

The Sand Creek Massacre

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The charge that genocide was committed against the American Indian peoples of the United States in the process of that nation state's formation is typically treated as a rhetorical device unsubstantiated by fact and designed only to attract "unwarranted" sympathy to North America's indigenous population.

While Native Americans were indeed decimated during the period of U.S. physical consolidation, apologists for the status quo contend this was merely an "unfortunate"—even unintended—"byproduct" of the interaction between "civilized and savage societies"; while "tragic," such a process does not add up to the conscious and intentional sort of state policy inherent to the crime of genocide.

Today is November 29, a date marking the anniversary of the Sand Creek massacre, an 1864 event in which the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples residing in what was then called Colorado Territory were destroyed. There can thus be no more appropriate day than this in which to consider whether genocide is actually the accurate term by which to describe what this country has done to Indians.

Prelude

The specific process which led to Sand Creek may be seen as beginning in 1851 at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, when the U.S. entered into a treaty with a number of the plains Indian nations. In exchange for guarantees of safe passage for wagon trains and the like, the U.S. recognized that the national territories of the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho nations encompassed virtually all of the western portion of what is now Kansas as well as the present state of Colorado, east of the Rocky Mountains. The U.S. further pledged itself to prevent non-Indian settlement within this area and the Senate duly ratified the treaty, making it both an international agreement and "the Supreme Law" of the United States.

Almost immediately, however, gold was discovered in the Rockies, near what is today the city of Denver. Non-Indians began to flood the gold fields in massive numbers, establishing permanent communities as they came, and the federal government did nothing to stop them.

To the contrary, when the Cheyenne and Arapaho began to openly resist this invasion of their national territory, the U.S.—rather than meeting its obligations under the existing treaty—called for a new one in 1861. The plan was that the Indians would agree to a reduction of their landbase to about 10% of what had been recognized as theirs only a decade earlier. When the Cheyenne and Arapaho leadership refused, their names were apparently forged as having accepted the arrangement. This 1861 "treaty" was then used as a justification for military operations against both peoples.

The problem for the U.S. was that, shortly after it launched its war against the Indians in Colorado, the Civil War broke out. This left the federal government with no troops it could devote to Indian fighting. Hence, for the next three years, the Cheyenne and Arapaho continued to reign supreme within their homeland.

This situation, needless to say, failed to set well with the non-Indian residents of Colorado Territory. So they elected a territorial governor named John Evans who campaigned on a program of “exterminating” the Indians and making their former property a state of the Union.

The Massacre

By 1864, Colorado Territory had mustered two regiments of volunteer cavalry, most of which had been sent east to fight the Confederacy. During the summer of that year, using fabricated “Indian atrocities” as an excuse, Evans requested federal authorization to raise a third regiment. This one was to serve a short enlistment of only 100 days, and was to be used exclusively to “exterminate” the Cheyenne and Arapaho “wherever they may be found.”

Overall command of all three regiments of Colorado volunteer cavalry was vested in a former Methodist minister named John Chivington, who not only expressed the goal of extermination, but instructed his troops to kill Indian children as well as adults (under the rationale that “nits make lice”).

In August, Evans and Chivington jointly informed a group of Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders known as the “Peace Faction” that they should take their people to Fort Lyons, Colorado, where they would be given sanctuary from the soldiers. If they were found away from the fort, they would be killed as “hostiles”; but as long as they remained where they were put, they would be safe. Taking most of the Cheyenne women and children with them, Black Kettle and White Antelope (Cheyennes) and Left Hand (Arapaho) did as they were told, surrendering their weapons when they arrived at Fort Lyon. Major Scott Anthony, in command at the fort, sent them to camp at a spot along nearby Sand Creek.

Meanwhile, the 3rd Colorado Volunteers were floundering around to the north, unsuccessfully trying to come to grips with the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers who fought back, guerrilla-style. By the time their enlistments were expiring, the “100 Day Men” had managed to kill no Indians (other than a non-combatant group of about 20 Cheyenne women and children, surrounded and butchered by Captain David Nichols’ troops). They were laughingly referred to as the “Bloodless Third” in the Denver press. So, in the fall, they began to move south, toward the Cheyenne/Arapaho peace camp.

Led by Chivington himself, the 3rd Colorado arrived at Fort Lyon on November 27. On the 28th, they were joined by a portion of the 1st under Anthony and moved directly toward Black Kettle’s “protected” encampment. At dawn on the 29th, despite the fact that the Indians were flying both a white flag and an American flag over their tipis, Chivington attacked with his combined force of 750 soldiers.

500 Slaughtered

Nobody knows exactly how many Indians were killed, but at least a third of the total encampment of about 500 were slaughtered. Two thirds of these were later estimated by volunteers to have been women and children, the rest mostly elderly men. The bodies were then severely mutilated—scalped and dismembered, female genitalia used as hat coverings, male genitalia converted into tobacco pouches—and prisoners shot.

With that, the volunteers fled back to Denver, lest the Dog Soldiers catch up with them. They were greeted as conquering heroes, their scalps and other “trophies” acquired for substantial sums, their success as “exterminators” applauded in *The Denver Post*—which redesignated them the “Bloody Third”—for months.

As a result of this “achievement,” the non-Indians of Colorado Territory were shortly awarded with statehood while the Cheyenne and Arapaho were pushed completely out of their territory.

What was done at Sand Creek was generally condemned, even at the time. In 1865, two congressional investigations and a military tribunal all concluded that Chivington and his men had engaged in war crimes. None of them were taken to trial on the matter, however. Perhaps their defenders pointed to a long series of similar incidents in U.S. history.

Further, the precise tactics and overt exterminationist terminology employed by Chivington and Evans were adopted by the U.S. Army as a whole almost immediately. This is readily evidenced in the written orders of General

of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman and his immediate subordinate, General Phil Sheridan, from there on in. It is also demonstrated rather eloquently in the attack by Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry on the remains of Black Kettle's peace faction at the Washita River in November of 1868, and hundreds of similar actions continuing through 1890.

The point of Sand Creek is not that it was worse than many other examples of what the U.S. did as a matter of policy to American Indians. No, the point is that Sand Creek fits so perfectly with the rest of the U.S. program of "opening the frontier."

It is time to be clear: we are dealing here with a history of conscious, intentional and sustained physical extermination. This is in the exact words, repeated over and over again, of the perpetrators themselves. And this, by any rational definition, adds up to genocide.

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