

The Impact of the White Man on Indians

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A LONG-RANGE POINT OF view, the white men came as the last of many migrants to the Western Hemisphere, but their effect as conquerors of all the peoples living there was final and, with minor exceptions so far, total. The European conquest of the Americas has been termed one of the darkest chapters of human history, for the conquerors demanded and won authority over the lives, territories, religious beliefs, ways of life, and means of existence of every native group with which they came in contact. No one will ever know how many Indians of how many tribes were enslaved, tortured, debauched, and killed. No one can ever reckon the dimensions of the human tragedy that cost, in addition to lives, the loss of homes, dignity, cultural institutions, standards of security, material and intellectual accomplishments, and liberty and freedom to millions upon millions of people. The stain is made all the darker by the realization that the conflict was forced upon those who suffered; the aggressors were the whites, the scenes of tragedy the very homelands of the victims.

In the bitter narrative of man's suppression and extermination of his fellow man in the Americas, no single European nation or special group of whites was more—or less—blameworthy than others. The long conflict that followed Columbus's arrival in America and that successively embroiled one part of the New World after another, as the white man spread through the continents, was essentially part of a worldwide expansionism. The people of western Europe, armed with superior firepower and supported by advanced technological civilizations, sailed out of their ports to conquer or dominate "inferior" men of color everywhere in the world. The Indian peoples of the Americas, like peoples in Africa and Asia, fell victim to conquerors who conceived of themselves as a superior race. In the Western Hemisphere, Indians, to the whites, were all the same, and the newcomers disagreed among themselves only over the extent to which the native populations differed from, or seemed to be inferior to, Europeans. On their part, the Indians, with rare exceptions, had no such unifying influence nor any conception of being involved in a total conflict of one race against another. Their own centuries-old differences, rivalries, feuds, and jealousies were readily discernible to the white men, who facilitated their own conquests by pitting one native group against another. The "divide-and-conquer" policy never worked better than in the Western Hemisphere, from the time of Columbus in the West Indies, Cortés in Mexico, and Pizarro in Peru to the period when the United States Army employed subjugated tribesmen as scouts and auxiliaries against undefeated Indians on the western plains and in the Southwest.

In justice to the whites, there is another side of the story. From time to time, there were many individuals, groups, and even governments that spoke out loudly or labored earnestly in efforts to place white relations with the Indians on foundations of fairness. In the earliest period, religious leaders in New Spain and New France, like Friar Bartolomé de las Casas in the West Indies, fought courageously in the Indians' behalf (though denying the Indians the right to their own religions), and the Spanish court itself took many steps designed to protect the natives. The enforcement of royal measures—as well as of papal bulls, like that of Pope Paul III in 1537, which tried to halt the alienation of natives from the desire to be converted by threatening excommunication to any whites who enslaved Indians or deprived them of their possessions—was, however, often impossible. Later, in the English colonies, the British Crown and its provincial officials

sometimes attempted to interpose themselves as protectors between the Indians and the expanding settlers. It rarely worked and, in fact, turned many colonists against the royal government. After the formation of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and many other leaders in and out of government tried to inject morality, justice, and strict legal procedures in the headlong dispossession of the Indians. Almost without exception, however, their decrees, pronouncements, and pleadings were nullified by events on the frontier and by champions of the anti-Indian elements.

The Indians themselves were not wholly innocent in the complex and intense struggle. Although the conflict would not have occurred without the intrusion of whites into countries the Indians already occupied—a fundamental cause of every manifestation of friction that bears reiteration because it is so often overlooked—the warlike nature and bold provocations of some tribes or groups of warriors led to violence and injustices that might not otherwise have taken place. Many Indians, for various motives, even welcomed white newcomers and brought eventual ruin on themselves by the use they made of the whites. In repeated instances native leaders who were unable to foresee the ultimate consequences appealed for white help against rival chiefs and bands; others became slave catchers, tribute collectors, fur traders, petty administrators, overseers over other Indians, and mercenary fighters in the employ of whites, and in intertribal wars for monopoly positions in the traffic of European arms and manufactured goods they destroyed other Indian groups with relish.

It was unfortunate for the Indians that the white engulfment of the Western Hemisphere commenced when it did. In the sixteenth century, Western civilization was emerging from long centuries of feudalism, and competitive new nations were forming. Merchant classes were on the rise, and trade, including overseas commerce, was expanding. At the same time, the dedicated struggle against Islam was being replaced by fierce religious wars between Christians. The combination of aggressive nationalism, lust for wealth, and crusading religious zeal struck with full force against the Indians and was made even harsher by the brutality and other vestiges of medieval conduct among Europeans, including torture, dismemberment, and punishment by burning, which the Age of Enlightenment would later moderate. Today, with much of mankind's moral force arrayed in the United Nations against colonialism and aggression, the conquest of

the Americas is a symbol of what man is capable of doing, but, hopefully, will never repeat.

The Europeans' principal motives for expansion and aggression differed in various parts of the New World. In the beginning, national policy was served by seizing sources of new wealth. Conquistador armies, composed of adventurers and restless veterans of European wars, ravaged for gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, and other loot for themselves. Their governments supported and encouraged them—even to the extent of inspiring them to raids and piratical attacks upon each other—and took a large share of the treasures of their conquests to finance their courts and European wars. Indian slaves, too, were a source of wealth, as miners and laborers in the treasure-producing countries of the New World, as cheap labor in Europe, and as objects of sale in the mushrooming slave markets in the world. Columbus himself initiated and encouraged the enslavement of Indians; but no nation or colony was entirely guiltless of following suit, and private fortunes based at least partly on Indian slavery were made even in New England and New York.

Conflicts among the white men often arose over whether Indians were more valuable free and alive, or enslaved, or dead. Looters, exploiters, and adventurers argued in an attempt to prove that since Indians were not acquisitive, did not hunt gold for themselves, and resisted doing more work than was necessary to feed themselves, they therefore were not normal people but rather members of a subhuman or animal species, lacking souls. Others maintained that Indians were savages, unworthy of freedom, the right of ownership, or even life itself. Against these arguments, religious leaders and missionaries, supported by the Pope and home churches, insisted that the Indians had souls that could be saved; with some success they extended their protection to large parts of the native populations, converting them to Christianity and organizing them into labor forces under their own comparatively benign direction and control. If they saved the Indians from death, however, their efforts had destructive effects often as ruinous as the aggressions of those from whom they were trying to protect the Indians. For they, too, destroyed the Indians' societies, institutions, and cultures, undermined the Indians' ability to cope with hostile white men, and, in the end, left most of the peoples they had saved weak, disorganized, and helpless in the midst of whites who had already overrun their lands.

At the same time, governments, as well as the European merchant classes and their representatives in the New World, recognized the huge dimensions of the Indian market for manufactured goods. Gradually, trade with the native populations became a significant source of wealth for Europeans. In Spanish America, satisfying the needs and wants of the Indians worked to keep them in slavery or peonage, for they could be kept perpetually in debt. Where tribes were still unconquered, joint-stock companies, formed by private merchants and royal investors, and given charters, patents, and various forms of monopolistic rights by the governments, discovered that it was profitable to maintain good relations with the Indians. In the present-day United States and Canada, especially, manufactured goods were traded to the natives at prices that represented huge profits, and the Indians paid the whites with furs and other valuable commodities which were much in demand in Europe and parts of Asia. The joint-stock companies, often establishing permanent settlements and posts in tribal territories, led directly to the introduction of what became the greatest acquisitive drive of all among white men in the New World—the greed for land. Settlers were sent over to establish colonies around the trading posts, and as new forces arose to induce others to emigrate to America, and the tide of colonists swelled, the Indians were pushed back or wiped out. Once started, the invasion of homeseekers never fully halted.

Every means and method was utilized in the long effort to dispossess the Indian. In some areas, land was bought or traded fairly; elsewhere intrigue, deception, legal chicanery, or outright confiscation were the rule. If the Indians resisted, militias with superior arms or organized troop units of the governments involved usually came to the assistance of the settlers. Treaties of peace invariably wrung from the defeated Indians the land the settlers had wanted. The pattern had variations, and on occasion the Indians won temporarily or were able to compromise or restrain white aggression long enough to bargain for retention of part of their homelands as preserves. In the United States, troops were sometimes able for brief periods of time to interpose themselves as police against the expanding whites; eventually, in each case, their protection of the Indians collapsed, and they were soon attacking the Indians whom initially they had been ordered to protect. Canada was more successful in giving its Indians a long-continued protection, and many of the native groups were settled on guaranteed lands of their own before the most rapacious, land-

hunting whites could reach their countries. In time, however, even many of those groups felt the pressures of white inroads. Elsewhere, tribes and remnants of defeated peoples withdrew into jungles, swamps, mountainous areas, deserts, and other relatively inaccessible or unwanted regions, where their descendants either died off or managed to continue an isolated existence.

Most white men, as related earlier, viewed Indian life and institutions from their own familiar points of reference; they either did not grasp Indian fundamentals which differed from their own, or they were uninterested in seeing Indian customs continued and did their best to modify or eradicate them. Few whites could comprehend the Indians' common ownership of land, and they failed to realize that most Indians, in turn, could not grasp the white man's concept of private ownership of pieces of the earth. A man, said the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, could not sell the land any more than he could sell the sea or the air he breathed. The Indians usually did not realize that when they accepted gifts for granting the right to use part of their tribal domain, they also gave up their own right to use it.

At the same time, white men often failed to recognize some of the cultural essentials of various Indian societies they met. Their own intrusions into Indian homelands inevitably exposed them to practices such as horse thefts, raids for personal prestige, torture, and even cannibalism and human sacrifice and trophy-taking that repelled and angered them. Although these practices were accepted traits in native religious, political, and social systems, they outraged the intruders' sense of morality and were opposed and ended by force and violence. In the areas of chiefdoms and authoritarian Indian states, Europeans generally replaced one form of absolutism with another. But elsewhere, white men could rarely perceive democratic, group-oriented elements where they existed in Indian societies. This oversight led to numerous episodes of capricious behavior by the whites, who arbitrarily selected friendly or venal Indians as chiefs and leaders and endowed them with power and prestige over tribes that possessed long-established methods of their own for choosing their leaders and spokesmen. The habit was prevalent in the United States but occurred in other parts of the hemisphere as well: settlers, government agents, and military officers all failed to recognize such traditional Indian customs and institutions as the autonomy of the individual and of the group within a tribe; the frequent absence of leaders who could speak and act for entire tribes; leadership by merit; councils of elected

spokesmen and civil chiefs with limited or little authority; decision by unanimous agreement; devotion to the group and antipathy to individual ambition or status-seeking; and other elements of native societies.

Despite resistance and conflicts, however, the Indian almost everywhere was changed by the white man's presence. Firearms, steel, and manufactured goods for a while made life easier and richer for many tribes, and the horse was a significant new element in the existence of nomadic peoples. Wherever traders appeared, Indians bartered eagerly for white men's goods, substituting them for their own more primitive weapons, utensils, and implements. Missionaries were often a principal influence in persuading Indians to wear white men's clothes, to learn farming and mechanical skills, to study reading, writing, and numbers, to cut their hair, to give up all their wives save one, and to adapt in many other ways to the white man's customs and ways of living.

The cost to the Indian was usually high. The newcomers introduced diseases to which the Indians had low resistance, and many more natives died from sicknesses than from warfare against the whites. On both continents, epidemics of smallpox, measles, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, and other diseases wiped out whole peoples and decimated others. By the early seventeenth century, for instance, it is estimated that Indian population losses in the highland areas of Spanish America were as high as 90 per cent in many localities. Wars between white traders as well as between the imperial powers of Europe, in addition, enmeshed Indians who had become dependent on white men's goods, and tribes took sides with white men and warred upon each other to the ultimate benefit of the whites. Slave catchers and fur traders, offering whisky and other goods, encouraged activities that disrupted and eventually destroyed Indian societies. And, finally, when Indians had lost their strength and freedom, they were often left in a powerless and demoralized condition. Alcohol and drugs provided means of escape from the degradation and hopelessness of life until the arrival of death.

The remnants of some tribes on both continents dragged on in poverty and finally became extinct. Among other peoples, flickers of hope were raised from time to time by the emergence of native religious leaders and movements that promised disaster to the whites and a miraculous return to the happy life. The prophets or messiahs, who often mixed various elements of native and Christian beliefs and rituals with shamanistic magic, arose in different parts of the hemi-

sphere at times of Indian crisis. After their subjugation, the Tupi-nambás of Brazil stopped their daily work and sought to reach the promised Land of the Grandfather by dancing. In the United States in the early years of the nineteenth century, the Shawnee Prophet helped rally Great Lakes Indians to the cause of his brother, Tecumseh. Another religious leader, Smohalla, a Sahaptin of the middle Columbia River, aroused dejected Plateau tribes to the promise of a brighter future after their military defeat in the 1850's. And Wovoka, a Paiute of Nevada, inspired the so-called Ghost Dance religion in the late 1880's, principally among the Plains tribes whom the U. S. Army had crushed. Wovoka's followers did a prescribed dance, accompanied by certain songs, which the prophet claimed would eventually cause the disappearance of the whites, bring back the dead Indian peoples, and restore the buffalo and old ways of life on the Plains. The dance was broken up by the Army, which feared its influence; many of Wovoka's followers among the Sioux were wiped out at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in December 1890 and the movement disintegrated.

Although Indians suffered tremendously and their cultures experienced great changes, the white man's impact, with all its technological superiority, aggressiveness, and zeal to conquer and refashion Indians in the European image, did not fully end Indian life. Many tribes disappeared; many became more or less assimilated in the white society around them; and most adopted various material traits of white culture. But large numbers of Indians on both continents have continued to maintain some of their native beliefs and customs, and a few, in the most remote parts of the hemisphere, are to this day almost completely untouched by civilization.