

Opposing Mythical Media Images and Mainstream Historical Narratives of Indigenous Lakota Indians as Savage and Warlike

Anthony Cortese¹, Ph.D.

Abstract

The nature of this violent conflict between the Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians and the US government and military is an example of what my entire research and teaching career has focused on—minority-dominant relations. The significance of this research is that the seven tribal bands of the Lakota nation and their allies were the last loose ends that needed to be tied up by the US government and military to complete the continuous expansion of manifest destiny. The Lakota Sioux had long dominated the American interior northern territories, impeding Western migration with discerning negotiation, brutal intimidation and absolute power. A fierce and effective resistance emerges in the North central US, led by the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne. This dramatic confrontation features men like Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, John Grass, Gall, Crazy Horse and military icons like George Custer. Gruesome violence, massacre, mutilation and removal are tragic and continuous in this saga. This research is relevant because many of the methods of decimation and control used against the indigenous plains Indians—racial and cultural genocide, forced assimilation, disproportionate use of violence, broken treaties, territorial colonization, suppression of religion and language, and reeducation schools—are the same weapons used today by dominant cultural groups against their own citizens, ethnic minority groups —by China against Uyghur Muslims and by the military coup in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims. US deplorable treatment and nativist policies regarding African slaves, those of Mexican descent, Asian immigrants and indigenous Americans have provided a ghastly template for genocide and other human rights violations for nations around the globe.

Keywords: Lakota, indigenous, Critical Race theory, racial and cultural genocide. Collective memory

Introduction

Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines how American racism has shaped public policy. Its been labeled divisive discourse that pits people of color against white people and liberals against conservatives. This issue has blown up in the public arena this spring—especially in K-12, where numerous state legislatures, e.g., Texas, are debating bills seeking to ban its use in the classroom. The analytical value of critical race theory has been clearly demonstrated in increased public awareness about residential segregation, criminal justice policy and the legacy of enslavement on Black Americans. The main theorem: Race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but is also embedded in legal systems, public policies and social institutions.

The basic tenets of CRT emerged out of a framework for legal discourse in the late 1970s and early 1980s created by legal scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. For example, in the 1930s, government officials delineated areas deemed poor financial risks, often due to the racial composition of inhabitants. Banks subsequently refused to offer mortgages to Black people in those areas. In 2022, the Pacific Sociology Association (PSA) conference theme was: Telling Our Stories: Collective Memory and Narratives of Race, Gender, and Community. The Lakota have told stories about their sacred relationship with the land on which their ancestors walked. Accordingly, any disconnect from that land would result in spiritual and cultural alienation.

¹ Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Dedman College of Humanities and Social Sciences, SMU, email: tony@SMU.edu

As victorious warriors, the Lakota told stories about the violent and hasty rout of the US Seventh Cavalry in the Battle of the Greasy Grass (aka the battle of the Little Big Horn). The study of collective memory is interdisciplinary.

Sociology, history, and cultural studies bring unique methodological and theoretical approaches that enhance the dialogue in memory studies. How does sociology guide memory and collective consciousness? How can memory disrupt power and systematic inequality and stimulate change? The PSA theme in 2022 encouraged us to challenge our histories and memories. This presentation explores macro and micro perspectives on individual and collective memory of the Great Sioux War of 1876. My session, *The Framing of Indigenous Discourse through Scholarship, Political Landscapes, and Mass Media*, focuses on the perspectives, world views, social histories and narratives of indigenous people that is basically left out in mainstream history, literature and social science theory and research. That is why this type of scholarly research is so significant. This is exactly what some people around the country are trying to restrict. I point out the history of institutional discrimination and unequal protection under the law for indigenous Great Plains Indians—just the type of analysis that the governor, lieutenant governor and the Texas State legislature want outlawed. So my indirect goal is to do a good enough job to have my research suppressed in Texas.

Colonizer-Indigenous Contact and Conflict

This research examines the rise, hegemony and decline of the indigenous peoples on the Great Plains. Current scholarly research in cultural studies has focused on the framing of indigenous discourse through socio-political landscapes and images in and claims by mass media. Accordingly, this research relies on the oral history, collective memory and tribal identity of indigenous peoples, i.e., great plains Indians in juxtaposition to dominant cultural ideologies and narratives of empire building, racial superiority, manifest destiny and cultural capitulation. The seven tribal bands of the Lakota nation and their allies were the last loose ends that needed to be tied up by the US government (1854-1891) to complete the continuous expansion of manifest destiny. The indigenous peoples on the East coast had long since been wiped out or pushed out by early settlers. Indian removal forced the displacement of self-governing indigenous tribes from their ancestral homelands in the eastern US to lands west of the Mississippi River – to designated Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, ended the Mexican-American War. Consequently, US territory expanded by 525,000 square miles, including all or parts of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado and California. Mexico also ceded all claims to Texas and recognized the Rio Grande as American's southern boundary. In 1848, the demographic make-up of California consisted of 6,500 Californios (people of Spanish or Mexican descent), 700 foreigners (primarily white Americans) and 150,000 Indigenous people. But the California Gold Rush (1848-1855) brought in a massive influx of whites. By the end of 1849, the non-native population of the California territory was approximately 100,000 (compared with the 1848 figure of less than 1,000). The biggest losers of the Gold Rush were the indigenous people. In the 20 years following the discovery of gold, 80 percent of the state's indigenous population was decimated by displacement, disease or genocide.

In the Southwest, the US government forces the surrender of and pushes once mighty tribes such as the Comanche and Apache onto reservations. The last bands of Comanche surrendered to the US Army in 1875. The Apache Wars emphatically ended when Geronimo surrendered in 1886. This left only the Great Plains hostiles free from control of the US government and reservation agencies. A fierce and effective resistance emerges in the North, led by the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne among others. This dramatic tale features Lakota men like Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa chief and medicine man or spiritual leader), Red Cloud (Oglala war chief), John Grass (Sihhasapa war chief), Gall (Hunkpapa war chief), Crazy Horse (Oglala war chief), and military icons like George Custer. Gruesome violence, massacre, mutilation and removal are tragic and continuous in this saga. The Sioux wars finally ended in January 1891. I employ social conflict theory—based on Marxist social theory—maintaining that individuals and groups (indigenous v. Euro-colonists) within a specified geographical region interact on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. I also focus on a materialist interpretation of history. The US has a long legacy of erasing and suppressing the history of indigenous people. I use revisionist history in an attempt to restore Lakota history and culture,

The Rise and Hegemony of the Lakota

In the 1750s, the Lakota were one of seven nations comprising the Sioux Alliance. They lived in the forest and wetlands between the Great Lakes and the Missouri Valley.

They were losing a power struggle in the eastern woodlands with the Ojibwa tribe. In the 1600s white settlers had destabilized the balance of power between warring Indian tribes. The Ojibwa traded furs with New France for guns and ammunition. But the Lakota were too far away from the major trading routes to benefit from goods traded by settlers. The Lakota were pushed out by the Ojibwa because of their advanced weapon technology.

Near the end of the eighteenth century, the Lakota moved west into the drier and less fertile great plains. The only fertile areas bordered the Missouri River which were already settled by the Arikawa tribe whose economy was based on agriculture. When Lakota warriors began riding horses, they were able to conquer the Arikawa and dislodge them from the riverside villages. The Lakota expanse grew rapidly. Spanish military explorers were forced to pay tribute to the Lakota in order to enter their territory.

In 1776, a powerful empire was born in North America. The Lakota pushed out the Crow, taking possession of the Black Hills (Paha Sapa), the most sacred place and most coveted buffalo hunting grounds in the western plains. Located in what is now South Dakota, control of the Black Hills, marked the tribe as the dominant power in the American West. In 1804, The US paid France 15 million dollars for 530 million acres, including Lakota territory. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the US, greatly strengthened the country materially and strategically, and provided a powerful impetus to westward expansion. The government commissioned Lewis and Clark to explore the vast amount of land annexed (828,000 square miles). But the Lakota refused to recognize the deal which they viewed as merely an agreement between two foreign countries. When Lewis and Clark reached Lakota territory, Chief Black Buffalo told his warriors to take one of the explorers' canoes as tribute for using their river.

The US government and Lakota nation entered into a mutually beneficial trade alliance. Lakota men were highly skilled bison hunters; the women transformed the hides into valuable robes traded to government officials. In turn, the Lakota received guns, ammunition, rations, other goods and small pox vaccines to protect them from the deadly disease that ravaged so many other indigenous tribes. In 1850, while most indigenous tribes were living on reservations, the Lakota were still expanding their empire, comprising 500,000 square kilometers (nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of Texas). At its peak, Lakota territory spanned from the Missouri River to Big Horn Mountains in Montana territory in the West. The Lakota had no central authority. Instead, the various bands united for several weeks each summer to strategize, propose policy and participate in the sun dance to appease the Great Spirit or Wakan Tanka .

The US government and military and indigenous Americans became locked in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. The major resource was land. The Great Sioux War of 1876 was fought over the Black Hills in South Dakota. The ideologies of empire building, racial superiority, manifest destiny and cultural capitulation provided justification to forcefully take indigenous territories—at the same time, practicing genocide or, at least, social exclusion to relegated reservations under federal government rule. Horses and bison were crucial to Lakota economic and cultural sustainability. Horses revolutionized the lifestyle of the Lakota—allowing them to be nomadic hunters and gatherers, no longer confined to stationary villages to support an agriculturally based economy. Lakota warriors on horseback provided the means for successful raids on rival tribal villages resulting in tribal dominance and the accumulation of increased territories and greater tributes.

Decline of the Lakota

The availability and sustainability of large herds of bison were essential to Lakota tribes. In fact, Lakota sovereignty depended on bison for food, clothing, tools, weapons, lodging, etc. No part of a bison was wasted. Bison were also used in Lakota art. Pictographs, waniyetu iyawapi (winter counts) were originally painted onto the hides of buffalo. The US government encouraged the slaughter of the buffalo by providing rifles, ammunition, supplies and transportation via train and wagon trains in the successful attempt to defeat and eliminate the Lakota by taking away their major source for all material needs.

The Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868 guaranteed that the Black Hills would continue to be exclusively Lakota territory. But when gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the US deliberately broke the treaty by trying to remove Indians and encourage prospectors. Fine print in the 1868 Treaty stipulated that unceded territory remain indigenous land only if there are enough bison to justify a hunt. Between 1872 and 1874, three thousand bison were killed each day and left to rot on the plains. In 1840, there were 60 million bison in North America; by 1890, there were only 500. The successful extermination of bison caused Lakota hardship and starvation, forcing them to eventually surrender their guns and turn themselves in to reservations. In 1875, Custer led an expedition to the Black Hills to confirm the discovery of gold.

This brought hordes of prospectors through Lakota territory. It became clear to the Lakota that the US no longer respected their legal claims to their territories. This resulted in attacks on wagon trains and government offices. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse rallied their allied Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes along with all bands of the Lakota.

Eighteen seventy-five signaled the twilight of the Lakota empire. The Battle of the Little Big Horn (aka Battle of the Greasy Grass by the indigenous peoples and Custer's Last Stand) was the most decisive indigenous victory and the worst and most humiliating US Army defeat in the enduring plains Indian War. The victory was fleeting, however, since it placed them on a seemingly perpetual run from the military, resulting in extreme hardship, starvation and freezing. The annihilation of Custer and the 7th Cavalry outraged white Americans and confirmed the stereotype of Indians as wild and bloodthirsty. Newspaper accounts of the massacre across the nation portrayed indigenous Americans as savages and demanded revenge, prompting a US military campaign of terror. It was the beginning of the end of the Lakota sovereign nation. A reinforced army defeated the Lakota in a series of battles, finally ending the Great Sioux War in 1877. The Lakota were eventually confined to reservations, prevented from hunting buffalo beyond those territories, and forced to accept government food distribution.

The Sundance was banned on reservations. Crazy Horse turned himself and his followers into a reservation where he was murdered in 1877. Sitting Bull took his followers to Canada to escape troops but returned because the hunting was not plentiful. He was murdered on a reservation in 1890. That same year marked the massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, where approximately 300 mostly unarmed Lakota women, children and old men were killed.

Missionaries and social reformers began attempts to assimilate the Lakota. Children were forcibly removed from families and sent to boarding schools whose explicit mission was to eradicate Lakota language, religion and culture. Virtually every component of Lakota life became subject to surveillance and control. The winter counts are scant from this period, reflecting the trauma, the scourges of legal ouster and suicide —results of internal colonialism.

Lakota Stereotypes

A dialectical method of analysis systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas (I.e., mass media portrayals of indigenous Lakota as savage and warlike) with a goal to resolve real or apparent contradictions. I borrow from critical race theory to critique federal policy and social arrangements between indigenous Lakota and white society. I propose the demise of socio-economic class and racial dominion over indigenous Americans.

The Lakota transitioned from haughty and imperial to fearful and vulnerable to prudent and accommodating. Lakota flexibility assisted their transformation from foragers to farmers to nomads to hunters on horseback, from isolation to the most dominant indigenous nation in the Americas, controlling territory across the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains and Canada. Lakota philosophy and world view directed their reinventions and reply to interaction and negotiation and competed with colonial powers over hotly contested territories.

The Lakota had a spacious conception of kinship in which rival tribes, competitors and even enemies could have been brought into their congregation. Lakota values (prayer, respect, compassion, honesty, generosity, wisdom, bravery, humility, perseverance, honor, love, and sacrifice) refute the notion that Indians are savages. In fact, US policy of genocide of indigenous tribes is barbaric—not the Indians. A declaration on December 6, 1875 by the US Commissioner of Indian Affairs, under direction of president US Grant, ordered Indians to settle on government reservations by January 1, 1876. Those who refused were considered hostile, faced total war and were hunted down like animals. The annihilation or extinction of the Lakota was the policy of the US whipped up by the presses across the nation.

The Lakota have an ancient Brave Heart Society whose members are honorable men that protect traditional and grassroots elders and oyate (the entire Lakota, Dakota, Nakota nation). They were primarily leaders and care givers and, only secondarily, warriors. Membership in this elite group is by invitation only. The traditional Lakota leadership structure is based on servant-leadership. Rather than the top-down structure of national governments, this is based on a bottom-up and matriarchal social structure. These men are known for compassion, generosity, bravery, and ability to provide and care for their people. Though the Lakota were known as a warrior society, this role was virtually always in self-defense.

The aggressors were the government officials and military leaders, railroad entrepreneurs, bison hunters, homesteaders, gold prospectors, etc. The Lakota have a spiritual connection to the land on which they live and hunt. The bison are indispensable to the indigenous both spiritually and instrumentally. By 1875, the last large herd of bison roamed and grazed on the plains in the Montana territory. This land included the Little Big Horn River, the site of the battle of the Greasy Grass. The severe loss of both land and bison forced the Lakota to defend themselves for their own survival and way of life.

American values and policies were greedy and aggressive on land acquisition. Cultural capitulation, a centuries old tradition, permitted inclusion and assimilation only for those who accepted European culture. Manifest Destiny also contributed to empire building. This 19th-century doctrine held that the expansion of the US throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.

Conclusion

For my analyses, I borrow from forensic archeology, Lakota family oral histories, tribal collective memory, drawings of the battle by Indian participants, historically published reports by US military, newspaper articles by reporters and contemporary research to provide an accurate account of the battle and the Great Sioux War.

By utilizing forensic archeology methods of field research, I examined and compared the validity of plains Indians narratives of the Battle of the Greasy Grass in family oral histories (e.g., Ernie LaPointe, great grandson of Sitting Bull) and tribal collective memory and drawings of the battle by Indian participants vs. reports by military and newspaper articles by reporters and journalists. Indigenous narratives were quite accurate while newspaper accounts of conflict between settlers, prospectors or the military was sensationalized in newspapers and in the entertainment provided by Buffalo Bill Cody and his traveling Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World show. The Battle of the Greasy Grass was not only Custer's Last Stand but it was figuratively the last stand for the entire aggregate of plains Indians. At present, the Lakota people inhabit five major reservations in the western Dakota region.

The military and government was far more savage than the indigenous people. The US started the war against the indigenous people. Under the leadership of General William Tecumseh Sherman, General Phillip Sheridan and Lieutenant Colonel George Custer, the military used a Total War policy that had been so barbaric yet successful against the Confederacy and used it again against the indigenous people. In total war, the military was willing to slay an unlimited amount of human lives and sacrifice a boundless amount of resources to obtain a complete victory. This meant killing not only indigenous warriors but also women, babies, children, the elderly, any animals that could have been used as food or transporting people or goods, and destroying, primarily by fire, all inhabitable structures, crops and possessions.

More recently, a resurgence in tribal identity has occurred in a spirit of optimism. The 2015 protests against the Dakota Access pipeline attracted global attention. But twenty-first century media images of Lakota teepees going up in flames sadly remind me of nineteenth century military massacres of indigenous people at Sandy Creek, Washita River and Wounded Knee. The Lakota continue to attempt to recover their sacred Black Hills and endure because they are Iktomi—the spider-trickster spirit and cultural hero for the Lakota people. The contemporary Lakota are active, agile, diligent, energetic, expeditious, industrious, accommodating and completely sure of their spiritual and historical essence. The Lakota continue to confront a federal government with a track record of broken promises.

Many of the methods of decimation and control used against the indigenous plains Indians such as racial genocide, forced assimilation, disproportionate use of force, treaty-breaking, territorial colonization, suppression of culture, religion and language, and reeducation schools are the same weapons used today by dominant cultural groups against their own citizens, ethnic minority groups —by China against Uyghur (wee gr) Muslims, by North Korea against its own people and by the military coup in Myanmar (mee an mar) against Rohingya Muslims. Burma, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Libya, North Korea and Sudan are among the worst abusers of human rights. US deplorable treatment and nativist policies regarding African slaves, those of Mexican descent, Asian immigrants and indigenous Americans have provided a ghastly template for genocide and other human rights violations for nations around the globe.

References

- Hamalainen, Pekka The Rise and Fall of the Lakota Empire. EdTed.com.
<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-lakota-empire-pekka-hamalainen>
- Hamalainen, Pekka. 2019. Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power. New Haven and London:Yale University Press.
- O'Riley, Bill and Martin Dugard. 2019. Killing Crazy Horse: The Merciless Indian Wars in America. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Powers, Thomas. 2010. The Killing of Crazy Horse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Powers, Thomas. 2019. How the Battle of Little Bighorn Was Won. Smithsonian Magazine. June 24.<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-the-battle-of-little-bighorn-was-won-63880188/>