

American Forgetting: Abraham Lincoln, the Conquest of the West and the Removal of Indians

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Introduction

“Geronimo, E.K.I.A. (enemy killed in action)”¹. These were words not spoken in the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, nor in the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (during which Geronimo² actually died from illness, not violence) but instead during the presidency of Barack Obama. “Geronimo,” in this case, was a code name for Osama Bin Laden.

I was in bed watching TV and occasionally checking my Twitter account on May 1 when I started seeing tweets about the rumored killing of Bin Laden. This was occurring about a half an hour before anything appeared on TV related to the raid. This is the way the world works now. If you follow the right people, you find out information from the mundane to the momentous, instantaneously. The bit about Geronimo did not come out until much later. When it did, the response paled in emotional comparison to the release triggered by the news of the death of Bin Laden. As I observed the outpouring of expressions about Bin Laden’s demise I saw a range of reaction. In particular what stood out was the contrast of people who wouldn’t harm a fly crying out in exultant joy

¹ The whole message was “For God and country—Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo. Geronimo, E.K.I.A.,” see Nicholas Schmidle, *The New Yorker*, “Getting Bin Laden,” <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/08/110808fa_fact_schmidle?currentPage=all> (Aug. 8, 2011). I would be remiss not to mention the fact that the helicopters (Black Hawks and Chinooks) carrying the Navy SEALs also bear Indian imagery.

² Lyuli is what the great-grandson of Geronimo says he ancestor was actually named, not Goyathlay or Goyakhla, as it is commonly said his Chiricuhua name was. The meaning of the name is also quite different, see the interview of Harlyn Geronimo in *hEyOKA Magazine*, November 2006, <http://www.heyokamagazine.com/heyoka_magazine.21.geronimo.htm> (Aug. 8, 2011).

with the revulsion of others (some ex-military) over the exuberance of those celebrating the violent death of a human being.

When it came to the mention of the use of Geronimo as a code name for Bin Laden, or the operation which led to his death, or both (there was some initial confusion about this matter), the message was delivered with no analysis. It was just stated as a matter of fact.³ I thought about Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating & Empire-Building* (1980)⁴. Was the use of the codename seemingly predetermined by the initial and eternal (?) conflict between European settlers and Indian nations that colors all American relations with non-European nations posited by Drinnon? To put it another way, should we have been surprised at all by the use of Geronimo's name? He is, after all, arguably the most famous Indian and one who fought against the United States government for an extended period of time, slipping away from the grasp of the government time and again before his eventual surrender. The fact that Indians have fought on behalf of the United States and their colonial forbearers in virtually every conflict entered into has no impact. That the U.S. government called on the so-called "Shadow Wolves", elite Indian trackers drawn from several nations, to help try to track Bin Laden in 2007, apparently had no influence on the use of the Geronimo name.⁵ In

³ Even Schmidle's article, which contains so much detail about the operation, passes over this incident where Obama meets the SEALs without comment: "The raiding team then presented the President with an American flag that had been on board the rescue Chinook. Measuring three feet by five, the flag had been stretched, ironed, and framed. The SEALs and the pilots had signed it on the back; an inscription on the front read, 'From the Joint Task Force Operation Neptune's Spear, 01 May 2011: 'For God and country. Geronimo.'"

⁴ Drinnon, *Facing West* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

⁵ "Native American trackers to hunt Bin Laden", *The Australian*, March 12, 2007 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/native-american-trackers-to-hunt-bin-laden/story-e6frg8yo-111113137848>> (August 10, 2011). The Shadow Wolves are an official part of the Department of Homeland security that have been used to track drug smugglers along the Mexican border in Arizona on the Tohono O'odham nation's reservation.

addition, the term “Indian Country” as signifying a hostile place still crops up in military descriptions of engagements in the Middle East.⁶

The questioning of the use of the name Geronimo would not take long to surface. There was understandable outrage among the Indian community. Harlyn Geronimo, Geronimo’s great-grandson and a Vietnam veteran, provided testimony to the U.S. Senate Commission on Indian Affairs during a May 5 hearing on racist stereotypes of Native Americans. He wanted an explanation of why his great-grandfather’s memory was invoked for the operation, an apology for the use of his ancestor’s name and the removal of the name from all government records of the operation. Geronimo said during his testimony:

Obviously to equate Geronimo with Osama Bin Laden is an unpardonable slander of Native America and its most famous leader in history.

And to call the operation to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden by the name Geronimo is such a subversion of history that it also defames a great human spirit and Native American leader. For Geronimo himself was the focus of precisely such an operation by the U.S. military, an operation that assured Geronimo a lasting place in American and human history.

The Encyclopedia Britannica (1967, Volume 10, page 362) has described the real Operation Geronimo in the following words:

During this last campaign, which lasted 18 months, no fewer than 5,000 troops and 500 Indian auxiliaries had been employed in the apprehension of a band of Apaches comprising only 35 men, 8 boys and 101 women, who operated in two countries without bases of supply. Army and civilian losses totaled 95; Mexican losses were heavy, but unknown; Geronimo’s losses were 13 killed, but none from direct U.S. Army action.

Geronimo was not killed and was not captured. After the Chiricahua Band of Apaches were taken from reservations in Arizona Territory and New Mexico to

⁶ For discussions of the “Indian Country” metaphor in military parlance as well as seeing Indian fighting symbolism in current engagements (among other topics) see Stephen W. Silliman, “The ‘Old West’ in the Middle East: U.S. Military Metaphors in Real and Imagined Indian country”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 237-247 and Matthew L.M. Fletcher and Peter S. Vicaire, “Indian Wars: Old and New,” (May 4, 2011). *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, 15th Anniversary Symposium, War On...The Fallout of Declaring War on Social Issues, Forthcoming, MSU Legal Studies Research Paper No. 09-11. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1832523>.

Ft. Marion, Florida, Geronimo and his warriors saw no chance of reuniting with their people except by surrender with the promise that they would be reunited with their tribe.

General Miles promised: 'There is plenty of timber, water, and grass in the land to which I will send you. You will live with your tribe and with your family. If you agree to this treaty you shall see your family within five days.' None of the promises were kept.

Nearly half the Chiricahua band, the band of Cochise, died in Florida and later in Alabama within several years before being moved to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. Geronimo was held a prisoner of war for the remaining 23 years of his life, though he was a major attraction at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 and was second only to President Elect Theodore Roosevelt in the applause received along the Inaugural Parade route of 1905.⁷

Clearly, there were vast differences between the operations which led to the surrender of Geronimo and the killing of Bin Laden. Getting those facts straight was not the main concern of Harlyn Geronimo. He was insulted that his ancestor was associated with the infamous terrorist who was presented by the United States as the face of global terrorism. Six famous Indian leaders (Geronimo) on ponies in full headdress according to Jesse Rhodes, "exhibited their willingness to adapt to the changes imposed on their people as well as their resoluteness to maintain a sense of self and keep their cultural traditions alive."⁸

However, there was another motivation for including these leaders in the event. Roosevelt who had written in *The Winning of the West*, "The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized

⁷ Harlan Geronimo testimony text can be found in Elahe Izadi's article on DCentric, "Geronimo's Great-Grandson On Bin Laden Code Name," <<http://dcentric.wamu.org/2011/05/geronimos-great-grandson-on-bin-laden-code-name/>> (Aug 8, 2011).

⁸ Jesse Rhodes, *Smithsonian Magazine*, "Indians on the Inaugural March", January 14, 2009, <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/specialsections/heritage/Indians-on-the-Inaugural-March.html>> (Aug. 10, 2011).

mankind under a debt to him...it is of incalculable importance that America, Australia, and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black and yellow aboriginal owners, and become the heritage of the dominant world races.”⁹ Part of the burden of the expansion of American power was civilizing the conquered. This element was represented in the inaugural parade by the presence of “350 cadets from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.”¹⁰ The direct link between the Carlisle school and the chiefs was that American Horse had children enrolled at the school. Apache children held captive after Geronimo’s surrender were also forcibly taken to Carlisle and Hampton “as they arrive at a suitable age”¹¹. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, founder of Carlisle, and his motto of “Kill the Indian, save the man” was being powerfully displayed for the nation to see.

Long before any association was made with Bin Laden, and, only four years after he appeared in the presidential parade of Theodore Roosevelt, Geronimo died from pneumonia while still in U.S. custody as a prisoner of war at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Here is how he was remembered soon after his death in the *New York Times*.

As the leader of the warring Apaches of the Southwestern territories in pioneer days, Geronimo gained a reputation for cruelty and cunning never surpassed by that of any other American Indian chief. For more than twenty years he and his men were the terror of the country, always leaving a trail of bloodshed and devastation. The old chief was captured many times, but always got away again, until his final capture, in 1886.¹²

While the obituary of the *Times* cast Geronimo and his father as men whose only occupation was war, it also relied on the memoirs of General Nelson A. Miles (the well-

⁹ Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West: Part IV: The Indian Wars, 1747-1787* (New York: Putnam), 1906, p. 56.

¹⁰ Rhodes, “Indians on the Inaugural March.”

¹¹ Grover Cleveland, Fourth Annual Message (first term), Dec. 3, 1888, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29529>> (Aug. 10, 2011).

¹² “Old Apache Chief Geronimo is Dead,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1909, p. 7.

known Indian fighter who Geronimo surrendered to) to do the heavy lifting. Miles described the mood after the Geronimo surrendered in this way: “Every one at Washington had now become convinced that there was no good in the old chief, and he was, in fact, one of the lowest and most cruel of the savages of the American continent.” Yet, Miles had a great respect for the Indian leader who thought him to be “one of the brightest, most resolute, determined-looking men that I have ever encountered.”¹³ Miles even compared the gaze of Geronimo favorably with General Sherman. At least in the North, Sherman is a hero for his admittedly harsh methods (which Lincoln did not discourage) that helped to break the Confederacy down and forced Robert E. Lee to surrender at Appomattox.

Sherman was not at that particular surrender, but an Indian figure was. When Lee realized that Ely S. Parker (who drafted the final terms of Confederate surrender at Appomattox as adjutant to General Grant) was a member of the Seneca nation, he said “I am glad to see one real American here.” Parker shook Lee’s hand and told him “We are all Americans.”¹⁴ Parker would later become the first Indian to hold the office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1869-1871).

Perhaps Parker’s statement at the surrender of the Confederacy was an aspiration because it was not a statement of fact. Before the war began, Parker had desired to become a lawyer and had begun reading law for three years at a law firm to prepare to take the bar exam in New York. Yet, Parker never had a chance to become a lawyer. “He had but one great disability, and neither learning nor capacity could avail against it. He was an Indian, a native of the soil. Therefore he could not be admitted to the bar for he

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Arthur Caswell Parker, *The Life of General Ely S. Parker: Last Grand Sachem of the Iroquois and General Grant’s Military Secretary* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1919), p. 133.

was not a citizen of the country. There was no way by which he could become one. He was a man without a country, a victim of legal injustice and popular prejudice.”¹⁵ The man without a country instead became a civil engineer. He gained admission to college with the help of anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. Parker died in 1895. Indians did not gain citizenship until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, some 56 years after the passage of the 14th Amendment.

In searching Abraham Lincoln’s *Collected Works*, I found no reference to Ely Parker other than a note that mentions Parker in an annotation not written by Lincoln on an 1863 note to Montgomery C. Meigs. In the public papers of the U.S. presidents, I found a single reference to Parker in a 1991 George H.W. Bush “Proclamation of National American Indian Heritage Month”¹⁶. I found no such recognition before Bush Sr. in 1990. Perhaps the source of that problem was quietude as Bush put it in the 1991 proclamation: “generations of Native Americans have quietly strengthened and enriched the United States.”¹⁷ However, I doubt that the reason for the lack of recognition was that Indians were too quiet about them. As I’ve been trying to suggest, the will to ignore the Indian or fall back into the adversarial or paternalistic view toward them has remained strong enough to wash out the contributions of Indians, who are still others after all these years. Turning now to Lincoln himself and his Indian relations, we will see a different man than we are used to.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 79.

¹⁶ George H.W. Bush, “Proclamation of National American Indian Heritage Month”, Oct. 31, 1991, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20164>>, (Aug.11, 2011). Geronimo was also mentioned with familiar Indians: Pocahontas, Sacajawea and Hiwatha. Obama changed the name to “National Native American Heritage Month” in 2009.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Lincoln's Forgetting and Forgetting About Lincoln

Despite all of the hagiography written about our 16th president, Lincoln was a man of his times and a partisan politician. He did have a complex nature that allowed him to rise above common opinion on some issues—Indian relations not among those. As with every president before him, Lincoln had three tools in Indian relations: killing, removal and treaties. He utilized all three, all of which were predicated on the idea that the Indian was inferior. By the time Lincoln became president, the idea that the Indian was a “dying race” was taking root. Lincoln did not exactly push back against that idea despite ample evidence to the contrary. Indeed, his Indian policy and his Western policy were intertwined and both carried a haunting implication for the Indian nations: an attempt would be made to phase them out of American life.

Most simply, the patronage system was the handing out of government jobs by the winning political party to people in the party who helped in creating the victories in elections. New York Senator William L. Marcy said in an 1832 speech defending Andrew Jackson's political appointment of Martin Van Buren as a minister to England, that New Yorkers “boldly preach what they practice. When contending for victory, they avow their intention to enjoy the fruits of victory, and if defeated they expect to retire from office. They see nothing wrong in the rule, that to the victors belong the spoils of the enemy.”¹⁸ We do not often think of Abraham Lincoln as a willing participant in such a system. Did not Lincoln himself say in 1861 that the Civil War was “essentially a People's contest” and that the Union's purpose in the war was to defend “that form, and that substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men--- to lift artificial weights from all shoulders---to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all---

¹⁸ See *Niles' National Register*, Vol. 43, Sept. 1832-March 1833 (Baltimore: Franklin Press), p. 8.

to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life”¹⁹ Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book *Team of Rivals* (2006) was much discussed for the purposes of drawing a connection between Obama’s cabinet appointments and those of Lincoln. The fact that Lincoln put his main competitors (to call them rivals is a bit disingenuous because, as Timothy S. Good reminds us in his recent book *Lincoln for President* (2009), Lincoln was not a rival to any Republican candidate in 1860 in any sense except for his superior characteristics of not making enemies and not holding grudges), Edward Bates, Salmon P. Chase, and William H. Seward, for the Republican nomination in 1860 in his cabinet seems to belie the notion that Lincoln rewarded supporters with jobs.

However, when looking at Lincoln’s correspondence or his day to day activities, we can see that he expended much energy in carrying out politics as usual under the patronage system. In actuality, Lincoln during his first term was likely the worst offender of the spoils system of any President up to that point in American history. The turnover in jobs from the previous administration was nearly absolute. In carrying out such sweeping changes, he handed out jobs to friend and foe alike with the intent of keeping as many people faithful to the Union as possible. Having both Congressmen and commoners in his debt surely helped Lincoln secure a second nomination in 1864. Still, Lincoln’s skillful use of the patronage did not apply as far as the so-called Indian System (then Office of Indian Affairs, now Bureau of Indian Affairs) was concerned.

In all of Lincoln scholarship, only David Nichols (*Lincoln and the Indians*, originally published 1978) has written a monograph on Lincoln’s Indian policy. Even well educated Americans are therefore in the dark about the Isanti Sioux uprising in

¹⁹ Lincoln, Abraham, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. IV*, ed. Basler, Roy P., et al., 8 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 438.

Minnesota in 1862 which led to Lincoln signing the death warrants on what remains the largest public execution in US history. The failure in handling Indian affairs in Minnesota which erupted into a war against the Isanti Sioux in 1862 to the extended series of wars with all of the Sioux only ending in 1890, stand at opposite ends of a continuum of aggression in 19th century Indian relations. While never describing Indians as a “dying race,” who were dying of natural causes based on their “contact with a superior race,”²⁰ as did Senator James Doolittle, chairman of the Senate Indian Committee, Lincoln’s Western policy (The Homestead Act, mineral development and the Transcontinental Railroad) can be said to have “carried with it the implicit doom of the Indians.”²¹ Despite Doolittle’s surety, Indians did not die out and remained in the United States in limbo between sovereignty and citizenship.

Lincoln’s knowledge of the Indians was scarce before taking office. Although he had enlisted in the Black Hawk War (1832), he experienced no combat. Lincoln did seem to share the common prejudices and feelings about the Indians as “savages” standing in the way of Westward expansion and with it, civilization—this view continued unto his death. As a younger man Lincoln had also campaigned for Whig presidential candidates who had been Indian fighters: William Henry Harrison (Tecumseh’s War: Battle of Tippecanoe) and Zachary Taylor (Black Hawk War; Second Seminole War).

To stick with the topic of patronage, it will suffice to say that Lincoln initially perceived the offices of the Indian System in the same manner as any of the other political offices he had at his discretion to allocate. Through his handlers at the Chicago convention in 1860, Lincoln offered to exchange the positions of the Secretary of the

²⁰ U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Globe*, Debate on the Indian Appropriation Bill, 38th Cong. 2d sess., 13 January 1865, pt. 1:154.

²¹ David A. Nichols, *Lincoln and the Indians* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 195.

Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for Indiana's 26 nomination votes (both Doris Kearns Goodwin and Timothy S. Good skirt the Indian issue by stating such offers were unessential to Lincoln's nomination). The men who filled these positions, Caleb B. Smith and William P. Dole, respectively, were professional politicians with no experience in Indian affairs. Some of the men Lincoln appointed to be Indian agents had never even met an Indian. Getting a job as a superintendent or agent in the Indian system could be extremely lucrative as agents sometimes engaged in wholesale theft of Indian annuities—Simon Cameron, whom Lincoln appointed Secretary of War despite pointed opposition, was possibly among these unscrupulous agents as a federal commissioner. He allegedly defrauded the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) Indians of \$66,000 in 1838.²² Cameron resigned in less than a year because of more corruption allegations (not Indian related). Caleb Smith and William Dole, however, lasted longer. In November 1862, Smith resigned to protest of Lincoln's policies (including emancipation) and because of his poor health. During his time as Secretary of the Interior, Smith wholeheartedly endorsed expansionism. In 1862, he stated "The rapid progress of civilization upon this continent will not permit the lands which are required for cultivation to be surrendered to savage tribes for hunting grounds."²³ Smith's replacement, John Palmer Usher, joined Dole, currency comptroller Hugh McCulloch, and Lincoln secretary John Nicolay in buying land in Kansas in 1864 which was to be held in trust for the Sac and Fox Indians. The Indian system was also a pathway to upward mobility by the time Lincoln took office. Simon Pomeroy had used the system to enrich himself and become a US Senator from Kansas (1861-1873). The first two governors of Minnesota, Henry Sibley and Alexander

²² Donald, David, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 266.

²³ Nichols, David A., *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 192.

Ramsey (later Secretary of War for Rutherford B. Hayes), had also risen through the system. Both of these Minnesota men would play a role, Sibley as colonel of the state militia and Ramsey as Governor of Minnesota, in the Sioux Uprising of 1862 (precipitated by the cheating of the Isanti Sioux out of annuities since 1851).

Lincoln was not ignorant of the extreme corruption of the Indian system in Minnesota but he was left to deal with the fallout: 400 to 800 Minnesota civilians were dead, along with 70 to 100 Sioux, and 77 US Army soldiers. The root cause of the war appeared to be that the Isanti nation, which had been the victims of a wholesale rip-off in their 1851 treaty with the U.S. government, had been cheated out of their annuities from corrupt Indian agents ever since. Lincoln had a role in this process. In rewarding friends through the patronage, he handed out agency jobs in the Indian system to men who had never even met an Indian. The spark of the war occurred when starving Indians trying to engage in trade for food were rebuffed by Indian agent Andrew Myrick who said about them “So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry let them eat grass or their own dung.”²⁴ After the fighting began, Myrick was found dead on August 18, 1862, with grass stuffed in his mouth.

In the aftermath of the fighting, three hundred and three Sioux had been tried, in some cases in trials averaging 10-15 minutes in length, convicted of murder or rape, and sentenced to death. After initially trying to pass off the decision on executions to local authorities before his attorney general informed him it was not possible, Lincoln personally reviewed the sentences and commuted all of the sentences but 38—which still makes Lincoln responsible for the largest mass execution in U.S. history.²⁵ Lincoln then

²⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 99-112.

removed all of the Sioux from Minnesota and their reservations were abolished. If General John Pope, the man Lincoln reassigned from the East to prevent him from bickering with General McClellan, had his way there would have been no Indians to remove. Pope told Henry Sibley, a Colonel under his command: “It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so and even it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year . . . they are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromises can be made.”²⁶

The Ho-Chunk were also expelled from Minnesota in 1863 even though they had nothing to do with the uprising. Lincoln agreed to have the Indians in Minnesota along with refugee Indian nations in Kansas removed to reservations. There were refugees in Kansas because of Lincoln’s abandonment of Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) at the beginning of the war. Slave owning Indian nations (Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole) in Indian Territory were convinced by the Confederacy that Lincoln meant to take their slaves. Their leadership decided to join the Confederates where they would not only be able to keep their slaves but also send delegates to the Confederate Congress. As not all of the Indians wanted to side with either the Union or the Confederacy (which annexed the territory in May 1861), a flood of refugees ended up in Kansas. Pressure from the government of the State of Kansas forced Lincoln to reverse course and try to win Indian Territory back from the Confederacy.

He even went as far as to authorize an expedition which would use Indians receiving the same pay and equipment as U.S. soldiers. At that date in late 1861, this would have obviously been a landmark decision and a boon to future relations had the operation actually been carried out. It would not be until late June 1862 before any

²⁶ Ibid, p. 87.

attempt to take back Indian Territory would be launched. Lincoln had changed his mind about the expedition several times. Instead of a viable fighting force that could help with the general war effort as originally planned, the expedition was only now going to be a kind of security detail to protect the refugees as they returned from Kansas. Problems in the East for the Confederates forced them to concentrate there and leave Indian Territory. The Indian soldiers who participated in the expedition were not given their provisions or their pay as they were promised. White troops refused to fight alongside the Indians and the Indians returned to Kansas with even more refugees from Indian Territory in tow.²⁷

During the war Lincoln was as determined to develop the West to show the world and more importantly Americans themselves that nation was still vigorous. As that plan (settlement, mineral development and the transcontinental railroad) moved forward it ran into the problem that Indians were already on the lands the plan required. The year after the Sioux uprising, Lincoln met a group of chiefs at the White House and pushed for assimilation from them. First he spoke to them of the “great difference” between whites and Indians. “The pale-faced people are numerous and prosperous because they cultivate the earth, produce bread, and depend on the products of the earth rather than wild game for subsistence. This is the chief reason of the difference but there is another. Although we are now engaged in a great war between one another, we are not as a race, so much disposed to fight and kill one another as our red brethren.”²⁸ Lincoln informed the chiefs that the only way he saw that Indians could become as numerous as the “pale-faces” was to take to farming as the whites did. That the land of the reservations that Indians were being removed to was agriculturally inferior to the lands they had previously lived on did

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 25-53

²⁸ “Speech to Indians,” March 27, 1863, *CW*, Vol. VI, p. 151-152.

not temper this statement.²⁹ The pursuit of taming the West through settlement, connecting it to the East with a railroad and stripping it of its minerals led to conflicts with Indians who lived on the land.

Lincoln's approach to Indian relations does not end on a hopeful note as one can spin out of his unfinished business in connection with his plans for freed slaves at the end of the Civil War. While we can be glad Lincoln didn't allow mass murder of Indians in Minnesota following the uprising, we have to remember that removal caused far more deaths than occurred at the gallows when the 38 Sioux were hung. Settlers pushing into land in the West created tension, as did the discovery of gold. In 1864, the Sand Creek massacre occurred when concentration policy in Colorado turned to the outright advocacy of the murder of Indians. Lincoln was too busy worrying about reelection to pay close attention to the warning signs. He would not live to read the Senate report based on the Sand Creek massacre which saw the dismemberment of mostly women and children. His view of Indian humanity differed from those who carried out the massacre in that he did not hate Indians. Yet, it was that view of the Indian as savage that was inescapable for Lincoln. They were not equals. They had no civilization. That Indians had helped bring an American civilization into being and helped to sustain it was not in Lincoln's consciousness. The Indians were unfortunately in the way of civilization. The wounds of the nation to be bound up that Lincoln spoke of did not include those injuries inflicted on Indians. The Indians who did end up fighting for the Union did not see their situation improve after the Civil War was over.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 152.

Conclusion

While Lincoln could not remove himself from a stance of superiority toward Indians that had resulted in mass suffering in the first 90 years of the United States, we can focus in on his role while he was in office. Lincoln was not powerless to do something to positively influence the relationship of the U.S. government and the Indian nations. The actions that he did take led down the path which symbolically closed the American frontier at Wounded Knee. If Drinnon and subsequent writers arguing along the same lines are correct, the frontier never closed but was transplanted. They would hold that until there is a break in American consciousness from this frontier mentality, the representation of the Indian as “savage” will continue to pop up as well as get the United States into misadventures abroad. Will remembering that Lincoln was not above thinking of Indians as inferior and in the way of “progress” help us make that break? Whether or not we agree with the idea that the frontier mentality still drives at least some of American foreign policy, the fact that the symbols still appear demands some consideration. As regards Lincoln, the point here is not to drag his name through the mud, but to humanize him, to place him in a fuller context than we are usually given.

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the USA. Like George Washington, he takes a special place in the list of American presidents. Abe grew up in the Middle West. His first home was a small one-room house in the woods. His family were pioneers who helped to fight Indians and push the borders of the US farther west. The family lived in poverty. His parents moved from Kentucky to Indiana when he was 7, and this was his home for 14 years. Thomas Lincoln, Abe's father hoped to make a better living there. Soon the mother died. Abe and his sister were lonely until their father married again. Ab Abraham Lincoln (/ˈɪˈlɪŋkən/; February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865) was an American statesman and lawyer who served as the 16th president of the United States (1861–1865). Lincoln led the nation through its greatest moral, constitutional, and political crisis in the American Civil War. He preserved the Union, abolished slavery, strengthened the federal government, and modernized the U.S. economy.