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Native American Indoctrination in the American Boarding School System

There is no question that there are peculiar differences between particular Native American and Euro-American settler cultures. Their respective way of living, the structures of their society and how they related to nature are incommensurable and incompatible. The American boarding school system for Native Americans and the cultural assimilation projects from the eighteenth to the twentieth century sought to not only integrate the indigenous communities, but to completely assimilate them into the lower echelons of American society, starting from a particularly young age. These young Native Americans would often be forced to use Christian names, practice Protestantism or Catholicism and learn about American values, such as private property, individualism, Western family structure and so on. Although in 2004 there were still seventy-two Indian boarding schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, detailed observations of the present situation are outside the scope of this essay.[1]

The educational system forced upon the Native Americans by the US government was exceptionally egregious for a number of reasons. The forced education of Native Americans was in no sense benevolent, even if some of those who were responsible for this dark page in American history thought they were being charitable. While the skills necessary to survive in a Western society could have been beneficial to some Native Americans, they were often inadequate and came at the cost of cultural erasure. Richard Henry Pratt, a prominent boarding school founder, made a famous statement, which sums up the attitude of these institutions quite well: 'Kill the Indian, and Save the Man'. Remarkably, Pratt was considered a moderate in his time, as his approach of cultural genocide was still less severe than that of those who advocated physical genocide.[2]

His aims were focused on separating Native American children from their communities. This strategy served a number of ulterior goals. Adults were less likely to convert to Christianity than children, which made the latter a prime target for indoctrination. However, Pratt observed that on-reservation boarding schools allowed the risk of children running home. Moreover, he was strongly

[1] Stephen Colmant – Lahoma Schultz – Rockey Robbins – Peter Ciali – Julie Dorton and Yvette Rivera-Colmant: 'Constructing Meaning to the Indian Boarding School Experience.' *Journal of American Indian Education* 43, no. 3 (2004): 22–40. Accessed December 31, 2019. jstor.org/stable/24398535.

[2] Andrea Smith: 'Boarding School Abuses, Human Rights, and Reparations.' *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (98) (2004): 89–102. Accessed December 31, 2019. jstor.org/stable/29768278.

against summer breaks, as during this time the children would return to their communities, undoing the cultural indoctrination of the schools. He proposed that boarding schools for Native Americans should be outside reservations to eliminate the possibility that the children could run home. They would only be allowed to return to their families as young adults.[3]

The so called 'Land of Freedom' was notorious for racial and cultural transgressions; the case of Native Americans was the rule, not the exception. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, an active promoter of 'racial adjustment' wished to provide education for people of colour. He was a founder of Hampton University, which provided post-secondary education to the recently freed class of African Americans. Later, the institute accepted Native American students as well. While such an objective may seem noble from afar, his reasoning reveals the troubling attitude of nineteenth century progressive politics:

> These people, who are with us and with whom we share a common fate, are a thousand years behind us in moral and mental development. Substantially the two races, [Negro and Indian] are in the same condition, and the question as to what education is best for them, and how such education is to be put within their reach, is pressing itself closely upon all thinking men and women.[4]

As is revealed in this excerpt, even progressive attitudes were working against the cultural integrity of not only Native Americans, but other races or cultures which differed from the hegemonic white Ango-Saxon Protestant ideal. While such an approach would be deemed wholly unacceptable in the twenty-first century, it is important to evaluate the current state of education with regards to people of colour. However, such a task remains outside the scope of this essay, despite the urge to acknowledge the significance of this topic.

There were numerous issues with the way these boarding schools tried to educate Native Americans, but the core problem was the perception that the Indian way of life was somehow inferior and obsolete. Boarding schools did not employ educational methods which could have provided valuable skills to Native Americans, while cultivating their culture. Even the assumption that the learning offered in boarding schools was useful in and of itself is dubious. Moreover, these institutions were rife with abuse, including (but not limited to) sexual, physical and psychological abuses, which only intensified once the US government handed control over to various Christian organisations.

The previously mentioned Richard Pratt founded the first ever boarding school for Indians that was located outside a reservation, revolutionising the relation

3 Smith, 2004, 89–102.

4 Jacqueline Fear-Segal: 'Nineteenth-Century Indian Education: Universalism versus Evolutionism.' *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 2 (1999): 323–341. Accessed January 23, 2020. jstor.org/stable/27556648.

between education and Native youth. However, there were other attempts at cultural assimilation of Native Americans and other people of colour into the hegemonic section of society, such as the Hampton University of Samuel Chapman Armstrong. This was done under the philosophy of cultural universalism, coupled with the emerging field of scientific racism.

Despite the shared misguided approach of assimilation through pseudoscience, the Carlisle- and Hampton-styled schools faced fundamental disagreements in their way of dealing with the perceived problem of cultural diversity. Pratt's work with Native American education/indoctrination started with the racially mixed Hampton University. However, he had his own ambitions and ideas about the assimilation of Native Americans.[5] There is no doubt that Hampton University was the less egregious out of the two, although it is important to note that Carlisle focused mainly on primary and secondary education. The appalling nature of abuses at Carlisle was greatly amplified due to the fact that the victims were children. Nevertheless, their contrasting approaches did not create anonymity between the schools, quite the opposite. The institutions often joined forces against external criticism, as their goal was the same, even if their philosophies were different. Pratt himself claimed: 'The problem to me seems not how it is done, but to get it done at all'.[6]

Armstrong's fundamental philosophy was less progressive than Pratt's, yet it was precisely that difference which led to the extreme approach of the Carlisle institution. Families would be coerced into sending their children to his institution. For example, Native Americans were often deprived of good hunting spots by US encroachment. This led certain tribes to be dependent on US food aid to survive. As a result, withholding food rations was a common way to coerce Indian communities to send their children to off-reservation boarding schools.[7] There was no doubt in the minds of Indian communities that these boarding schools were harming their communities and children; however, they were powerless in the face of government encroachment on their way of living.

Sometimes, sick children were sent to Carlisle boarding schools by their parents in the hope that they would be treated, especially in cases of diseases unknown to the natives; however, it only made matters worse. Boarding schools were run as cheaply as possible, as one of the main considerations was that educating Indians should be a cost-efficient way of controlling them. As such, boarding school facilities were inadequate, often raising the problem of overcrowding, food and medical attention were scarce and students had to work themselves to raise money for

5 Fear-Segal, 1999, 323–341.

6 Ibid.

7 Mary Anette Pember: 'Tiny Horrors: A Chilling Reminder of How Cruel Assimilation Was—And Is' *Indian Country Today*, (2013). Accessed December 31, 2019. newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/tiny-horrors-a-chilling-reminder-of-how-cruel-assimilation-was-and-is-VLKL7I26wUSj4LmZL_YDvw

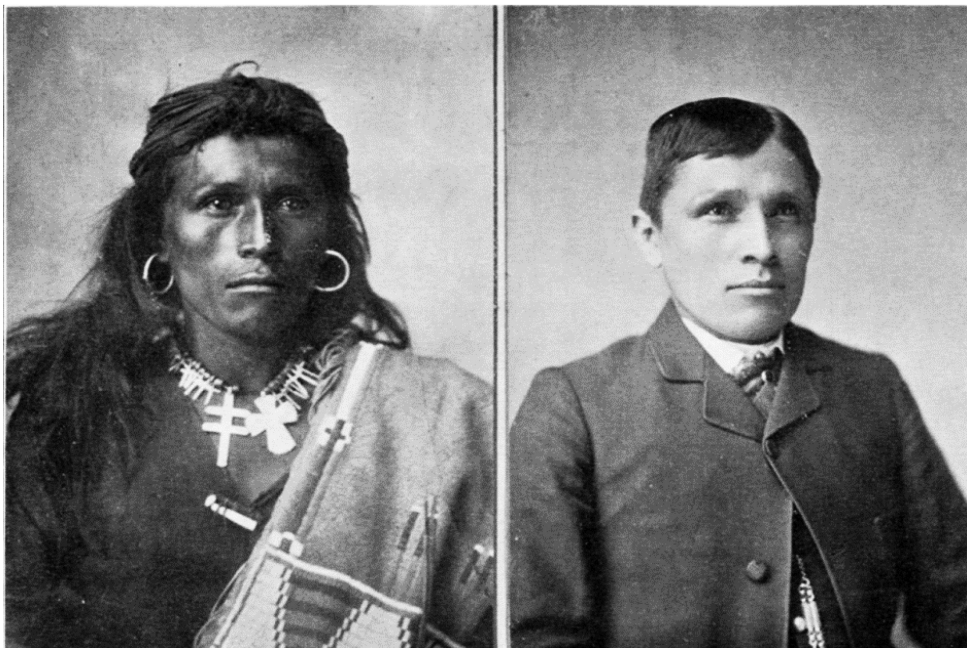
their institutions.[8] It is painfully apparent that the conditions at boarding schools combined with infectious diseases was a recipe for disaster.

Ironically, Armstrong's less favourable evaluation of Native Americans and people of colour in general, led to an education plan that was less at odds with the Indians' way of life and was more humane in general. He was an evolutionist and believed that Native Americans need to learn how to farm and raise livestock. Although he wanted to assimilate Indians into the hegemonic society, he did not believe in the notion that such a goal can be achieved within one generation.[9] While Pratt's approach was to isolate Indian children from their communities long enough for them to lose their culture, Armstrong's evolutionist attitude made him employ less drastic measures, allowing and even encouraging students to return home. Pratt would encourage his students to continue their education within the hegemonic white institutions, while Armstrong was sceptical of such an attitude, as he viewed 'overeducation' as a dangerous prospect for the races with 'deficient character'. He did not believe that other races would be capable of competing with whites yet and that further education of Indians would change the balance of their minds.[10]

Job opportunities were limited and Natives were less likely to get hired. Indian children were rarely taught skills which could help them secure high paying or prestigious jobs. Boys had to learn farming and manual labour, while the girls had to focus on domestic work.[11] As previously mentioned, students had to produce capital for their own schools, so such choices for their curriculum came naturally, as not only did they generate profit, but the schools could claim that they taught the Native children valuable skills. However, the prospects of young adults emerging from the boarding school system was perhaps worse than before they enrolled. They lost touch with their traditional way of living and their job opportunities were limited, if they were lucky enough to have any. Children were leased out to white homes, creating a psuedo-slavery system, where upon graduation the only place willing to hire them was their host family. Girls in particular were given insufficient skills to thrive on their own, as most domestic classes focused on serving, rather than producing.[12] Their choices were limited to becoming a housewife to a husband, or working as a maid for a rich family.

Cultural erasure was carried out in these schools in a number of ways, which was often coupled with abuse that damaged the children for the rest of their lives. As mentioned earlier, Christian denominations controlling these boarding schools felt as if it was their mission to convert the Natives. Despite Christian values, many cases of verbal, physical and sexual abuses were carried out by priests, educators and other school staff. Such tragic school experiences compounded with a society that viewed Indians as inferior made it near impossible for young adults coming

8 Smith, 2004, 89–102.
9 Fear-Segal, 1999, 323–341.
10 Ibid.
11 Smith, 2004, 89–102.
12 Smith, 2004, 89–102.



Tom Torlino—Navajo, 1882 (before) and 1885 (after).

out of boarding schools to assimilate into American society; even though the goal of these programs was exactly that.

As these boarding schools had limited funding and relied heavily on government aid, there were certain unsavory strategies deployed to secure more money for the institutions. One of these was the infamous 'before and after' images of young Natives who graduated from boarding schools [Figure 1].[13] The premise was simple: by contrasting pre-enrolment pictures of Native individuals displaying traditional outfits, hairstyle and jewellery with their post-graduation pictures, dressed in Euro-American 'sophisticated' clothes and having a hairstyle emanating a similar image, boarding school directors sought to prove the effectiveness of their institutions in hopes to secure more funds from the government, or wealthy donors. This 'ventriloquised' image of Native 'cultural converts' extended to newspaper publications as well, projecting Native voices without actual Indian people.[14]

Indian children also had to give up their Native names for Christian names, which sought to erase the very core of their sense of identity. Although they were often allowed to choose their own Christian name, the choice was illusory in that it not only pulled them away from their culture, but, in a sense, made such alienation

[13] Accessed January 2, 2020 from Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, 'Analyzing Before and After Photographs & Exploring Student Files'.

[14] Sarah Ruffing Robbins: 'Reclaiming Voices from Indian Boarding School Narratives.' *Learning Legacies: Archive to Action through Women's Cross-Cultural Teaching*, 135–179. ANN ARBOR: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Accessed January 2, 2020. jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sxf3.7.

their own decision as well. English language was forced upon the students, which coupled with the prolonged period away from their own communities sometimes resulted, to some degree, in the loss of their native tongue. Sadly, that was the intended effect. Native children were also forced to worship the Christian God in English, while they were prohibited to practice their own religion and traditions.[15]

Although the prevalence of abusive boarding schools declined throughout the twentieth century, there were no laws preventing Jim Crow-esque approaches to be taken until the late-1970s. The Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978, which aimed to stop forceful separation of Native children from their parents on the account of poverty or bigotry. However, such cases occurred mainly in the realm of foster homes, where forcibly separated children would be placed for adoption, instead of the Carlisle-style boarding school approach that was part of a bygone era; and was detailed in this essay. Nevertheless, to a certain extent this law made the Native communities exempt from the standards of the US child protection laws because their traditional culture and way of living was and is incommensurable to the prevailing American expectations.

Despite advancements in the matters of boarding schools, there are still issues with education Indian children receive. In particular, northern communities living in the jurisdiction of Canada and Alaska face difficult issues regarding education, as the immense distances between available schools and Indian/Eskimo communities create a school environment eerily similar to the 'no parental contact' boarding schools of the nineteenth century. Although not every account of boarding school experience describes such grim predicaments as this essay detailed, the fact that they exist and that their prevalence seems to indicate that they were not isolated cases make the issue an important historical cultural concern.

Abstract

The essay investigates the conception and early days of boarding schools in the United States, as well as their intended and actual effects on the Native American populace. It also strives to understand the consequences of boarding schools on enrolled students and Native American communities alike, with particular interest in policies and practices used in such educational programs. Boarding schools served the deliberate objective to assimilate Native Americans into the hegemonic US society, with varying degrees of antagonism. Graduates faced difficulties of returning to their own communities due to systematic erasure of their Native cultures, while being also limited by prejudice and lack of economic mobility within the wider US society.

Keywords
Boarding schools, Native American, school segregation, indoctrination, assimilation, inequality, US minority.

[15] Smith, 2004, 89–102.