers, they continue to face poverty

and identity crises. It is rare at best to find anyone who is 100% Native as their population has been watered down by hundreds of years of contact with whites. Furthermore, it is common to come across a Native American tribe not recognized by the United States, and therefore the people are not recognized as a Native American. However, to look on the bright side, it is clear that the future for Native Americans is irrefutably brighter than their past.

**Bibliography:**

[http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/exploration/text6/text6read.h  
tm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/exploration/text6/text6read.htm)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_reservation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_reservation)  
<http://www.faqs.org/minorities/North-America/American-Indians.html>  
<http://www.dailypennsylvanian.com/node/50546>