

Crazy Horse and the Legacy of the American Indian Genocide

Recent news articles about coal pollution in the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming, and [protests](#) against new [pipelines](#) in North Dakota by the Standing Rock Sioux caught my eye. I'm an ardent environmentalist, but I've never been to and know little about the Mountain West area of the United States. The name of this particular river jumped out at me, however, because I had just been reading about the 1876 Lakota Sioux War and its famous Battle of Little Bighorn, which took place along a stream parallel to the larger Powder River where much of the theatre of war was centered. I thought about how a minor link between past and present symbolized the entire history of the American Indians' relationship with the United States.



C
o
a
l
m
i
n
e

in the Powder River Basin

I have always been interested in the story of the American Indians. When I was in the first grade in elementary school, we spent one week preparing a project on American Indians; everyday I had to fight with one other equally keen classmate over who got first rights to the 'I' volume of the class encyclopedia set. There was a long article on Indians in this volume with many great pictures and maps showing the locations of all the tribes, and their inexorable migration westward. A

couple years later, in 1992, "The Last of the Mohicans" was the first R-rated film I saw in the cinema; I have seen it a couple dozen times since and it remains one of my all-time favorite films. There has always been something powerful in my consciousness, even before I understood it, that the country in which I was born and raised was once populated with a totally different group of people who were gone now—mostly gone, anyway. For a big, year-long historical research project in 7th grade in middle school, I chose the Trail of Tears—the forced death march of the Cherokee tribe from Georgia to Oklahoma to allow for gold-mining on their land. Long before I was politically aware, the innate feeling of tragic injustice moved me, and has continued to inform my historical and political readings to the present day.

My first year of college I took a class on early American history, during which I learned much more about the Pequot War and King Philip's War. These two wars, beginning in 1634 and 1675 respectively, pitted for the first time New England colonists against local Indian tribes. They were brutal and both sides engaged in what would now be called 'war crimes', but by a narrow margin the Pequot and Wampanoag tribes were defeated, dispossessed of their land, enslaved, and driven into extinction (in a case of *damnatio memoriae* it was even forbidden to mention the name Pequot after the first war). The continual westward push of the European immigrants from the eastern seaboard gave rise to the same theme recurring again and again: frontiers with the Europeans and Indians were established, usually with an official peace treaty between the parties; the growing European population fueled the need for land; encroachment on Indian lands by Europeans started new conflict; Indians were defeated by Europeans, often with the help of rival Indian tribes, and often with extreme cruelty and duplicity. This pattern played out hundreds of times in the 280 years or so from the first English colonies in Virginia and Massachusetts to the "official" closing of the western frontier in 1890 (if we extend this history back to

Columbus' enslavement of the Arawak Indians on his first voyage in 1492 then it becomes almost exactly 400 years; in this essay I will focus only on the American Indians of the United States and not the entire American continent, though the history follows a similar pattern everywhere).

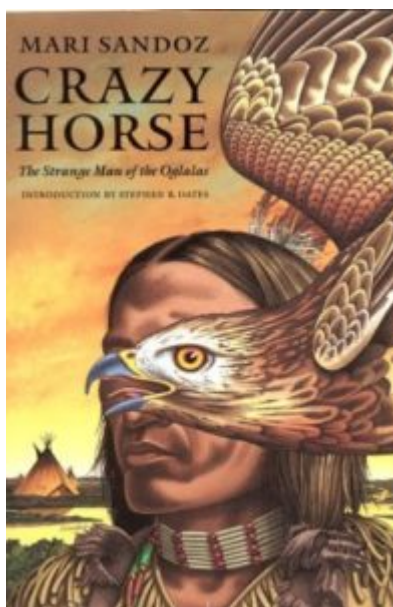
The contours of this long history are only ever taught in American history classes as a broad and tame overview, eliding most of the relevant details, and thus not providing scope for the scale of the tragedy of the American Indians' plight. Only through independent reading and study, Howard Zinn's unconventional history book *The People's History of the United States* or Dee Brown's engrossing *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* to name two famous examples, can one come to learn the heartbreaking tale of the American Indian.

Last Fight of the Fierce and Feathered

The last major war in these centuries of conflict between European Americans and American Indians was the 1876 Lakota Sioux campaign, called the Great Sioux War. This is one of the most famous events of all the Indian wars due to the abundance of contemporary sources (though no one bothered to interview or report anything from the Indian perspective until decades later, long after hostilities between Indians and white men were a thing of the past), as well as the well-known protagonists on each side. This war featured the most famous Indian fighter in American history, George Armstrong Custer, and two of the most famous Indian warriors of all time, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse.

Custer was one of those 19th century American originals who made his name by fighting, first in the Civil War and then against the plains Indians. His total defeat by the Indians at Little Bighorn (known as the Battle of the Greasy Grass to the Sioux) is still the worst loss in American military history in

which an entire unit was destroyed in such a short time. The 210 cavalry troops in Custer's personal detachment of the 7th Cavalry were killed to the last man against a type of foe (Indians) who had never won a war against American forces in over 200 years of near continual, if low-level, conflict. This battle is described in a fascinating, thorough, and even-handed way in Nathaniel Philbrick's 2010 *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, which I would highly recommend (as well as his other books *In The Heart of the Sea* and *Why Read Moby-Dick?*).



Crazy Horse was a warrior leader of the Oglala Sioux tribe, one of five confederated groups that made up the Lakota, or western plains Sioux Indians. Sitting Bull was a chief and holy man of the Hunkpapa, another one of the five tribes. Both of these men shared the characteristics of noble defenders of their people against an unprincipled and perfidious enemy. Crazy Horse, considered strange and incomprehensible even to his own people, was never defeated in battle in hundreds of engagements against the U.S. cavalry and rival tribes. Despite this, even he had to surrender to the U.S. government in order to save his people from starving. In the end he was stabbed in the back by one of these people, and with his death the spirit of resistance of the Indians died. He was never photographed and his final resting place is still secret. One of the best

biographies I have read is Mari Sandoz's *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*, which tells his story entirely from the Indian perspective with a compassionate and poetic touch. There has been an ongoing project in the Black Hills for the last 70 years to carve a sculpture of this great warrior, which will be the largest sculpture in the world when completed. It was originally blessed by one of the leaders of the tribe, but most Indians today feel the monument is a desecration of a sacred mountain in the hills they consider their rightful home.

The original cause of the Great Sioux War was that Custer led a large cavalry march into the Black Hills to cut open a path, which violated terms of the peace treaty between the Sioux and the U.S. government which stated that the Black Hills were property of the Sioux and would never be entered by white men. This path became frequented by gold diggers who had discovered a rich source of mineral wealth. As happened again and again, when Indian land was found to be valuable, treaties were summarily ripped up and war of conquest, displacement, and destruction was visited upon the Indians, who never understood why the white man's word was not his bond. Offers of millions of dollars to buy the Black Hills were rejected over and over by the Sioux tribes, which led to the government taking the land by force. Today, moral resistance against the theft continues since no Indian has ever taken the money offered by the government for the Black Hills (now sitting in a trust worth \$1.3 billion), which have since been extensively mined for over 130 years with the total gold and metal extraction unknown, but probably coming to at least hundreds of billions of dollars. As recently as 2015 Congress [passed a defense bill](#) authorizing Native lands in Arizona to be sold without permission to foreign companies for copper mining. To recap, the U.S. government and many private companies have made an enormous amount of money from a small piece of land that was stolen from Indians, who never took any money in return and today survive on unwanted land that they are [not allowed to](#)

[own](#) in abject poverty.

The Economic and Environmental Effects of the Indian Genocide

I am fully aware that genocide is a strong word, the strongest one used by historians in fact. Genocide is the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnic group or nation. I am also quite familiar with the entire centuries-long history of Indian wars and the many individual tragic episodes that comprise it, and I have no misgivings about using the word genocide. Starting from the Pequot War and King Philip's War to the Trail of Tears to the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, 1868 Washita Massacre (one of Custer's proudest "victories"), and the final, painful Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, the classification of genocide is appropriate. Look up the harrowing details and I'm sure you will agree.

Estimating historical population figures is always tricky, but the typical average estimate for Indian population in the Americas in 1492 (the watershed year) is around 50 million, with high estimates of 100 million; up to 20 million or so has been estimated for the population of the area of the present-day United States. For comparison's sake, the likely population of Europe in 1492 was probably around 60 million (and for even further comparison, the Roman Empire at its height in the second century CE was around 50 million). This goes to show the general truth that population figures have held steady or grown very slowly for most of human civilization, with the explosion to nearly 8 billion humans building up only for the last two centuries. The current American Indian population in the United States today, on the other hand, is less than 3 million. This number, which has actually grown rapidly in the last couple decades after staying very low for most of the 20th century, shows how there

is just a fraction left of the people that used to inhabit the entire continent, while the total non-Indian population of the United States itself has exploded from 0 to 320 million since the 1600s (it goes without saying that disease played the largest part in decimating the Indians, but for those survivors it was an endless campaign of total destruction waged by the white men that drove the Indians nearly to extinction; it is always worth revisiting Jared Diamond's outstanding [*Guns, Germs, and Steel*](#) demonstrating how Europeans came to wield such power over the rest of the world's inhabitants).

The surviving Indian tribes remain dispersed almost completely in arid, resource-less lands of the American West, land unwanted by any white man for good reasons. Not only that, the arrangements by which they were herded onto reservations and which govern Indian relations today state that it is illegal for the Indians to actually own their own land, which makes them the only people in the country who are denied property rights, in a land which was all stolen from them in the first place. The irony is stunning and tragic. The biggest issue that raises awareness of the Indians' plight today is not land or even history, however, but sports teams and school mascots. Most Indians today are not very concerned or offended by the [Washington football team](#) using the name Redskins, or by the hundreds of high schools and colleges using Indian names and mascots. They are too busy living in squalor, [in third-world conditions](#) in the richest country on Earth, and with little hope to even [own their own property](#) or improve their situation.

General Philip Sheridan



ed
r
e
d
h
i
s
s

oldiers to exterminate the American buffalo, which he thought would kill off the resisting plains Indians

Like all indigenous peoples of the world, especially those of the western hemisphere, American Indians are the best and wisest advocates for environmental protections and the most dedicated fighters against exploitation of natural resources. According to Noam Chomsky, indigenous peoples of the world are the [only hope](#) for human survival. From the First Nations of Canada to the Zapotecs in Oaxaca and Mayans in Chiapas to the recently murdered rights activist [Berta Cáceres](#) in Honduras to the Amazonian tribes in Brazil and the Guaraní of Bolivia, indigenous peoples are leading the protests against deforestation, new pipelines, new dams, and other wanton destruction that is part of an exploitative capitalist system that does not account for environmental or human costs. As I have already mentioned, the Black Hills sacred to the Sioux are now deforested for timber and dotted with thousands of mines that blight the landscape. The Powder River basin of Montana and Wyoming, scene of the Great Sioux War, now produces 40% of the United States' coal in super-intensive mining that renders the land into a real-world version of Mordor. The millions of American bison that once roamed the plains were massacred by the white man until there were only a few hundred left, all so that the plains Indians could not survive by their traditional nomadic hunting lifestyle. In

2016, members of the small remaining Standing Rock Sioux tribe are still [protesting](#) against [new pipelines](#) of [dirty tar sands oil](#) and a fracking-derived [natural gas pipeline](#) that would cross their land without their permission (or the land they inhabit but cannot own, which is considered public land by the government). If Crazy Horse were alive today he would be one of the leaders demanding political and property rights and environmental protections for his people. The current situation is the result of hundreds of years of principled American Indian resistance to genocide. Perhaps it is time for the rest of us to heed the wisdom and courage of the American Indians, and all indigenous people, and to treat animals as brothers and the land as if it is sacred, and not just an endless resource to be consumed and destroyed.