

A History and Future of Resistance - Indigenous struggle against dispossession and the Dakota Access Pipeline

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The fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline is part of a centuries-long indigenous struggle against dispossession and capitalist expansionism.

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Mounted Lakota warriors, their horses resplendent in traditional regalia, charge a line of law enforcement. They gallop headlong, push back the police, pull up only at the last moment, and then circle back for more.

The scene could be the Battle of the Little Bighorn [1], circa 1876. But it's not. Here, along the banks of the Missouri River, just beyond the boundary of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota, indigenous land and water defenders are standing together to block the Dakota Access Pipeline [2], which threatens their land, water, ancestral burial grounds, and future generations. They are part of a decades-long struggle to assert and reclaim indigenous lands, jurisdictions, and sovereignties. And they are doing so on ground that has given rise to indigenous resistance for centuries.

For the average American, it's easy to mistake the resistance at Standing Rock for a one-time re-run: indigenous warriors emerge from the wild, put up a brief, fierce, but ultimately tragic fight before succumbing to progress and providence. Cowboys and Indians II: Pipeline edition.

Vine Deloria Jr, the father of Native American Studies [3], called this the "cameo theory" of American history [4]. In this version of events, indigenous people are cast in fleeting roles — movie set extras in the grand drama of American progress — only to be dropped from the next episode's storyline.

But such a narrative obscures the fact that indigenous people — not only in the United States, but across the settler colonized Angloworld in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand — have starred in a series of long-running, quietly successful movements to oppose natural resource extraction and neoliberal colonization.

At Standing Rock and across indigenous territories, indigenous peoples are resisting hundreds of years of dispossession, subjugation, and elimination committed in the name of capitalist accumulation [5] and white possession. As indigenous people put their bodies on the line to resist the Dakota Access Pipeline, they are fighting for their sovereignty while offering an alternative

relationship to land, water, and each other.

The fight for our shared future is on.

Remember Wounded Knee

In the United States, the modern roots and spiritual center of indigenous struggle are interred at the village of Wounded Knee on the Oglala Lakota Nation's Pine Ridge Reservation. There, on December 28, 1890, the Seventh Cavalry intercepted a band of some four hundred Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakota from the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock reservations under the leadership of Chief Bigfoot, and ordered them to camp along the banks of Wounded Knee Creek.

The Lakota were followers of the prophet Wovoka's Ghost Dance movement [6], which taught that the dead would return, the colonists would be driven off, and tribes would be united, bringing peace and prosperity to the dispossessed. The movement inspired indigenous people across the continent, while fomenting fear among settlers along the frontier.

On the morning of December 29, during a confused effort to disarm the encampment, a shot rang out. With Hotchkiss guns already trained on the camp, the cavalry opened fire, slaughtering Lakota people and even some of their own soldiers. Cavalrymen hunted down women and children as they fled.

Once the last shot was fired, more than three hundred Lakota lay dead on the plains. Their corpses were left to freeze for three days before the army hired civilians to bury them in a mass grave. As laborers shoveled dirt over the slain bodies, indigenous land was opened to settlement.

Eighty years later, the spirit of the Ghost Dance and the memory of Wounded Knee inspired the Red Power movement [7]. Resistance and optimism for a better future rolled across the continent from the occupation of Alcatraz in the West to the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building in the East.

On the Trail of Broken Treaties in 1972 [8], the young, militant, and photogenic American Indian Movement (AIM) released its "Twenty Point Position Paper," which called on the United States government to respect, re-forge, and even rewrite treaties as the basis for nation-to-nation relationships with the continent's first peoples. That call to recognize indigenous sovereignty and honor the treaties endures today.

In February 1973, the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) invited AIM to Pine Ridge to help remove BIA-backed Tribal Chairman Dick Wilson, a menacing leader who thought nothing of using his private militia, the Guardians of the Oglala Lakota Nation (GOONs), to suppress dissent and opposition. Wilson, charged with corruption, intimidation, and abuse, had avoided impeachment.

On the night of February 27, 1973, in a brilliant act of political theater, a fifty-four-car caravan of Oglala and AIMsters took up arms and liberated Wounded Knee under the terms of the broken Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 [9]. TV stations and newspapers across the country lit up with news of the occupation. "Armed Indians Seize Wounded Knee, Hold Hostages," read the front-page headline in the *New York Times* [10].

Within hours, a stand against Wilson turned into an armed standoff against the United States government. In a list of demands sent to the Justice Department, the activists called for immediate Senate hearings on Indian treaties and prompt investigation into the BIA at Sioux reservations

across South Dakota. They courted the press, played hardball with government negotiators, and began smuggling food, activists, and supplies into the village.

In a decision unbeknownst to journalists, rumored among AIM activists, and in clear violation of the Constitution, the United States military was called in to quash the protest. Relying on the intelligence of the FBI's infamous COINTELPRO program [11], military commanders in duck-hunting gear called the plays and coordinated law enforcement, deploying armored vehicles and air force munitions.

Wilson's GOONs, armed with shotguns, set up roadblocks beyond federal lines to stop protesters, sympathizers, and news cameras. As in Cuba, the Congo, and other corners of the colonized world, the United States government demonstrated its willingness to ally with a tyrant as long as that tyrant's interests aligned with its own.

AIM warriors held their ground with hunting rifles, .22s, and an AK-47 carried back from the jungles of Vietnam. Federal law enforcement responded with a .50-caliber arsenal, tear gas, and fighter jet flyovers.

On April 17, Frank Clearwater, a Cherokee who had arrived from North Carolina with his pregnant wife the day before, was shot in the head. He died on April 25. The next day, a bullet pierced the heart of Oglala Vietnam veteran Buddy Lamont. He was buried with a one-hundred-gun salute next to Chief Bigfoot's band, his coffin draped in the flags of the nations he served: the United States, and the Independent Oglala Nation.

Before it was over, the OSCRO and AIM had held Wounded Knee for an astounding seventy-one days. Their rebellion galvanized indigenous people across the country — and around the world.

In Canada [12], Red Power forced a shift in indigenous policy from assimilation to recognition. In Australia, the fight for aboriginal land rights won significant political and legal victories. And in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Maori Renaissance successfully pressured the Crown to honor the Treaty of Waitangi, which to this day structures Crown-Maori relations.

The Indigenous Struggle Today

The struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline is rooted in this history. Indeed, the pipeline violates the same treaty that underwrote the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee. And just as AIM demanded respect for the treaties and indigenous sovereignty, the Standing Rock Sioux are demanding that the Fort Laramie Treaty be honored and the land and water be protected.

The people who have endured centuries of dispossession and attempted elimination — the poorest of the poor, the most likely to be killed by law enforcement, the most easily forgotten — are still here and still fighting. They have built alternatives within and beyond capitalism for hundreds of years. They are the carriers of traditions of indigenous resistance and resurgence simultaneously rooted in Lakota land and history, and global in scope.

In recent decades, this struggle has been threatened by neoliberal cooptation. Repelled by a colonizing state, many indigenous groups found themselves in an uneasy alliance with neoliberals who denounced "big government" [13] and jumped at the opportunity to slash the welfare state and restructure tribes as junior corporate partners in the global economy. "Tribal sovereignty" became increasingly conflated with owning and profiting from an Indian casino.

Yet despite the absence of a free-market critique in some indigenous circles, Standing Rock and other actions have emerged as exemplary counterweights to this pernicious drift.

And elsewhere, indigenous land protectors are also navigating the currents of globalization to great effect. The Unist'ot'en camp in northern British Columbia [14] has, thus far, blocked construction of numerous potential and proposed pipelines through their territory, building a space where indigenous lifeways can persist on lands defined by industry as an "energy corridor." [15] In Minnesota, the energy company Enbridge recently shelved plans for the Sandpiper pipeline [16], partially in response to tribal opposition. And the Obama administration nixed the Keystone XL Pipeline [17], after facing enormous pressure from tribes and their allies.

In each of these instances, indigenous peoples are more than cameo extras. They are central protagonists in the fight against the forces of capitalist expansion, who would destroy the land and water, and trample indigenous sovereignty, all for the purposes of resource extraction.

At Standing Rock, disparate tribes have set aside differences and come together as one. People from indigenous nations across the continent have travelled thousands of miles to stand with them. Indigenous people are rallying in support from New York City to San Francisco. Together, they are envisioning a future without a Dakota Access Pipeline, and enacting a future where indigenous nations exercise their rights to define a more just, equal, and sustainable path forward, as stewards of land, water, humanity, and each other.

At Standing Rock, the audacious vision for an indigenous future, handed down from Wounded Knee and global in force, is alive and well. This is how you Ghost Dance in 2016.

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P.S.

* Jacobin.9.8.16 :

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/09/standing-rock-dakota-access-pipeline-protest/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/battle-of-the-little-bighorn>

[2] http://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/4/dakota_access_pipeline_company_attacks_native

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/15/us/vine-deloria-jr-champion-of-indian-rights-dies-at-72.html?_r=0

[4] <http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/We-Talk-You-Listen,673208.aspx>

- [5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/cowboys-wild-west-manifest-destiny-expansion/>
- [6] <http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/history/history-native-american-peoples/plain-sioux-and-us-colonialism-lewis-and-clark-wounded-knee>
- [7] <http://thenewpress.com/books/like-hurricane>
- [8] <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/trailofbrokentreaties.html>
- [9] <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/sioux-treaty/>
- [10] http://www.nytimes.com/1973/03/01/archives/armed-indians-seize-wounded-knee-hold-hostages-dakota-indians-hold.html?_r=0
- [11] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/fbi-cointelpro-new-left-panthers-muslim-surveillance/>
- [12] <http://www.utppublishing.com/Skyscrapers-Hide-the-Heavens-A-History-of-Indian-White-Relations-in-Canada.html>
- [13] <http://www.uhpress.hawaii.edu/p-5513-9781869692865.aspx>
- [14] <http://unistoten.camp>
- [15] http://www.kitsaultenergy.com/about_news.html
- [16] <http://www.inforum.com/opinion/4095347-laduke-column-dakota-access-pipeline-purchaser-looking-enron>
- [17] <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-02-19/native-american-tribes-unite-fight-keystone-pipeline-and-government-disrespect>