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INDIGENOUS
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BLOODY FOOTPRINTS

For the first 200 years of our military heritage, then, Americans depended on arts of war that contemporary professional soldiers supposedly abhorred: razing and destroying enemy villages and fields; killing enemy women and children; raiding settlements for captives; intimidating and brutalizing enemy noncombatants; and assassinating enemy leaders. . . . In the frontier wars between 1607 and 1814, Americans forged two elements—unlimited war and irregular war—into their first way of war.

—John Grenier, *The First Way of War*

Within days of the assassination of Osama bin Laden, on May 2, 2011, it was revealed that the Navy SEAL team executing the mission had used the code name Geronimo for its target.¹ A May 4 report in the *New York Daily News* commented, “Along with the unseen pictures of Osama Bin Laden’s corpse and questions about what Pakistan knew, intelligence officials’ reasons for dubbing the Al Qaeda boss ‘Geronimo’ remain one of the biggest mysteries of the Black Ops mission.” The choice of that code name was not a mystery to the military, which also uses the term “Indian Country” to designate enemy territory and identifies its killing machines and operations with such names as UH-1B/C Iroquois, OH-58D Kiowa, OV-1 Mohawk, OH-6 Cayuse, AH-64 Apache, S-58/H-34 Choctaw, UH-60 Black Hawk, Thunderbird, and Rolling Thunder. The last of these is the military name given to the relentless carpet-bombing of Vietnam peasants in the mid-1960s. There are many other current and recent examples of the persistence of the colonialist and imperialist sensibilities at the core of a military grounded

in wars against the Indigenous nations and communities of North America.

On February 19, 1991, Brigadier General Richard Neal, briefing reporters in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, stated that the US military wanted to be certain of speedy victory once it committed land forces to “Indian Country.” The following day, in a little-publicized statement of protest, the National Congress of American Indians pointed out that fifteen thousand Native Americans were serving as combat troops in the Persian Gulf. Neither Neal nor any other military authority apologized for the statement. The term “Indian Country” in cases such as this is not merely an insensitive racial slur, tastelessly but offhandedly employed to refer to the enemy. It is, rather, a technical military term, like “collateral damage” or “ordnance,” that appears in military training manuals and is regularly used to mean “behind enemy lines.” It is often shortened to “In Country.” This usage recalls the origins and development of the US military, as well as the nature of US political and social history as a colonialist project. Furthermore, “Indian Country” is a legal term that identifies Native jurisdiction under US colonial laws but is also an important tool for Native nations to use in maintaining and expanding their land bases in the process of decolonization. “Indian Country,” the legal term, includes not only federally recognized reservation territories, but also informal reservations, dependent Native communities and allotments, and specially designated lands.²

ROOTS OF GENOCIDE

In *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814*, military historian John Grenier offers an indispensable analysis of the colonialist warfare against the Indigenous peoples of the North American territories claimed by Great Britain. The way of war largely devised and enacted by settlers formed the basis for the founding ideology and colonialist military strategy of the independent United States, and this approach to war is still in force in the twenty-first century.³ Grenier writes that he began his study with the goal of tracing the historical roots of the use of unlimited war

by the United States, war whose purpose is to destroy the will of the enemy people or their capacity to resist, employing any means necessary but mainly by attacking civilians and their support systems, such as food supply. Today called “special operations” or “low-intensity conflict,” that kind of warfare was first used against Indigenous communities by colonial militias in Virginia and Massachusetts. These irregular forces, made up of settlers, sought to disrupt every aspect of resistance as well as to obtain intelligence through scouting and taking prisoners. They did so by destroying Indigenous villages and fields and intimidating and slaughtering enemy noncombatant populations.⁴

Grenier analyzes the development of the US way of war from 1607–1814, during which the US military was forged, leading to its reproduction and development into the present. US historian Bernard Bailyn calls the period “barbarous” and a “conflict of civilizations,” but Bailyn represents the Indigenous civilization as “marauders” that the European settlers needed to get rid of.⁵ From this formative period, Grenier argues, emerged problematic characteristics of the US way of war and thereby the characteristics of its civilization, which few historians have come to terms with.

In the beginning, Anglo settlers organized irregular units to brutally attack and destroy unarmed Indigenous women, children, and old people using unlimited violence in unrelenting attacks. During nearly two centuries of British colonization, generations of settlers, mostly farmers, gained experience as “Indian fighters” outside any organized military institution. Anglo-French conflict may appear to have been the dominant factor of European colonization in North America during the eighteenth century, but while large regular armies fought over geopolitical goals in Europe, Anglo settlers in North America waged deadly irregular warfare against the Indigenous communities. Much of the fighting during the fifteen-year settlers’ war for independence, especially in the Ohio Valley region and western New York, was directed against Indigenous resisters who realized it was not in their interest to have a close enemy of settlers with an independent government, as opposed to a remote one in Great Britain. Nor did the fledgling US military in the 1790s carry out operations typical of the state-centered wars occurring in

Europe at the time. Even following the founding of the professional US Army in the 1810s, irregular warfare was the method of the US conquest of the Ohio Valley and Mississippi Valley regions. Since that time, Grenier notes, irregular methods have been used in tandem with operations of regular armed forces.

The chief characteristic of irregular warfare is that of the extreme violence against civilians, in this case the tendency to seek the utter annihilation of the Indigenous population. “In cases where a rough balance of power existed,” Grenier observes, “and the Indians even appeared dominant—as was the situation in virtually every frontier war until the first decade of the 19th century—[settler] Americans were quick to turn to extravagant violence.”⁶

Many historians who acknowledge the exceptional one-sided colonial violence attribute it to racism. Grenier argues that rather than racism leading to violence, the reverse occurred: the out-of-control momentum of extreme violence of unlimited warfare fueled race hatred. “Successive generations of Americans, both soldiers and civilians, made the killing of Indian men, women, and children a defining element of their first military tradition and thereby part of a shared American identity. Indeed, only after seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Americans made the first way of war a key to being a white American could later generations of ‘Indian haters,’ men like Andrew Jackson, turn the Indian wars into race wars.” By then, the Indigenous peoples’ villages, farmlands, towns, and entire nations formed the only barrier to the settlers’ total freedom to acquire land and wealth. Settler colonialists again chose their own means of conquest. Such fighters are often viewed as courageous heroes, but killing the unarmed women, children, and old people and burning homes and fields involved neither courage nor sacrifice.

So it was from the planting of the first British colonies in North America. Among the initial leaders of those ventures were military men—mercenaries—who brought with them their previous war experiences in Britain’s imperialist, anti-Muslim Crusades. Those who put together and led the first colonial armies, such as John Smith in Virginia, Myles Standish at Plymouth, John Mason in Connecticut, and John Underhill in Massachusetts, had fought in the bitter, brutal, and bloody religious wars ongoing in Europe at the time of the

first settlements. They had long practiced burning towns and fields and killing the unarmed and vulnerable. “Tragically for the Indian peoples of the Eastern Seaboard,” Grenier observes, “the mercenaries unleashed a similar way of war in early Virginia and New England.”⁷

SETTLER-PARASITES CREATE THE VIRGINIA COLONY

The first Jamestown settlers lacked a supply line and proved unable or unwilling to grow crops or hunt for their own sustenance. They decided that they would force the farmers of the Powhatan Confederacy—some thirty polities—to provide them with food. Jamestown military leader John Smith threatened to kill all the women and children if the Powhatan leaders would not feed and clothe the settlers as well as provide them with land and labor. The leader of the confederacy, Wahunsonacock, entreated the invaders:

Why should you take by force that from us which you can have by love? Why should you destroy us, who have provided you with food? What can you get by war? . . . What is the cause of your jealousy? You see us unarmed, and willing to supply your wants, if you will come in a friendly manner, and not with swords and guns, as to invade an enemy.⁸

Smith’s threat was carried out: war against the Powhatans started in August 1609 and the destruction of the Powhatans became the order of the day. The war dragged on for a year until the English governor, Thomas West, ordered forces mobilized by George Percy, a mercenary who had fought in the Netherlands, “to take revenge” and destroy the Indigenous population. In his report following the assault, Percy gloated over the gruesome details of killing all the children. Despite the terrorizing tactics of the settlers, the Powhatans were able to protect their grain storage buildings and force the Jamestown settlers to shelter within their colonial fortress.⁹ Meanwhile the Powhatans organized a stronger confederacy. In 1622, they attacked all the English settlements along the James River, kill-

ing 350—a third of the settler population. Unable to eliminate the Indigenous population by force of arms, the colonists resorted to a “feedfight,” as Grenier identifies it—systematic destruction of all the Indigenous agricultural resources.¹⁰ A dozen years later an even greater conflict broke out, the Tidewater War (1644–46). Hardly a war, it consisted rather of settlers continuously raiding Indigenous villages and fields with the goal of starving the people out of the area. There followed three decades of peace, from which the settlers inferred that total war and expulsion of the Indigenous people worked. The few Indigenous families that remained in eastern Virginia were under the absolute dominance of the English. It was clear, Grenier points out, that “the English would tolerate Indians within and near their settlements provided they essentially neither saw nor heard them.”¹¹ In the absence of Indigenous sources of food and labor, the colonists brought in enslaved Africans and indentured European servants to do the work.

By 1676, the settler population of Virginia had mushroomed and English tobacco farmers were encroaching on the lands of the Susquehannock people. When the Susquehannocks resisted, a war broke out that went badly for the English. In 1676, the Virginia House of Burgesses formed a mounted force of 125 men to range through a particular cluster of Indigenous villages and thereby overcome Susquehannock resistance.¹² This was the immediate background of Bacon’s Rebellion, so beloved by populist US historians and those who search for the onset of racialized servitude in the British colonies. The rebellion occurred when Anglo settler-farmers along with landless indentured servants—both Anglo and African—took into their own hands the slaughter of Indigenous farmers with the aim of taking their land. The plantation owners who ruled the colony were troubled, to be sure, by the interracial aspect of the uprising. Soon after, Virginia law made greater distinction between indentured servants and slaves and codified the permanent status of slavery for Africans.¹³ The point is an important one, but there is a larger issue. Bacon’s Rebellion affected the development of genocidal policies aimed at the Indigenous peoples—namely, the creation of wealth in the colonies based on landholding and the use of landless or land-poor settler-farmers as foot soldiers for moving

the settlement frontier deeper into Indigenous territories.¹⁴ That the rebellion's leader, Nathaniel Bacon, was a wealthy planter reveals the relationship between the wealthy landed settlers and the poorer, often landless, settlers. Historian Eric Foner rightly concludes that the rebellion was a power play by Bacon against the Virginia governor William Berkeley and his planter allies, as Bacon's financial backers included other wealthy planters opposed to Berkeley.¹⁵