

(This 1,500 word essay, written December 2022 is to remind other American Indians and First Peoples that we need to shake off our victim mentality. It paralyzes us as individuals and slows collective social and economic progress across Indian Country. We can stop being our worst enemy by replacing debilitating defeatism with pride and determination. That's how we achieve and exceed our former glory.

This is the right time in history for Natives to stand out as a bright beacon of pride, optimism, and self-respect. The new American fashion among many non-Natives is to play the victim, bizarrely including groups that are objectively the most-fortunate, least-discriminated-against people in history. Makes no sense until you notice that in goods, services, and media, convincing people they are victims has in recent decades become a very popular, extremely lucrative business model. But when everyone is the victim, no one is the victim, so American Indian complaints are drowned out anyway. Yet another reason to return to the old ways of thinking, talking, and behaving like proud victors, I think.)

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The Indians Won The Indian Wars

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The North American Indian Wars, which reached a bloody climax in the 1870s, stand out indelibly and vividly in the American psyche. Many believe the indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada lost the war.

But no, the Indians won. Miraculously and thanks to our creator we achieved the first, last, and only objective that mattered: **survival**. From the day the first European sails appeared on the horizon, the goal of every indigenous person was to survive as a people, together as a tribe, forever. Do anything and everything you can to save your tribe: fight, kill, die, run, hide, even surrender if that is the only way for your people to survive. No one wants the world to end, and for tribal peoples the tribe *is* the world. So in a great and glorious victory for our sliver of humanity, Indians fought and saved our world. It survives still.

The newly-arrived invaders had two goals: take our land and commit coast-to-coast genocide. They conveniently characterized our violence and self-sacrifice as animalistic, subhuman savagery, because if we weren't human, they weren't murderers. But we were more human than they were because we still knew and lived what they had long forgotten and abandoned: that living in truly communal societies -tribes- is what best suits natural human nature and is the best and happiest way to live a life. So of course we defended our way of life with shocking ferocity.

No outsider will ever fully understand what it means and feels like to be a member of one of the 574 U.S. tribes or 630 Canadian First Nations. On my large, remote Montana reservation, where nearly all of the 10,000 people living here are Indians, I feel a deep, ever-present, unbreakable connection and bond with the land and with all life around me. Ours is predominately a spiritual world and everything around me, seen and unseen, is alive. All this swirling life, for us, embodies and personifies human qualities, and so communicates with us like one human to another. Yes, I mean this literally, factually: a mountain, a tree, the bear, a stream, the sky, the spirits, the badger will engage us when the time and purpose arrives. For me and my blood family, the spirit animal that brings us messages and omens is usually an adult bald eagle.

On a morning in early 2022 I was driving westbound on I-90 in the low mountains east of Coeur d' Alene. I came over a rise overlooking a small valley with the freeway sweeping south through it in a broad curve. My eyes instantly fell on what I thought was a child a half mile ahead, standing in the 70mph road. Panicked, I sped up to reach the child as quickly as possible, but then my mind reeled as I got closer and realized what I was really looking at. I slowed way down because standing on the dashed lines between the slow and fast lane of I-90 was something that can never be mistaken for anything else: a large adult bald eagle, motionless, looking directly at me, waiting, about 3' tall, meaning we would be nearly at eye level when I passed in my Prius. But I expected the eagle to fly off as I approached because we had seen and acknowledged each other and in the past that had been all these encounters require. But, no, the eagle didn't budge, remaining statue-like except its head slowly swiveling, maintaining eye contact with me. Panic gave way to deep dread because I knew this was not a message, this was an omen, and it could only be a bad one for my eagle to come find me so far from home. I was in the slow lane, now slowed to a crawl, and rolled down my window. Time stood still as we locked eyes for an eternity, within four feet of each other. I looked in my side mirror immediately after passing and saw the eagle spread its wings and slowly fly off. There is no cell service in that valley so I drove as fast as I could to high ground and made frantic calls. This story is about how and why, not what, so I will end the story here other than to say the reason my eagle found me soon became clear.

What I am trying to explain is the immutable kernel and essential soul of our tribal existence. The inter-connectivity with... everything and everyone. Most people will likely find my words incomprehensibly abstract or just plain nonsensical and shake their heads in bewilderment or disbelief. But tribal members will smile mildly to themselves, nod unconsciously, and reflect on their own lives and experiences.

Here, on our 1.5 million acres bordering the Rockies and Canada, is an enveloping sense of belonging that comes, in part, from knowing there are 500 generations of my ancestors' blood under my feet. I feel like an integral, embedded part of a complete, self-contained world that is separate, distinct, and intentionally closed off from other societies. For those here, there's a constant immersion in our ancient culture and cosmology, the ever-present spirits, the unique way we communicate, the great comfort of being with your people, the constant stories and laughter. Having lived both ways, off-reservation life and on-reservation life are totally different. Indian tribes are the most humanistic yet spiritual societies imaginable and, again, the type of social system and structure humans are naturally best suited to.

So, today, our societies and now-sovereign boundaries remain demarcated because we like our version of humanity and "civilization" better than that of the colonizers. That's because 99% of Americans live in a world dominated by *things* and still carry with them the Aegean definition and ideals of progress and wealth. But Indians live in a world consisting mainly of *spirits, people, and animals*, not things. Our definition of progress has nothing to do with beating back the wilderness and making nature serve us. Assimilation failed because Indians like being Indians and would rather rule in our hell than serve in your heaven.* So today we still live together as tribes on sovereign states, large and small, just as we've done for at least 15,000 years, in even greater numbers now than at the end of the Indian Wars. (*My tribe, the Blackfeet, say "summer is heaven, winter is hell." Also, near us is a place called Hellgate, named so because of us: Google "Why is Missoula called Hellgate?" for some dastardly history. So I use the word "hell" in the sense of a physical world, nothing more.)

Against all odds, tribes have survived one formal and many unstated termination periods. It is our intention to outlast the Republic, cultures intact and thriving. So we must protect and strengthen our sovereignty. We may have won so far, but there are many battles left to fight.

Our continued survival requires two things. First, pride in who we are because that's the inspiration and motive force for Indians to keep fighting. Second, we need the 99% of Americans who are not Indians to want tribes to survive as separate, self-governing peoples, and to say so loudly and clearly to policymakers and anyone who will listen. The key is building bridges of good will and mutual understanding between Indian Country and the outside world, where the two worlds highly value each other's complementary place on this land and their contribution to larger society.

Which brings me to a story. In 1927 there was a big pile of rocks southwest of London on the Salisbury Plain that no one but archaeologists and anthropologists knew about. Who today doesn't know about Stonehenge? The moral? Protect and preserve your indigenous cultures, which are the roots and foundation of your national heritage, before it's too late. Let those cultures die and they are gone forever. The English woke up in time, will Americans?

Think about this. The reason the American persona, worldview, and sense of self is unique is that, in all of global history, only here did a well-established nation rapidly triple in size and open up a vast, dangerous, already-populated wilderness that Manifest Destiny demanded be quickly conquered. This is where the go-West-young-man-Darwinism-at-its-most-extreme, self-reliant-hard-working-tough-guy, wild-west-sorta-outlawish, freedom-loving American personality came from. Love it, hate it, but there it is. How essential are Indians to the heritage of America? Well, can you imagine an America shaped and forged by cowboys and Indians, only minus the Indians?

Neither can we. Thanks for reading. We will all benefit from the goodwill and friendship that comes from deep respect, meaningful communication, and mutual understanding. Let's talk again.

Note 1: *Big, isolated Plains & Southwest tribes (Blackfeet, Sioux, Navajo, et al) commonly call themselves "Indian." Western & Eastern tribes - especially those near large, non-Indian populations often call themselves "Native American." For Indians, it's a matter of adopting the terms others around you use. Both terms are fine, as is Native, indigenous, and (in Canada) First Peoples.*

Note 2: *U.S. Census says 2% of Americans claim tribal heritage. But over 1% consists of self-reported claims of Indian blood (e.g. family legends or blood from an ancestors not listed on the rolls of the 574 tribes). Fewer than 1% of Americans (about 2.9 million) are enrolled members of federally-recognized tribes and therefore legally-qualify as Indians, hence my 99% figure.*