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## Preface

We are a race constantly hungry for power. It's what drives and motivates us and can easily push man to great lengths he didn't know he was capable of. Because of this, despite exceptions to the rule, the world's history reeks of man's continuous fight to dominate. Whether about race, religion, sex, etc. there is and will always be someone striving to be on top. Debatably, the most significant struggle for dominance is that for the most powerful race, with white, Western Europeans usually coming out on top. I believe the large variety of races, cultures, and traditions our world has to offer is what makes it so beautiful. If every person and place were exactly the same, how would we ever learn, change and evolve? If all these different pieces and details of our world are what mold this planet to be as diverse as it is, why attempt to strip it of that? It exhausts and angers me that it's "only human nature" to always be striving for bigger, better and more powerful. Through out American history, these ideals have been reflected in the relationship between the Indians<sup>1</sup> and the Americans. Spanning from Columbus's voyage to current day, a lack of respect for Indians has overshadowed the possibility for a mutual, equal relationship between the two races. Forced to endure strenuous labor and assimilate in to western ideals, their traditions and cultures have been abated and have gone greatly unappreciated. So how, you might ask, have we gone so long not viewing this treatment as a bad thing? Were there ever reasons to justify the actions that took place between the Indians and the "superior" power? I don't believe there is any justification for these actions nor is there any way to rationalize it.

It's true the settlers, explorers, and even current day Americans really saw no flaws in their actions because they truly believed they were the superior race. In many cases, their actions were just viewed as a way to "better" the Indians, instead of harming them. Take the United States, the primary policy of the government towards Indians until recently was to assimilate them; they were savages. In the eyes of the Americans, they were uncivilized and knew nothing of the "right way to live." Luckily for the Indians, the Americans made it a priority to help them become accustomed to the "dominant culture" in the United States. As Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the first American Indian boarding school in the late 1870's, once said, "Kill the Indian- Save the man."

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<sup>1</sup> It is often believed that the term "Native American" is the proper term to refer to American Indians as. But this term was coined in the early 1900's because it was believed that use of the word "Indian" was disrespectful as they were not in fact from India and were given this term by Christopher Columbus who was too much of an idiot to realize he was not actually in India. Although these statements are true about the term "Indian", Russell Means, the Lakota activist and founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM), has strongly rejected "Native American" in favor of "Indian" (<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/aihmterms.html>) due to the fact "Native Americans" did not take part in the Trail of Tears and Wounded Knee, Indians did. "According to a 1995 census survey, 49.76 percent of American Indians preferred that term, compared to 37.35 percent preferring *Native American* and much smaller numbers preferring other terms." (<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nc-american-indians/5526>) "Native American" is also a term that can be seen as simply a way to take some guilt off of the shoulders of Americans.

## History of Repetition

During Columbus' and Cortez's expedition, the settlers entrance in America and the interactions between the Americans and American Indians, the indigenous people faced poor treatment, including having their rights stripped and their people killed. As a result, the cultures of the indigenous people were slowly decimated.

How we treat the events of the past is a reflection of our country in the present. In America, there is a strong presence of Indian suppression caused by the ancestors of people like me, who can trace their roots in America as far back as the May Flower. It is our job as an individual in the present to educate ourselves about the then and the now to reassure these tragic events are not recurring events.

## Treatment of Indians

Even though the possibility of better intentions was there, there's almost no way to justify the actions of the explorers, settlers and Americans. You can argue it's human nature and you can say they meant well but simply put, overpowering the indigenous and stripping them of their culture is inhumane because they are, just like everyone else, an equal part of the human race.

Since the dawn of Western exploration, the indigenous people have been treated brutally and unfairly. The intentions of the explorers were most often to find new land, gold or slaves and there was little to nothing that they wouldn't do to obtain what they wanted. But were the explorer's approaches or attitudes to acquire what they wanted in any way reasonable? When Christopher Columbus found that the land he "discovered" potentially had gold, he used this as reasoning for the King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to fund another voyage abroad. Upon his return he forced the "Indians" to find and meet a certain quota for gold each month. Little did he know there was far less gold than he was asking for and it would have been impossible for them to ever meet that quota. To then make up for the lack of gold, Columbus returned to Spain with a larger amount of slaves than he originally intended to. 560 Arawaks were enslaved during his second voyage and brought back to Spain. Triggered by his desire for power and gold and his miscalculations for how much there was, the natives suffered through torture, enslavement, abuse and death.

Following up Columbus' exploration, in 1519 Cortéz, 508 soldiers, and 11 ships reached the banks of Yucatan with a goal to colonize new land for the Spanish. They shot off their guns at approaching envoys, sent by Montezuma, to evoke intimidation. The envoys reported back, "The noise weakened one, dizzied one. Something like a stone came out of their weapons in a shower of fire and sparks. The smoke was foul; it had a sickening, fetid smell." ("Hernan Cortes Arrives in Mexico." *PBS*.) Along with the fact that Cortéz had a striking resemblance to the Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl. Because of this, when he arrived to greet the king, Cortéz and his men were given gold, food and women. They, on the other hand, believed they should use that opportunity to convert the Aztecs to Christianity. "The Spaniards gathered the natives together and shouted the essentials of the Gospel, oblivious to the fact that the Aztecs did not understand their language. If the natives refused to fall to their knees and repent, the Spaniards assumed they were

rejecting the word of God and killed or enslaved them.” (Tangen, Turid. "The Conquest of the Aztecs." *Cortes Conquers Aztecs: 1521*.) Fighting amongst the Aztecs and the Spaniards continued when Cortéz and his men took Montezuma captive leading to a large decrease in the Aztec population. Meanwhile, the Spaniards plagued the Aztecs with disease that their bodies held no immunity to, wiping out almost three quarters of the entire population.

A little more than a century later in Jamestown, a group of settlers led by John Smith sailed in to the Chesapeake Bay. Due to previous experiences with the Spanish, the local Indians' initial reaction was to attack although they later warmed up to the newcomers by offering them food. As the settlers continued to adapt and get used to their new land, the relations between them and the Indians began to turn. The settlers became more reliant on the food of the Indians as they were more interested in finding immediate wealth than planting their own crops. Since the ideals of John Smith were similar to those of the Spaniards- that he and his men were above the Indians- Smith and the other settlers began to treat them far less respectfully by taking what they needed by force and forcing them in to labor and slavery. With this, the tribe and their leader, Powhatan, retaliated, killing their livestock, attacking men and burning the few crops they had grown. To no surprise, the settlers used this chance to burn down Indian settlements and their crops. The fighting continued back and forth until Powhatan was forced into a truce. (Graham, John. "How Did the Puritans in New England Interact with Native Americans?" *Helium*.) Prior to their experience with the settlers, the natives showed their fear of the newcomers. Scarred from previous events, they had no way to tell if this encounter was to in anyway be a positive experience. Instead of molding a better image for the settlers and the future pilgrims to come, they carried through the ideas of terror and brutal behavior.

In all cases, the land “discovered” by the explorers was by no means fairly conquered. Given the language barriers and the unequal modes of defense there was no way to call it a fair match. Explorers came armed with new age firearms that the indigenous people did not have, placing them in the weaker position for the events to come. Initial intentions between the two groups were also different in that the indigenous peoples had far better intentions than the explorers and settlers, only helping further the position of inferiority by being unprepared for the events that followed.

Years of discrimination against American Indians followed. From 1838 to 1839 the Cherokee nation was forced across the Mississippi river to present day Oklahoma as a result of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Policy. The Cherokees faced large amounts of death, disease and starvation. Over 4,000 of the initial 15,000 voyagers died. The Cherokee later labeled this event the “Trail of Tears” due to its devastating effect.<sup>2</sup>

But by forcing the Cherokee elsewhere, how was that helping? Who was in benefitting and what difference did it make (other than wiping out a portion of the Cherokee population)? There seems to be no satisfying answer to these questions other than to benefit the Americans in providing them with new land to occupy. Although the stated intentions were potentially good, the obvious outcome of the march was negative making it a cruel and unjust idea from the start. You simply cannot deny that there were no expected deaths on a march that lasted through out the winter that was approximately 1,000 miles long. I would go as far to say that it was an act of genocide and a crime

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<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1567.html>)

against humanity by the American government. And for not having read about it in textbooks or learning about it in my 12 years of schooling, it can easily be argued that a blind eye has been turned.

Following these events, in the late 1800's yet another mass murder took place. On December 29th, 1890 on the Pine Ridge Reservation, approximately 300 Indians were shot and killed by U.S. bodies. That day, part of the U.S. 7th cavalry regiment, led by Samuel M. Whitside, brought a group of miniconjou and hunkpapa Sioux Indians to make camp at wounded knee creek. When they arrived the bare arms of the Indians were forced off of them by U.S. soldiers. One Sioux man was particularly unsettled by this and in an argument over the issue a shot was, what was believed to be accidentally, fired. This triggered a response from the soldiers to shoot back and due to the lack of weapons the Indians held, there was almost no hope. With 300 Indians dead and only 25 casualties for the soldiers out of the initial 500, I believe it's a fair to label the event as a massacre. Following the events that took place, 20 soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions during the battle. American Indian activists have urged for these medals to be withdrawn but have had no such luck. How can we award these men for such acts that were by no means honorable? How is giving the highest honor in the military to men who began a battle over a what could have possibly been a misunderstanding and ended up killing 200, unarmed women and children? You can rack your brain for hours but the justice is by no means there. The decisions on the medals were entirely biased. You support your team, your men and your people. But where was the Medal of Honor for the Sioux?

Meanwhile, national efforts to assimilate the American Indians in to western culture were taking place. The strongest example of this is the American Indian boarding schools. The Indian boarding schools are schools where children on Indian reservations were taken, in some cases by force, others by choice, to assimilate them into Western ways and Christianity. They ran through the late 19th century into the early 20th century. The children who attended were only given an education equivalent to today's eighth grade level. They did not intend for the students to gain as proper of an education as the other American children, they just meant to teach them enough to assimilate them into their ways but make them account to nothing more than servants, secretaries and teachers at the very best. At these schools, the children were forced to cut their hair, change their clothes, and bathe themselves upon arrival. They were forbidden to speak their language, practice their traditions and religions and wear their traditional clothes. If they broke these rules it often resulted in abuse ranging from sexual, physical and mental, in nature. At these schools, "Students were taught to hate who they were born to be. Ojibwa student Merta Bercier wrote: *Did I want to be an Indian? After looking at the pictures of the Indians on the warpath — fighting, scalping women and children, and Oh! Such ugly faces. No! Indians were mean people — I'm glad I'm not an Indian, I thought.*" ("Indian Boarding Schools." *PBS*) By using propaganda such as these photos the boarding schools manipulated and warped the perception of what it meant to be Indian. Some students were lucky enough to leave with a better sense of their Indian identity while most left with the traumatizing experience of abuse in varying forms. Many resorted to running away but upon return to their reservation they were met by the awaiting "boarding school" police who brought them back to school where they were most likely to face an abusive punishment.

Due to the fact that these schools brought children to an environment where they were intentionally made to feel badly towards their tribe and cultures, I bring these boarding schools to a lower point than many of the other discriminatory issues that the Indians faced. If the children talked in their own language, wore their own clothes, practiced their religion or took part in any of their traditions, they risked a potentially dangerous punishment. While attending the boarding schools they were alone, surrounded by white adults forcing their own beliefs and ideas on them giving them no one but themselves to stand up for them. But, they could not defend themselves; there was virtually no escape from the abusive environment for the students.

In the later 19th century, the event known as “The Incident of Oglala” took place. On June 26th, 1975, two FBI agents, Jack R. Coler and Ronald A. Williams drove in to Jumping Bull, the AIM (American Indian Movement) compound on the Oglala reservation in South Dakota, at high speed in search of Jimmy Eagle for whom they had a warrant. Tension on the reservation between the traditional and Americanized Sioux made the fast approaching car and gunshots a high-risk situation for the FBI agents. The shoot out that followed left both FBI agents and AIM member Joe Stuntz dead. Four men were put on trial for the death of Jack R. Coler and Ronald A. Williams while no man was convicted for the death of Joe Stuntz (mainly because both suspects were dead). James Eagle, Darrell Butler, Bob Robideau and Leonard Peltier were all put on trial for the murder of the agents. Eagle was let go due to insufficient evidence; Robideau and Butler were found not guilty while Leonard Peltier still remains in jail to this day. Peltier tried for a second trial but because of the lack of new evidence, it was refused.

Not only was Peltier just as guilty as Robideau and Butler, but also there was no sure way of proving any of them are particularly responsible. Peltier now faces two consecutive life terms and is expected to get out in 2040 when he’ll be 96 years old. Considering his diabetes and other health problems, the odds of his life span reaching that lengthy of a period are slim to nothing. So how can we keep this man in jail? It doesn’t seem right when there were far more men shooting their guns that could just have potentially shot the two FBI agents. And the fact that they were not the initial ones to aim their guns that day, their reaction was in self-defense. Where is the logic and reasoning behind these decisions?

Justifiable?

How were the actions of Columbus, Cortez, John Smith and the U.S. Government justifiable? Were they? Indigenous means original inhabitants of a certain land, there before external forces came to take over. From the beginning, indigenous people have been placed on unequal playing grounds that leave them in a far weaker position. As Explorers and Settlers came and conquered these new lands they enforced new rules and regulations for the local tribes to follow. Being behind in the ideas of new weapons and machinery it was nearly impossible for them to not fall under the power of the newcomers and by the time they had caught, it was far too late for them to regain what they had lost.

I’ve been told I should be thankful. With out the history with the Indians we wouldn’t be living in the America we have today. But maybe, I don’t want to live in an

America where that kind of past is there. Because, overpowering the indigenous and stripping them of their culture is inhumane because, like everyone else, they are equal as a part of the human race. It's hard to be loud and proud when you know of all the damage that's been done. And in a world where these topics are often excused in American classrooms, I don't see how we can say we've taken full responsibility. We celebrate holidays that cherish our past with the natives that don't even begin to cover the whole history. I guess the lingering knowledge that few acquire of the absurdities that Indians experienced isn't enough for me. I believe that by gaining a little insight on the matter holds the potential to cease any further events, like those that the Indians faced, from happening once again.