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AN
INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES'
HISTORY
OF THE
UNITED STATES

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ANNIHILATION UNTO TOTAL SURRENDER

The US Army's search-and-destroy missions and forced relocations (ethnic cleansing) in the West are well documented but perhaps not normally considered in the light of counterinsurgency.

Mari Sandoz recorded one such story in her 1953 best-selling work of nonfiction *Cheyenne Autumn*, on which John Ford based a 1964 film.³³ In 1878, the great Cheyenne resistance leaders Little Wolf and Dull Knife led more than three hundred Cheyenne civilians from a military reservation in Indian Territory, where they had been forcibly confined, to their original homeland in what is today Wyoming and Montana. They were eventually intercepted by the military, but only following a dramatic chase covered by newspaper reporters. So much sympathy was aroused in eastern cities that the Cheyennes were provided a reservation in a part of their original homeland. A similar feat was that of the Nimi'ipuu (Nez Perce) under Chief Joseph, who tried to lead his people out of military incarceration in Idaho to exile in Canada. In 1877, pursued by two thousand soldiers of the US cavalry led by Nelson Miles, Nimi'ipuu led eight hundred civilians toward the Canadian border. They held out for nearly four months, evading the soldiers as well as fighting hit-and-run battles, while covering seventeen hundred miles. Some

were rounded up and placed in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, but they soon left on their own and returned to their Idaho homeland, eventually securing a small reservation there.

The longest military counterinsurgency in US history was the war on the Apache Nation, 1850–86. Goyathlay, known as Geronimo, famously led the final decade of Apache resistance. The Apaches and their Diné relatives, the Navajos, did not miss a beat in continuing resistance to colonial domination when the United States annexed their territory as a part of the half of Mexico taken in 1848. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico, which sealed the transfer of territory, even stipulated that both parties were required to fight the "savage" Apaches. By 1877 the army had forced most Apaches into inhospitable desert reservations. Led by Geronimo, Chiricahua Apaches resisted incarceration in the San Carlos reservation designated for them in Arizona. When Geronimo finally surrendered—he was never captured—the group numbered only thirty-eight, most of those women and children, with five thousand soldiers in pursuit, which meant that the insurgents had wide support both north and south of the recently drawn US-Mexico border. Guerrilla warfare persists only if it has deep roots in the people being represented, the reason it is sometimes called "people's war." Obviously, the Apache resistance was not a military threat to the United States but rather a symbol of resistance and freedom. Herein lies the essence of counterinsurgent colonialist warfare: no resistance can be tolerated. Historian William Appleman Williams aptly described the US imperative as "annihilation unto total surrender."³⁴

Geronimo and three hundred other Chiricahuas who were not even part of the fighting force were rounded up and transported by train under military guard to Fort Marion, in St. Augustine, Florida, to join hundreds of other Plains Indian fighters already incarcerated there. Remarkably, Geronimo negotiated an agreement with the United States so that he and his band would surrender as prisoners of war, rather than as common criminals as the Texas Rangers desired, which would have meant executions by civil authorities. The POW status validated Apache sovereignty and made the captives eligible for treatment according to the international laws of

war. Geronimo and his people were transferred again, to the army base at Fort Sill in Indian Territory, and lived out their lives there. The US government had not yet created the term "unlawful combatant," which it would do in the early twenty-first century, depriving legitimate prisoners of war fair treatment under international law.

During the Grant administration, the United States began experimenting with new colonial institutions, the most pernicious of which were the boarding schools, modeled on Fort Marion prison. In 1875, Captain Richard Henry Pratt was in charge of transporting seventy-two captive Cheyenne and other Plains Indian warriors from the West to Fort Marion, an old Spanish fortress, dark and dank. After the captives were left shackled for a period in a dungeon, Pratt took their clothes away, had their hair cut, dressed them in army uniforms, and drilled them like soldiers. "Kill the Indian and save the man" was Pratt's motto. This "successful" experiment led Pratt to establish the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania in 1879, the prototype for the many militaristic federal boarding schools set up across the continent soon after, augmented by dozens of Christian missionary boarding schools. The decision to establish Carlisle and other off-reservation boarding schools was made by the US Office of Indian Affairs, later renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The stated goal of the project was assimilation. Indigenous children were prohibited from speaking their mother tongues or practicing their religions, while being indoctrinated in Christianity. As in the Spanish missions in California, in the US boarding schools the children were beaten for speaking their own languages, among other infractions that expressed their humanity. Although stripped of the languages and skills of their communities, what they learned in boarding school was useless for the purposes of effective assimilation, creating multiple lost generations of traumatized individuals.³⁵

Just before the centennial of US independence, in late June 1876, then-Lieutenant Colonel Custer, commanding 225 soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry, prepared to launch a military assault on the civilians living in a cluster of Sioux and Cheyenne villages that lay along the Little Bighorn River. Led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were ready for the assault and wiped

out the assailants, including Custer, who after death was promoted to general. The proud author of multiple massacres of Indigenous civilians, starting during the Civil War with his assault on unarmed and reservation-incarcerated Cheyennes on the Washita in Indian Territory, Custer "died for your [colonialist] sins," in the words of Vine Deloria Jr.³⁶ A year later, Crazy Horse was captured and imprisoned, then killed trying to escape. He was thirty-five years old.

Crazy Horse was a new kind of leader to emerge after the Civil War, at the beginning of the army's wars of annihilation in the northern plains and the Southwest. Born in 1842 in the shadow of the sacred Paha Sapa (Black Hills), he was considered special, a quiet and brooding child. Already the effects of colonialism were present among his people, particularly alcoholism and missionary influence. Crazy Horse became a part of the Akicita, a traditional Sioux society that kept order in villages and during migrations. It also had authority to make certain that the hereditary chiefs were doing their duty and dealt harshly with those who did not. Increasingly during Crazy Horse's youth, the primary concern was the immigrant defilement of the Sioux territory. A steady stream of Euro-American migrants clotted the trail to Oregon Territory. Young militant Sioux wished to drive them away, but the Sioux were now dependent on the trail for supplies. In 1849, the army arrived and planted a base, Fort Laramie, in Sioux territory. Sporadic fighting broke out, leading to treaty meetings and agreements, most of which were bogus army documents signed by unauthorized individuals. Crazy Horse was a natural in guerrilla warfare, becoming legendary among his people. Although Crazy Horse and other militants did not approve of the 1868 US treaty with the Sioux, some stability held until Custer's soldiers found gold in the Black Hills. Then a gold rush was on, with hordes of prospectors from all over converging and running rampant over the Sioux. The treaty had ostensibly been a guarantee that such would not occur. Soon after, the Battle of the Little Bighorn put an end to Custer but not to the invasion.

Indigenous peoples in the West continued to resist, and the soldiers kept hunting them down, incarcerating them, massacring civilians, removing them, and stealing their children to haul off to faraway boarding schools. The Apache, Kiowa, Sioux, Ute, Kick-

apoo, Comanche, Cheyenne, and other nations were attacked, leaving community after community decimated. By the 1890s, although some military assaults on Indigenous communities and valiant Indigenous armed resistance continued, most of the surviving Indigenous refugees were confined to federal reservations, their children transported to distant boarding schools to unlearn their Indigenousness.

GHOST DANCING

Disarmed, held in concentration camps, their children taken away, half starved, the Indigenous peoples of the West found a form of resistance that spread like wildfire in all directions from its source, thanks to a Paiute holy man, Wovoka, in Nevada. Pilgrims journeyed to hear his message and to receive directions on how to perform the Ghost Dance, which promised to restore the Indigenous world as it was before colonialism, making the invaders disappear and the buffalo return. It was a simple dance performed by everyone, requiring only a specific kind of shirt that was to protect the dancers from gunfire. In the twentieth century Sioux anthropologist Ella Deloria interviewed a sixty-year-old Sioux man who remembered the Ghost Dance he had witnessed fifty years before as a boy:

Some fifty of us, little boys about eight to ten, started out across country over hills and valleys, running all night. I know now that we ran almost thirty miles. There on the Porcupine Creek thousands of Dakota people were in camp, all hurrying about very purposefully. In a long sweat lodge with openings at both ends, people were being purified in great companies for the holy dance, men by themselves and women by themselves, of course. . . .

The people, wearing the sacred shirts and feathers, now formed a ring. We were in it. All joined hands. Everyone was respectful and quiet, expecting something wonderful to happen. It was not a glad time, though. All wailed cautiously and in awe, feeling their dead were close at hand.

The leaders beat time and sang as the people danced, going round to the left in a sidewise step. They danced without rest, on and on, and they got out of breath but still they kept going as long as possible. Occasionally someone thoroughly exhausted and dizzy fell unconscious into the center and lay there "dead." Quickly those on each side of him closed the gap and went right on. After a while, many lay about in that condition. They were now "dead" and seeing their dear ones. As each one came to, she, or he, slowly sat up and looked about, bewildered, and then began wailing inconsolably. . . .

Waking to the drab and wretched present after such a glowing vision, it was little wonder that they wailed as if their poor hearts would break in two with disillusionment. But at least they had seen! The people went on and on and could not stop, day or night, hoping perhaps to get a vision of their own dead, or at least to hear the visions of others. They preferred that to rest or food or sleep. And so I suppose the authorities did think they were crazy—but they weren't. They were only terribly unhappy.³⁷

When the dancing began among the Sioux in 1890, reservation officials reported it as disturbing and unstoppable. They believed that it had been instigated by Hunkpapa Teton Sioux leader Tatanka Yotanka (Sitting Bull), who had returned with his people in 1881 from exile in Canada. He was put under arrest and imprisoned in his home, closely guarded by Indian police. Sitting Bull was killed by one of his captors on December 15, 1890.

All Indigenous individuals and groups living outside designated federal reservations were considered "fomenters of disturbance," as the War Department put it. Following Sitting Bull's death, military warrants of arrest were issued for leaders such as Big Foot, who was responsible for several hundred civilian refugees who had not yet turned themselves in to the designated Pine Ridge Reservation. When Big Foot heard of Sitting Bull's death and that the army was looking for him and his people—350 Lakotas, 230 of them women and children—he decided to lead them through the subzero weather to Pine Ridge to surrender. En route on foot, they encountered US

troops. The commander ordered that they be taken to the army camp at Wounded Knee Creek, where armed soldiers surrounded them. Two Hotchkiss machine guns were mounted on the hillside, enough firepower to wipe out the whole group. During the night, Colonel James Forsyth and the Seventh Cavalry, Custer's old regiment, arrived and took charge. These soldiers had not forgotten that Lakota relatives of these starving, unarmed refugees had killed Custer and decimated his troops at the Little Bighorn fourteen years earlier. With orders to transport the refugees to a military stockade in Omaha, Forsyth added two more Hotchkiss guns trained on the camp, then issued whiskey to his officers. The following morning, December 29, 1890, the soldiers brought the captive men out from their campsites and called for all weapons to be turned in. Searching tents, soldiers confiscated tools, such as axes and knives. Still not satisfied, the officers ordered skin searches. A Winchester rifle turned up. Its young owner did not want to part with his beloved rifle, and, when the soldiers grabbed him, the rifle fired a shot into the air. The killing began immediately. The Hotchkiss guns began firing a shell a second, mowing down everyone except a few who were able to run fast enough. Three hundred Sioux lay dead. Twenty-five soldiers were killed in "friendly fire."³⁸ Bleeding survivors were dragged into a nearby church. Being Christmastime, the sanctuary was candlelit and decked with greenery. In the front, a banner read: PEACE ON EARTH AND GOOD WILL TO MEN.

The Seventh Cavalry attack on a group of unarmed and starving Lakota refugees attempting to reach Pine Ridge to accept reservation incarceration in the frozen days of December 1890 symbolizes the end of Indigenous armed resistance in the United States. The slaughter is called a battle in US military annals. Congressional Medals of Honor were bestowed on twenty of the soldiers involved. A monument was built at Fort Riley, Kansas, to honor the soldiers killed by friendly fire. A battle streamer was created to honor the event and added to other streamers that are displayed at the Pentagon, West Point, and army bases throughout the world. L. Frank Baum, a Dakota Territory settler later famous for writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, edited the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* at the time. Five days after the sickening event at Wounded Knee, on

January 3, 1891, he wrote, "The Pioneer [*sic*] has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth."³⁹

Three weeks before the massacre, General Sherman had made clear that he regretted nothing of his three decades of carrying out genocide. In a press conference he held in New York City, he said, "Injins must either work or starve. They never have worked; they won't work now, and they will never work." A reporter asked, "But should not the government supply them with enough to keep them from starvation?" "Why," Sherman asked in reply, "should the government support 260,000 able-bodied campers? No government that the world has ever seen has done such a thing."⁴⁰

The reaction of one young man to Wounded Knee is representative but also extraordinary. Plenty Horses attended the Carlisle school from 1883 to 1888, returning home stripped of his language, facing the dire reality of the genocide of his people, with no traditional or modern means to make a living. He said, "There was no chance to get employment, nothing for me to do whereby I could earn my board and clothes, no opportunity to learn more and remain with the whites. It disheartened me and I went back to live as I had before going to school."⁴¹ Historian Philip Deloria notes: "The greatest threat to the reservation program . . . was the disciplined Indian who refused the gift of civilization and went 'back to the blanket,' as Plenty Horses tried."⁴² But it wasn't simple for Plenty Horses to find his place. As Deloria points out, he had missed the essential period of Lakota education, which takes place between the ages of fourteen and nineteen. Due to his absence and Euro-American influence, he was suspect among his own people, and even that world was disrupted by colonialist chaos and violence. Still, Plenty Horses returned to traditional dress, grew his hair long, and participated in the Ghost Dance. He also joined a band of armed resisters, and they were present at Pine Ridge on December 29, 1890, when the bloody bodies were brought in from the Wounded Knee Massacre. A week later, he went out with forty other mounted warriors who accompanied Sioux leaders to meet Lieutenant Edward Casey for

possible negotiations. The young warriors were angry, none more than Plenty Horses, who pulled out from the group and got behind Casey and shot him in the back of his head.

Army officials had to think twice about charging Plenty Horses with murder. They were faced with the corollary of the recent army massacre at Wounded Knee, in which the soldiers received Congressional Medals of Honor for their deeds. At trial, Plenty Horses was acquitted due to the state of war that existed. Acknowledging a state of war was essential in order to give legal cover to the massacre.

As a late manifestation of military action against Indigenous peoples, Wounded Knee stands out. Deloria notes that in the preceding years, the Indian warrior imagery so prevalent in US American society was being replaced with "docile, pacified Indians started out on the road to civilization."

Luther Standing Bear, for example, recounts numerous occasions on which the Carlisle Indian Industrial School students were displayed as docile and educable Indians. The Carlisle band played at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and then toured several churches. Students were carted around East Coast cities. Standing Bear himself was placed on display in Wanamaker's Philadelphia department store, locked in a glass cell in the center of the store and set to sorting and pricing jewelry.⁴³