

The Abandoned American Indian of the U.S.

by Dale Schlundt

When one says the phrase “American Indian,” what comes to mind? Is it the fierce looking warrior on horseback or perhaps the individual in war paint holding a repeating rifle, ever ready for battle? We have so many political and societal issues being discussed in regards to 21st century American citizens, yet it is truly rare to hear any issues relating to present day American Indians. “Present day” being the key phrase. Isn’t it unfortunate, a people we forced to accept a European based society such as our own, are today left to be their own advocates in the U.S., typically having little voice at all? If asked to picture a person of indigenous ancestry, I would argue a much more realistic depiction would be one living a modern American life, much like you and I. Granted, perhaps with small variations, comparable to any differences between ethnicities. However, a vast many also continue to see the negative effects of the past that have yet to be corrected.

Poverty being a concerning issue among various contemporary American Indian communities. Of course, not every person of North American indigenous ancestry is living in poverty stricken communities, yet the numbers in regards to this are sobering. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a poll taken showed American Indians as one of two ethnic groups whose poverty rates peaked at 27%, as compared to a national U.S. average of 14.3%.¹ My question is how as a nation do we justify such misfortune among a people we have inarguably exerted so much influence over during the past two hundred plus years? Are we so far removed from the immoral actions of our own ancestors towards these native societies that we negate our responsibilities to the wellbeing of their communities today? In a time where recognition of past wrongs

is vital, it is certainly not the sole solution either. The phrase “talk is cheap” did not originate because it was false statement. Real advocacy, as well as action, is needed for the status quo to see a positive change in favor of the various American Indian heritages.

A loss of culture, if not the worst atrocity, is truly one not to be overlooked in terms of collateral damage done to native societies. All one has to do is research the Carlisle Indian School, opened in the late nineteenth century, in an effort to “convert” Indian children to be American. Youth not allowed to speak their own language, practice their faith, or wear non-European clothing, having a lasting effect. The hope was for them to grow up and be able to assimilate into white society, essentially “weaning” the Indian culture out of existence, if you will. Perhaps you are saying to yourself, “Well that’s not so bad, I guess.” However, through simply looking at race relations throughout history, foretelling success of this program should be simple. Despite many children adapting to American culture and even learning useful trades, what white communities would be accepting of them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? One thing that history proves is that public opinion is uncontrollable. The chances of successful Indian assimilation in that time period, despite a few individual’s best intentions, is minimal at best. Although, the Carlisle School had a devastating effect only a small group, relative to the many native inhabitants of the time period, it is just one of many examples of disservices done to American Indian cultures. Examples leading to the present socio-economic status many hold today. According to PBS *Indian Country Diaries*, an insightful work called “Revitalizing Native Culture,” in the 90’s there were 175 native languages

spoken compared to the many hundreds in pre-European contact.² Once again, staggering numbers that are very telling of the degeneration of indigenous populations and their heritage. In a time where we put value on respecting other cultures, it is a true embarrassment that few of us think of the American Indian in discussions about moving America forward, myself included.

I always begin my first day of the semester teaching U.S. History classes for college freshman with a picture of candidate Barack Obama visiting the Crow Tribal Reservation. I ask them why this is significant. Typically they answer correctly, even if not realizing the significance of the larger context. That being because we don’t see politicians, nor the public, giving contemporary American Indian groups a voice in American politics. Now the motivation behind candidate Obama visiting that reservation can obviously be debated. Yet regardless, when thinking of U.S. voters, I would suggest that conservative, liberals, and others may come to mind. Do individuals of North American indigenous ancestry pop up in our thoughts when picturing the American electorate? While we continue to argue over healthcare laws and asking the questions of “what can we do to help me,” I can’t help but think of the story of the Indian students from the Carlisle Indian School, getting off the train to greet their parents after being separated for so long. As they walk up to greet each other, they then realize they cannot, no longer does either speak the same language they once shared. Perhaps it is time to right the wrongs. ★

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Endnotes

- ¹ “American Indian and Alaska Native Poverty Rate About 50 Percent in Rapid City, S.D., and “About 30 Percent in Five Other Cities”, *U.S. Census Bureau*, Census Bureau Reports, FEB. 20, 2013.
- ² “Revitalizing Native Culture”, *Indian Country Diaries*, PBS, September, 2006.