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AN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

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WOUNDED KNEE 1890 AND 1973

The period between the "closing of the frontier," marked by the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, and the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee, which marks the beginning of Indigenous decolonization in North America, is illuminated by following the historical experience of the Sioux. The first international relationship between the Sioux Nation and the US government was established in 1805 with a treaty of peace and friendship two years after the United States acquired the Louisiana Territory, which included the Sioux Nation among many other Indigenous nations. Other such treaties followed in 1815 and 1825. These peace treaties had no immediate effect on Sioux political autonomy or territory. By 1834, competition in the fur trade,

with the market dominated by the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, led the Oglala Sioux to move away from the Upper Missouri to the Upper Platte near Fort Laramie. By 1846, seven thousand Sioux had moved south. Thomas Fitzpatrick, the Indian agent in 1846, recommended that the United States purchase land to establish a fort, which became Fort Laramie. "My opinion," Fitzpatrick wrote, "is that a post at, or in the vicinity of Laramie is much wanted, it would be nearly in the center of the buffalo range, where all the formidable Indian tribes are fast approaching, and near where there will eventually be a struggle for the ascendancy [in the fur trade]."[15] Fitzpatrick believed that a garrison of at least three hundred soldiers would be necessary to keep the Indians under control.

Although the Sioux and the United States redefined their relationship in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, this was followed by a decade of war between the two parties, ending with the Peace Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. Both of these treaties, though not reducing Sioux political sovereignty, ceded large parts of Sioux territory by establishing mutually recognized boundaries, and the Sioux granted concessions to the United States that gave legal color to the Sioux's increasing economic dependency on the United States and its economy. During the half century before the 1851 treaty, the Sioux had been gradually enveloped in the fur trade and had become dependent on horses and European-manufactured guns, ammunition, iron cookware, tools, textiles, and other items of trade that replaced their traditional crafts. On the plains the Sioux gradually abandoned farming and turned entirely to bison hunting for their subsistence and for trade. This increased dependency on the buffalo in turn brought deeper dependency on guns and ammunition that had to be purchased with more hides, creating the vicious circle that characterized modern colonialism. With the balance of power tipped by mid-century, US traders and the military exerted pressure on the Sioux for land cessions and rights of way as the buffalo population decreased. The hardships for the Sioux caused by constant attacks on their villages, forced movement, and resultant disease and starvation took a toll on their strength to resist domination. They entered into the 1868 treaty with the United States on strong terms from a military standpoint—the Sioux remained an effective

guerrilla fighting force through the 1880s, never defeated by the US army—but their dependency on buffalo and on trade allowed for escalated federal control when buffalo were purposely exterminated by the army between 1870 and 1876. After that the Sioux were fighting for survival.

Economic dependency on buffalo and trade was replaced with survival dependency on the US government for rations and commodities guaranteed in the 1868 treaty. The agreement stipulated that "no treaty for the cession of any portion or part of the reservation herein described which may be held in common shall be of any validation or force against the said Indians, unless executed and signed by at least three fourths of all the adult male Indians." Nevertheless, in 1876, with no such validation, and with the discovery of gold by Custer's Seventh Cavalry, the US government seized the Black Hills—Paha Sapa—a large, resource-rich portion of the treaty-guaranteed Sioux territory, the center of the great Sioux Nation, a religious shrine and sanctuary. When the Sioux surrendered after the wars of 1876–77, they lost not only the Black Hills but also the Powder River country. The next US move was to change the western boundary of the Sioux Nation, whose territory, though atrophied from its original, was a contiguous block. By 1877, after the army drove the Sioux out of Nebraska, all that was left was a block between the 103rd meridian and the Missouri, thirty-five thousand square miles of land the United States had designated as Dakota Territory (the next step toward statehood, in this case the states of North and South Dakota). The first of several waves of northern European immigrants now poured into eastern Dakota Territory, pressing against the Missouri River boundary of the Sioux. At the Anglo-American settlement of Bismarck on the Missouri, the westward-pushing Northern Pacific Railroad was blocked by the reservation. Settlers bound for Montana and the Pacific Northwest called for trails to be blazed and defended across the reservation. Promoters who wanted cheap land to sell at high prices to immigrants schemed to break up the reservation. Except for the Sioux units that continued to fight, the majority of the Sioux people were unarmed, had no horses, and were unable even to feed and clothe themselves, dependent upon government rations.

Next came allotment. Before the Dawes Act was even implemented, a government commission arrived in Sioux territory from Washington, DC, in 1888 with a proposal to reduce the Sioux Nation to six small reservations, a scheme that would leave nine million acres open for Euro-American settlement. The commission found it impossible to obtain signatures of the required three-fourths of the nation as required under the 1868 treaty, and so returned to Washington with a recommendation that the government ignore the treaty and take the land without Sioux consent. The only means to accomplish that goal was legislation, Congress having relieved the government of the obligation to negotiate a treaty. Congress commissioned General George Crook to head a delegation to try again, this time with an offer of $1.50 per acre. In a series of manipulations and dealings with leaders whose people were now starving, the commission garnered the needed signatures. The great Sioux Nation was broken into small islands soon surrounded on all sides by European immigrants, with much of the reservation land a checkerboard with settlers on allotments or leased land.[16] Creating these isolated reservations broke the historical relationships between clans and communities of the Sioux Nation and opened areas where Europeans settled. It also allowed the Bureau of Indian Affairs to exercise tighter control, buttressed by the bureau's boarding school system. The Sun Dance, the annual ceremony that had brought Sioux together and reinforced national unity, was outlawed, along with other religious ceremonies. Despite the Sioux people's weak position under late-nineteenth-century colonial domination, they managed to begin building a modest cattle-ranching business to replace their former bison-hunting economy. In 1903, the US Supreme Court ruled, in *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*, that a March 3, 1871, appropriations rider was constitutional and that Congress had "plenary" power to manage Indian property. The Office of Indian Affairs could thus dispose of Indian lands and resources regardless of the terms of previous treaty provisions. Legislation followed that opened the reservations to settlement through leasing and even sale of allotments taken out of trust. Nearly all prime grazing lands came to be occupied by non-Indian ranchers by the 1920s.

By the time of the New Deal–Collier era and nullification of

Indian land allotment under the Indian Reorganization Act, non-Indians outnumbered Indians on the Sioux reservations three to one. However, the drought of the mid- to late-1930s drove many settler ranchers off Sioux land, and the Sioux purchased some of that land, which had been theirs. However, "tribal governments" imposed in the wake of the Indian Reorganization Act proved particularly harmful and divisive for the Sioux.[17] Concerning this measure, the late Mathew King, elder traditional historian of the Oglala Sioux (Pine Ridge), observed: "The Bureau of Indian Affairs drew up the constitution and by-laws of this organization with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. This was the introduction of home rule. . . . The traditional people still hang on to their Treaty, for we are a sovereign nation. We have our own government."[18] "Home rule," or neocolonialism, proved a short-lived policy, however, for in the early 1950s the United States developed its termination policy, with legislation ordering gradual eradication of every reservation and even the tribal governments.[19] At the time of termination and relocation, per capita annual income on the Sioux reservations stood at $355, while that in nearby South Dakota towns was $2,500. Despite these circumstances, in pursuing its termination policy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs advocated the reduction of services and introduced its program to relocate Indians to urban industrial centers, with a high percentage of Sioux moving to San Francisco and Denver in search of jobs.[20]

Mathew King has described the United States throughout its history as alternating between a "peace" policy and a "war" policy in its relations with Indigenous nations and communities, saying that these pendulum swings coincided with the strength and weakness of Native resistance. Between the alternatives of extermination and termination (war policies) and preservation (peace policy), King argued, were interim periods characterized by benign neglect and assimilation. With organized Indigenous resistance to war programs and policies, concessions are granted. When pressure lightens, new schemes are developed to separate Indians from their land, resources, and cultures. Scholars, politicians, policymakers, and the media rarely term US policy toward Indigenous peoples as colonialism. King, however, believed that his people's country had been a colony of the United States since 1890.

The logical progression of modern colonialism begins with economic penetration and graduates to a sphere of influence, then to protectorate status or indirect control, military occupation, and finally annexation. This corresponds to the process experienced by the Sioux people in relation to the United States. The economic penetration of fur traders brought the Sioux within the US sphere of influence. The transformation of Fort Laramie from a trading post, the center of Sioux trade, to a US Army outpost in the mid-nineteenth century indicates the integral relationship between trade and colonial control. Growing protectorate status established through treaties culminated in the 1868 Sioux treaty, followed by military occupation achieved by extreme exemplary violence, such as at Wounded Knee in 1890, and finally dependency. Annexation by the United States is marked symbolically by the imposition of US citizenship on the Sioux (and most other Indians) in 1924. Mathew King and other traditional Sioux saw the siege of Wounded Knee in 1973 as a turning point, although the violent backlash that followed was harsh.

Two decades of collective Indigenous resistance culminating at Wounded Knee in 1973 defeated the 1950s federal termination policy. Yet proponents of the disappearance of Indigenous nations seem never to tire of trying. Another move toward termination developed in 1977 with dozens of congressional bills to abrogate all Indian treaties and terminate all Indian governments and trust territories. Indigenous resistance defeated those initiatives as well, with another caravan across the country. Like colonized peoples elsewhere in the world, the Sioux have been involved in decolonization efforts since the mid-twentieth century. Wounded Knee in 1973 was part of this struggle, as was their involvement in UN committees and international forums.[21] However, in the early twenty-first century, free-market fundamentalist economists and politicians identified the communally owned Indigenous reservation lands as an asset to be exploited and, under the guise of helping to end Indigenous poverty on those reservations, call for doing away with them—a new extermination and termination initiative.