Editor's Introduction

For at least 12,000 years, probably much longer, Amerindian peoples have inhabited the northern and southern continents of the Americas, from the Arctic Circle to the tip of South America. Over the course of these millennia, and living within this vast geographic area, Native peoples developed an enormous range of distinct cultures and languages. By the time of European contact near the start of the 1500s, there may have been as many as 2,000 separate languages in the hemisphere spoken by as many as 50 million indigenous inhabitants.

In North America, the precontact population was probably between 2.5 million and 3 million. The overall pattern of response to whites produced an initial phase of moderate population growth (aided by trade and expansion), which was followed by periods of decline as game, material goods (e.g., furs), and, especially, land for Indians became increasingly scarce. Disease, too, was a leading cause of population decline, since Native Americans had no natural immunity to the various diseases brought in by European settlers and the enslaved Africans accompanying them.

In the Eastern Woodlands, decline set in before 1700, with eradication campaigns by whites fueling the process. Some strongholds remained, however, such as the Five Civilized Tribes (Creek, Seminole, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw) in the Southeast and the Iroquois Confederacy and their neighbors in the Great Lakes region. On the Central Plains, serious decline did not come until the bison were all but exterminated in the 1870s and 1880s. The downward cycle on the Plains was a long one, starting with the taking of the first horses from the Spanish in New Mexico around 1600 and ending with the demise of the bison almost three hundred years later. In the Southwest, the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache peoples faced less overt destruction of their cultures and ways of life while nevertheless enduring the depredations of the incoming colonialists. A somewhat similar situation transpired on the Northwest Coast, where trade in artifacts played a sustaining role. In California, in contrast, Native peoples suffered severely under the rule of the Spanish missions. The overall picture was one of violent change followed by forced adaptation and abiding endurance—either that, or extinction.

Early Indian–White Treaties and Issues

For nearly a hundred years the government of the United States made formal treaties with the Indian tribes, regarding them essentially as foreign nations. Most such agreements worked to the disadvantage of the Indians, either from the outset or over the course of time. In many cases, the government did not hold up its end of the bargain.

Between 1778 and 1871, the United States made—and often remade—almost four hundred treaties with Indians. The remaking of treaties was treated as a necessity because of changing conditions, despite the fact that the conditions changed largely because of white expansion or economic aims. Most of these treaties involved material exchanges or cash payments in connection with land transfers; some of them also offered U.S. citizenship to members of a tribe. Yet, many of these treaties were unjust. In 1787, for example, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, which prohibited the taking of land or other Indian property without tribal consent—except in the case of wars explicitly declared by Congress. In the decades that followed, numerous instances of land seizures occurred but without any formal declaration of war having been made. These were violations of the spirit and letter of the law. Moreover, the federal courts backed up the government in the overwhelming majority of cases.

With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the United States came into possession of much of the lower continent west of the Mississippi River. Shortly after this acquisition, a number of Southern states began to threaten secession if they could not push out Indian populations and obtain more land for their plantations. As a result of Southern pressure, led by Georgia, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830. Calling for the relocation of all Indians living east of the Mississippi to lands west of the river, the law was accompanied by a compensation payment to Indian tribes of only $500,000 for ceding their lands and agreeing to move. During the ensuing Trail of Tears (1838) thousands of Indians died. The survivors settled in Indian Territory—or what would later become Oklahoma.

White Expansion in the West

After 1836, whites surged westward in a series of migrational phases, each representing a more complex mixture of technology, economics, and social forces. Economic opportunity was the main draw that brought men and women from Europe and the eastern United States into

the sparsely settled West. In the earliest phase there were the trappers and fur traders who sought profit in the form of animal hides—from beaver pelts and deerskins to bear and buffalo hides. Close behind them came the miners, searching the streams and mountain slopes for precious metals, especially gold and silver. From the 1840s, too, came caravans of covered wagons, filled with dreamers seeking fertile farmlands in distant Oregon and California. Although few in number, these travelers played a key role in opening a path for later settlers and thus in disrupting Indian cultures.

Another wave of settlers was made up of the so-called pioneer families who sought to farm the land. They viewed undeveloped space as an opportunity. They cut down the forests and broke up the prairie sod in order to build their cabins, raise their crops, and expand their holdings. Eventually, many would fence-in their property and demand that local and state governments build roads to connect their communities. As commercial activity continued to grow, more settlers—merchants, millers, blacksmiths, distillers, lawyers, etc.—appeared. Eventually, the presence of whites was evident throughout the backcountry.

The occupation of western lands might have proceeded at a relatively slow pace were it not for the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Subsequent discoveries were made in Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of gold seekers flocked to the scene. Over the next two decades, their remote mining camps bloomed into permanent settlements, as shops and services popped up and farmers came in to supply food.

About the same time as the miners and early settlers arrived, the cattlemen came looking for fresh fields in which to fatten their expanding herds. The cattle industry in the West was based on use of the open range as a pastureland. Concentrated between the years 1865 and 1890, ranching was also founded on the presence of the transcontinental railroad and its many feeder lines. From Texas, the main source of cattle production, herds were pushed north to the railroads over the Chisholm Trail and other paths. Over time, however, increased settlement cut into the cattlemen's domain, driving ranchers farther west and thereby further diminishing Indian lands.

Indian Wars

The great wars between the various Indian tribes and the U.S. government that took place in the American West after the Civil War represented the end-phase of over 200 years of Indian-white conflict. They were carried out by the United States for three reasons: 1) to "pacify" a region in order to make it safe for whites; 2) to place Indians on reservations; and 3) to keep them there. The issue was largely economic, but also, in part, political. It was fueled by the encroachment of westward-migrating whites on traditional Indian lands, or hunting grounds, and by the unsavory conditions present on the reservations. The treaties of the 1860s, under which Native Americans were expected to reside in designated reservations while providing half of their food by hunting, were thoroughly undermined by the rapid pace at which the West was being developed. For virtually every promise written into a treaty, there was a new, contradictory fact on the ground: a gold discovery, a needed passage for whites, a tract of land ideal for railroad development, and so on. Most of the final Indian wars unfolded in far-flung regions of the West: the Modoc War (1872-73), in northern California and southern Oregon; the Great Sioux War (1876-77), in the Black Hills; the Nez Perce War (1877), in northern Idaho and surrounding regions; the Bannock War (1878), in southern Idaho and northern Nevada; and the Apache Wars of the 1880s, in the Southwest. This is why the US campaign against Native peoples was also political; it was a means, simply, to clear the land of Indians forever and facilitate white possession of the continent, "from sea to shining sea." The last remaining Indian territory (apart from the reservations) vanished in 1889, when the western half of what is now Oklahoma was declared available for land claims by incoming settlers. The last major violent encounter was the massacre by U.S. Army troops of some 300 men, women, and children of the Sioux tribe at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890.

Federal policy for addressing the "Indian question" had long included the goal of breaking up the tribes to speed the integration of Native Americans into general society. Not until passage of the Dawes Allotment Act (1887), however, was the legal status of "domestic dependent nation" with respect to Indian tribes abandoned in favor of allotting plots of reservation land to individual Indians. While, in practice, federal guardianship of American Indians remained in effect, by 1890 Indians came to be viewed quite differently by the American people. They were now their own agents, for better or for worse. Sales of lands quickened, and vast quantities passed into the hands of speculators and developers. The peopling of the "Last West," as the remaining western territories

are sometimes called, brought several new states into the nation: North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington in 1889; Idaho and Wyoming in 1890; Utah in 1896; Oklahoma in 1907; and New Mexico and Arizona in 1912. The railroads had much to do with this, as millions of acres of Indian lands were seized and sold cheaply to private interests.

As one impassioned scholar summarizes the situation in her *Indigenous People's History of the United States*,

> Under the crust of that portion of Earth called the United States of America—"from California … to the Gulf Stream waters"—are interred the bones, villages, fields, and sacred objects of American Indians. They cry out for their stories to be heard through their descendants who carry the memories of how the country was founded and how it came to be as it is today. (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014: 1)

Later Developments

By the twentieth century, one of the key institutions affecting American Indian life, apart from the reservations, was the federal or church-run boarding school. Such schools were designed to integrate Indian youth into the white mainstream, generally by prohibiting the use of indigenous languages, downplaying individual cultures, and even disrupting tribal self-government. One unintended consequence of this was the beginning of a pan-Indian identity and the creation of a number of Indian advocacy groups to work with and/or against the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which managed federal Indian policy.

In 1934, the prevailing policy of assimilation was overturned under the Indian Reorganization Act. The act also ended the allotment program, restored additional lands to Indian tribes, and established loan funds to finance Indian businesses and cover tuition in vocational schools. Additionally, it authorized tribes to prepare written constitutions and generally encouraged self-governing for Indian peoples.

However, assimilation again became official policy in the 1950s, as Congress sought "to make the Indians within the territorial limits of the United States subject to the same laws and entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities as are applicable to all citizens." To that end, federal authorities went so far as to dissolve a number of tribes and removed their lands from federal protection. Strong Indian protest, such as a claim made by a group of Sioux to control the small island of Alcatraz, in the San Francisco Bay (the claim was made under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868), led the government to drop its efforts.

More Indian groups formed in the 1960s. One of them, the American Indian Movement (AIM), cultivated cross-tribal alliances and encouraged improved relations between urban Indians and those residing on reservations. In 1973, 200 AIM members occupied the Wounded Knee site to protest the conditions of Indians, an act that again produced violence. Two years later, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, in which the United States reaffirmed Indian self-determination and the government's readiness to assist tribes in the area of educational development.

In the 1990s, taking advantage of tribal sovereignty status and seeking to build revenue for health and education programs, among other things, some tribes began pursuing legal gambling operations on their reservations. Many of these ventures became hugely successful, filling tribal coffers with cash. Others, however, struggled or performed only modestly well. In any case, nationwide American Indians living on reservations today remain the poorest segment of the U.S. population, facing high unemployment, low (but improving) educational achievement, and poor health. At the same time, there continues to be a strong spirit of "resilience" and an openness toward "rebuilding" among Native peoples, according to Native scholar Donald Fixico. Fixico writes that Indians have increasingly "chosen their own means in responding to federal policy, social changes, federal laws, and court decisions," seeking to "[go] about their business while responding to the dominant society rather than complete assimilation into white society" (Fixico 2013, 11). And the results are beginning to pay off, beginning with a renewed sense of confidence and a more hopeful outlook regarding the future.

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