

Lexington

## Looking at Indians, white Americans see themselves

*Thinking about natives in an era of nativism*



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IN EARLY 1924 the blue-bloods of Virginia found themselves with a problem. To criminalise interracial marriage, the state had drafted a law that classified anyone possessing even “one drop” of non-white blood as “coloured”. Awkwardly, that would include many of the so-called First Families of Virginia, because they traced their descent to a native American woman, Pocahontas, who had been abducted and married by a member of the Jamestown colony three centuries before. This ancestry had been considered far from shameful. It was a mark of American aristocracy, the real-life Pocahontas having been reinvented (she probably did not save the life of a colonist called John Smith) as an “American princess”. To fix matters, a clause known as the “Pocahontas exception” was added to the racist law, to exempt anyone with no more than one-sixteenth Indian blood.

This episode, documented in a new exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, on Indian myths and reality, helps explain a cultural puzzle. It has become clear that the pre-Columbian Americas were much more densely populated, by more sophisticated civilisations, than was previously thought. By one estimate North America, the more sparsely populated continent, had 18m people when Columbus sailed, more than England and France combined. Yet in the popular imagination it remains a vast wilderness, peopled by a few buffalo-hunters. The reason for this gigantic misunderstanding, suggest the Smithsonian’s curators, goes beyond bad schooling.

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It is fuelled by the ways Americans use real and mythical Indians, such as Pocahontas, to express their own ideas of citizenship and national identity. At a time when those things are contested by white nativists as well as natives, “Americans”, as the exhibition is called, lives up to its name: it is about all Americans.

From their first flush of revolutionary zeal, Americans used images of Indians to represent themselves. The exhibition's oldest example is a sketch by Paul Revere from 1766. This was in part a sardonic comment on British cartoonists doing likewise. It also represented the revolutionaries' self-identification as a new race of men, free of European tyranny. An association between Indians and liberty has been prominent in official iconography, including medals, stamps and friezes, ever since. Some officials were also keen to bring Enlightenment principles to their dealings with actual Indians. To dispossess them, argued Henry Knox, George Washington's secretary of war, would be a “stain on the character of the nation.” But few agreed.

In 1830 the government began removing Indians east of the Mississippi onto a shrinking territory in what is now Oklahoma. Farther north, on the plains of Minnesota and the Dakotas, white settlers encroached on the hunting grounds of some of the last free tribes, the Sioux, leading to violence that accelerated their demise. By the end of the century, America's Indians had been reduced to a sickly population of 250,000, huddled on patches of marginal land. Having dispensed with the real Indians, America then began losing its heart to imaginary ones.

Many North American Indians were settled cultivators. The nomadism of the plains was atypical and shaped by Europeans. The Sioux, formerly farmers, had shifted to hunting the herds of bison that grew in a land depopulated by imported diseases, using horses they got from the Spanish and guns from the French. Yet by the time of their futile last stand, they had come to represent all native Americans in the popular imagination. This was in some ways pernicious, a means to associate all Indians with violent resistance, justifying their eradication. Even so, Americans fell in love with the myth of the warrior-like Sioux.

With their eagle feathers and fiery expressions, Plains Indians became synonymous with the rugged individualism Americans liked to see in themselves. That is evident in the many sports teams with Indian-related names—the Cleveland Indians, Kansas City Chiefs and so on. It is also apparent in the endless consumer and military goods, from butter to missiles, marketed with images of Indians—to

suggest trustworthiness; durability; environmental soundness; efficacy at killing people. Any residual negative connotations are being scrubbed from that list: the racist caricature of Chief Wahoo, the Cleveland team's emblem, is being phased out. The remaining Indian-related brand values share a sense of authenticity. "Today, nothing is quite as American as the American Indian," writes one of the Smithsonian's curators, Paul Chaat Smith, a Comanche scholar with a dry wit.

There are lessons here for understanding America's latest spasm over who is, and who isn't, a legitimate American (a word used into the 19th century in England to refer exclusively to Indians). One is that the racist enormities on which America was founded, slavery and the dispossession of Indians, are so recent and unresolved—as evidenced by protests on tribal land and at Confederate monuments—that fights over national identity are inevitable. Another is that the nativist position espoused by many on the right is illogical. A Minnesotan nativist seeks, in effect, to bar Aztec migrants (lately called Mexicans) from a state his grandparents took from people who had had it for millennia.

### **Siouxing for peace**

A third, more hopeful, lesson lies in the way Americans have made national champions of their sometime victims, imbuing them with all-American virtues. That is not merely chutzpah. It stands for America's relentless ability to synthesise its disparate parts in an uplifting national story. Even in the current quarrelsome time, that contrary movement is evident—including among real-life native Americans, who are, though still deprived, becoming less impoverished and more confident. The admiration of popular culture has played a part in that. "It's the country saying to Indians, imaginary and real, past and present," suggests Mr Smith, "without you there is no us."

*This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Honest Injun"*

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