

Native Americans, America's Colonial Troops

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Native Americans have been touted as the quintessential American patriots. Their war record in the 20th century certainly does not contradict this assessment. More fruitful, however, would be to look at their patriotism as one aspect of their colonial relation with the United States.

Native Americans participated in every war waged by the United States in the 20th century. Such contribution to American war efforts has been widely praised. Often, the praise has been framed in racial and/or cultural terms. Native Americans were, and are still largely believed to fight for reasons of their own, by “tradition”, “custom”, because “this is what they have always done.”¹ Running somewhat counter to those beliefs, recent historical accounts have shown that there was no single distinctively Indian experience in the U.S. military. But historians have not shaken to the core this basic tenet: Native Americans are and have always been warriors.

The idea has acquired such potency in both Native American and non-Native American circles, that it feels tantamount to an attack against Native Americans, men or women, to claim the contrary: that Native Americans have not always been warriors; and that a good portion of their military experience in the 20th century is not at all distinct from that of other Americans, whatever their race or ethnicity. In this article, I do not intend to factor culture out of my account of Native American military experience, far from it; I contend, however, that culture has played a

¹ See United States Department of Defense, “20th Century Warriors: Native American Participation in the United States Military”, 1996 (<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-1.htm>)

much greater role in shaping the memory of wars in Indian country than it has actually influenced the day-to-day life of Indian soldiers. More importantly, I think that this specific segment of Native American lives: military service, should above all be understood within a colonial framework. Native Americans have been colonized peoples for centuries. Comparison with other peoples colonized by the United States is the only way to identify their specificity, if any.

The reason why comparison with “traditional” colonial troops has been only halfheartedly attempted should however be clear from the start: contrary to those, and with a few exceptions, Native American soldiers of the U.S. army did not fight in segregated units in the 20th century. While segregation was still targeting African American recruits and preventing many of them from carrying guns while in the ranks, the vast majority of Native Americans served in white units and filled all manners of positions – regardless of their supposedly racially-ingrained fighting abilities. Unsurprisingly many contemporaries during and after the world wars interpreted this to mean that Native Americans had reached in the ranks the equality that they were refused on reservations. Those self-styled “friends of the Indian” reasoned that military participation should result in increased rights; equal service meant equal citizenship. In 1919, they were happy to see Congress grant Indian veterans of World War One the right to claim U.S. citizenship. Five years later all Native Americans born in the U.S. were granted that same right – whether they wanted it or not.²

Indian Recruits in Imperial Context

The early twentieth-century itinerary of Indian soldiers thus offers striking differences with their segregated African American counterparts. Usually considered as forerunners of the African American servicemen of the 20th century,³ the famous “Buffalo Soldiers” could more appropriately be regarded as one of the most genuinely colonial body ever raised by the U.S.

² On this and later references to Indians in World War One and World War Two, see in particular Thomas A. Britten, *American Indians in World War I: at home and at war*, University of New Mexico Press, 1997; and Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

³ William H. Leckie, with Shirley A. Leckie, *The buffalo soldiers: a narrative of the Black cavalry in the West*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

Coming from populations just freed from slavery, widely disenfranchised and bound to the land, black Americans after the Civil War were undoubtedly a colonized people, albeit one with a specifically American story: their colonial status did not depend on their being the first inhabitants of the land, but on having been forced to help in settling it and on being prevented from political participation.

The colonial nature of this second-class status showed clearly in the armed forces: between the end of the Civil War and World War One, black soldiers could only serve under white officers – a major similarity with European colonial troops. They also fulfilled the two roles of colonial armies: policing “pacified” territories and conquering new ones. For most of the period leading up to World War One, “Buffalo Soldiers” served essentially stateside, against Indians, strikers, or on the Southwestern border. But when the army set out to carve out an empire for America in the Caribbean and the Pacific, black troopers were also assigned specific tasks based on their perceived racial abilities. Most notably, they were deemed immune to tropical diseases and as such, left behind after the American evacuation of Cuba.⁴ When the U.S. joined the Allies in World War One, army authorities went a step further in recognizing African American recruits as colonial troops: they let an entire division of black infantry, the 93rd, serve under French officers who, they thought, knew best how to handle black recruits because they had led Senegalese in combat.

Compared to African Americans, Indians seemed particularly well integrated. At the turn of the century, segregated bodies of Indian scouts were fast becoming a memory of the past. The last ones would retire in the 1940s, but already in the 1900s, their role had been mostly restricted to policing. In this even they were much less important than Indian reservation police forces. Contrary to black troopers, Indian scouts did not follow the expansion of the American empire; they were replaced by local recruits. No clearer testimony of the Indian scouts’ demise can be found than the creation, in 1899, of the first companies of... Filipino scouts. Their first troop was a purely imperial product: its Macabebe recruits had served under Spanish command, and it was an ex-officer of Buffalo Soldiers, Matthew A. Batson, who raised them and promoted the

⁴ Vincent J. Cirillo, *Bullets and Bacilli: The Spanish-American War and Military Medicine*, Rutgers University Press, 2004.

idea of enlisting native troops in the Philippines.⁵ While Indian scouts never numbered more than three hundred in the last decades of the 19th century, Filipino scouts became in 1922 a full-scale, 12,000-strong army. They were a permanent part of the U.S. army who comprised two-thirds of the terrestrial forces that were to defend the Philippines in case of war. Even after meritorious service in World War II, Filipino scouts were not, however, offered citizenship on a general basis like Indian veterans. Undoubtedly they were America's colonial army.

A bird's eye comparison of Indian soldiers with African Americans and Filipinos, then, seems to bear out the hypothesis of the exceptional status of Native American recruits. Indians were not employed *as Indians* at the heyday of imperial expansion; they were, nominally at least, given the choice of becoming citizens after serving in World War One; and they almost never served in ethnically homogenous groups, with the exception of a few all-Indian companies.

That insight bids two questions. First, if their military status set Indians apart from other peoples colonized by the U.S., to what should we ascribe this difference? Second, was the difference as far-reaching as to preclude looking at Indians through a colonial lens?

From Warrior to Soldier and Back

Before resorting to cultural explanations to answer our first question, one should look at the history of what lies at the heart of American Indians' military specificity: their integration into white regiments. Time, indeed timing is here of the essence. The idea of integrating Indians in the U.S. army was raised in military circles in the 1880s. It was, at its root, a colonizing project, one that European colonial officers could have claimed as their own, and one in which their example was, at least rhetorically, put to use. The avowed purpose of employing Natives not as mere auxiliaries, like scouts, and on a temporary basis, but as regular U.S. soldiers, depended on a conviction largely held by American officers: Indians were warriors. Warriors could not easily be turned into farmers, as the "civilizing" project of the Bureau of Indian Affairs

⁵ On the Philippine Scouts, see James R. Woolard, "The Philippine scouts: the development of America's colonial army", Ohio State University, 1975 (http://etd.ohiolink.edu/view.cgi?acc_num=osu1273515604); and Edward M. Coffman, "Batson of the Philippine Scouts," *Parameters* 7, no. 3 (1977): 68-72. (<http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/Articles/1977/coffman.pdf>)

at the time would have it. Military service would consequently constitute a perfect intermediary stage for Indians on their path to civilization. Martial discipline would channel Indians' natural aggressiveness, service under white officers would generalize the use of English, and young warriors would not have time to make trouble for Indian agents on reservations. Not everyone was thrilled at the idea of regularizing Indians; trust and money were both limited resources. In 1890 the proponents of the scheme succeeded nevertheless in implementing a program which created Indian companies within several western regiments.⁶

The success of the program varied widely according to assignment (cavalry or infantry), tribe and band, officers, and individuals. In some cases, raising the required number of Indian soldiers was not possible, the duties and pay of regular soldiers being too little attractive to former scouts. In others, disciplinary requirements were such as to repel Indian warriors. In yet other cases, transition from scouts to regular servicemen did go smoothly. While historians are hard-pressed to assign a single meaning to this experience, contemporaries were not. The coalition of junior and senior officers and politicians that had promoted it lost its political clout around the mid-1890s, and in 1897 the last regular Indian company was decommissioned. The "experiment" was deemed a failure, not to be replicated.

It was not immediately clear what would become of Indian soldiers. Enthusiasm for the power of military discipline to civilize Indians did not wane. Programs in Eastern boarding schools such as the Hampton institute in Virginia or the Carlisle school in Pennsylvania were founded by an ex-officer, Richard Pratt, and seemed to pursue the task that Indian companies had failed to achieve. They emphasized patriotism, drill, and parades as central parts of their curriculum, and attempted to prepare their Indian students for insertion in the U.S. economy. At first, Pratt, who for twenty years was a voice impossible to ignore in Indian education, did not hold strong beliefs regarding military employment of Indians. Himself a former officer of Indian scouts and African-American troopers, Pratt recommended raising Indian troops when the Spanish-American war broke out in 1898. His suggestion was to form a regiment of boarding school graduates, a notable variation on the experiment that had just been terminated. Pratt soon

⁶ Clifford P. Coppersmith, "Indians in the Army: Professional Advocacy and the Regularization of Indian Military Service, 1889-1897," *Military History of the West*, Volume 26, No. 2, Fall 1996, pp. 159-85.

reversed his position, however: absolute integration in white troops became his dogma. He went as far as recommending that Indians not be allowed to serve in the same regiment. The military followed his advice, so that in 1901, there were no more than forty Indians officially enrolled in the U.S. armed forces.⁷

For Indians, therefore, integration started as near-exclusion. Added to the hundred and falling number of scouts retained in the Indian Scouting Service, the turn of the century recruits brought the total of Indian soldiers to less than two hundred – for a population of 250 000 whose male component had massively relied on war for its status and sustenance in the previous decades. Integration in the armed forces happened at a time when the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ social engineering meant to completely reverse the signification of military activity for Indians. Disarmament was the precondition to converting warriors into farmers, and a military career was only to be allowed for a small, indeed minuscule minority of Native Americans.⁸ Patriotism and citizenship, managed by the state, were the new rationales for organized violence, not status and plunder. This “reformist” will was only partly successful. Despite a few notable incidents between 1890 and 1917, Indian warriors did lay down their arms. Warrior ethics were transferred to the field of education and the pursuit of justice in the courts. In the Plains, many warrior societies, a prominent institution of tribal life, slowly disappeared. Yet not all did. The knowledge associated to tales of war deeds, war honors, and above all dances, survived. Two ideals of military prowess started evolving together on reservations: the Indian citizen-soldier, and the modern-day defender of the tribe.

As a result of the policy of assimilation pursued by the BIA, coupled with the failure of the Indian companies experiment in the 1890s, the ideal of armed citizenship and the use of military-influenced school curricula had thus been substituted for actual service. American Indian warriors’ reluctance to become soldiers in the 1890s had played no small part in this evolution. Contrary to other colonized people, American Indians had not been theorized by

⁷ On Indian soldiers between 1890 and 1917, see file 213574, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁸ The individual Indian soldier, in this context, was more than likely to be used as evidence of the success of America’s civilizing enterprises. Such was the case, for example, of Arthur Bonnicastle, an Osage private of the 9th Infantry Regiment, who was called in court to testify to the cruelty of native insurgents during Major Littleton Waller’s trial for the massacre of mutinous Filipino porters. See file 213574.

military experts as a “martial race”, naturally gifted for military service,⁹ although they had momentarily come very close to it. Such policy did not differentiate the U.S. from other colonial powers: Great Britain did not behave differently with Canadian Indians. After 1885, when a hundred Native boatmen were asked to come to the rescue of the British Empire in Sudan,¹⁰ First Nations north of the 49th parallel were never again specifically recruited in Canada. That Inuit and Aleuts population were a notable exception to this shows us why this was so: both Canada and the U.S. were settler colonies where interest in arming Natives was always deemed a temporary expedient, one justified by a specific terrain or the local balance of power. Indians’ military relevance vanished at the turn of the century. After the Civil War, Indians were never again employed in segregated troops against non-Indians.

The Spontaneous Generation of Indian Warriors

Not that many did not want to see such troops created and used – and Indians were part of them. Imperial expansion in the Pacific more than once raised from its ashes the project of enlisting all-Indians units. With the help of Leonard Wood, a physician who had seen service against Geronimo, Theodore Roosevelt showed the way by recruiting Indians in his “Rough Riders” regiment, because he wanted this unit to be representative of American manhood. Following his illustrious example, several propositions to raise Indian regiments for service in the Philippines were made by officers of Indian and black troops, as well as civilians with military experience or Bureau of Indian affairs connections.¹¹ Their familiarity with specific tribes, these volunteer recruiters explained, ensured that they would be able to raise and lead them, just like American officers had done with scouts.¹² Some specifically pointed to the possibility of using ex-scouts and policemen. With the extension of guerilla warfare in the Philippines, they referred directly to Indian skills in tracking and ambush, and found in

⁹ On the notion of martial race, see Timothy H. Parsons “Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen: The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 671-701. http://artsci.wustl.edu/~tparsons/journal_articles/kamba.pdf.

¹⁰ In 1885, Britain raised a body of boatmen, a quarter of them Indians, to accompany a rescue expedition to Sudan, a remarkable experiment as short-lived as the U.S. Indian companies. See Louis Jackson, *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt*, Montreal, W. Drysdale and Co., 1885. <http://www.archive.org/stream/ourcaughnawagasi32995gut/32995.txt> ; and Michael Bumsted, “From the Red to the Nile: William Nassau Kennedy and the Manitoba contingent of voyageurs in the Gordon relief expedition, 1884-1885,” *Manitoba History*, Autumn 2001, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/42/kennedyvoyageurs.shtml

¹¹ See in particular file 213574, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹² See for example Hugh Lenox Scott, *Some memories of a soldier*, New York, The Century Co., 1928.

newspapers a willing relay of these conceptions. The educational rationale that had lied at the bottom of the 1890s experiment was also relied on. Others fashioned more complex argumentations, arguing that taking Indians away from the West to the Philippines would forever erase the possibility of Indian uprisings and free American units for service overseas; and why not settle them there?

That these proposals were never implemented is beside the point here: they are clear evidence that colonial techniques of racialized and racializing recruitment did not die easily, rooted as they were in both recent experiences in the West and current ones in the Pacific. More importantly, such techniques continued to influence Native American service in the 20th century.

Racialization was in fact intrinsically linked to integration. The infamous “one drop rule” lied behind this paradox: for an Indian recruit to be found to have “Negro admixture” meant exclusion from white units.¹³ Populations of visibly mixed ancestry such as Cherokee Freedmen could not, therefore, claim Indian ancestry to escape the stigma and the quota associated with serving in blacks-only units. Even Native Americans who had been permitted to enlist in white regiments could not take for granted that their race would not be used against them: servicemen from the South, among others, could and would challenge their affectation out of racist prejudice.¹⁴

More importantly, integration never erased racialized expectations regarding the military abilities of Indian recruits. Trench warfare during World War One only renewed interest in Indians’ supposedly natural stealth, camouflage, and brutality. While most of this interest only translated in propaganda about the remarkable contribution of Native Americans to the war effort, service on the French front again resuscitated the idea of employing Indians for specific jobs. In 1919, inspired by European colonial troops, Lieutenant John R. Eddy, a former agent of the Indian Bureau working for the Historical Section of the U.S. army, conducted a survey on Indians’ scouting abilities, with a view to creating Indian-manned but white-officered ranger

¹³ File 213574, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ See for example Sebastian Hubert Lukasik, « Military Service, Combat, and American Identity in the Progressive Era », dissertation, Duke University, 2008 (<http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/909>).

companies. Many officers responded positively: 60% of the soldiers surveyed were deemed to have good or excellent scouting abilities. There also, the failure of Eddy's scheme matters less than the willingness of army officials to organize the survey. Twenty years after integration, return to segregation was still being considered, and the U.S. military had not renounced the idea of harnessing the military abilities of Indians as a race.¹⁵

This hesitant policy of the U.S. army regarding Indian servicemen shaped their battlefield experiences well into the 20th century. At least one historian has gone as far as identifying a "scout syndrome" affecting the experience of Indian soldiers up to the present day. He remarked that, isolated as they were in white units and under pressure to live up to the stereotype, Indians were often made to fill the most dangerous positions as courier, sniper, scout, or as point man on patrols. Indian recruits themselves were aware of such racial profiling. When World One broke out, the Indian scout remained a vaunted figure, and the exploits of Apache scouts in Mexico in 1916 were still in every mind.¹⁶ The willingness of non-Native officers to draw on racial and/or cultural resources occasionally bore practical fruit. Most notably, it resulted in the most talked-about use of Indian abilities: code talking, practiced by Choctaws in World War One, and by Navajos and several other tribes in World War Two.

Such experiments were possible only as the product of colonial relations. In the case of the Choctaw, their commanding officers merely had to draw recruits from one almost all-Indian company of the Oklahoma-Texas National Guard's 36th division. In the case of the Navajos, their unit was a distinct program of the Marine Corps, proposed to them by the son of a missionary who had grown up on the Navajo reservation. Western expertise continued to influence the position of Native Americans in the military fifty years after the official demise of Indian companies.

Native Soldiers' Colonial Dilemma

¹⁵ See Britten, *op. cit.*; and Thomas Grillot, "L'Héritage Patriotique: mémoire de la grande Guerre et Anciens combattants amérindiens aux États-Unis", dissertation, EHESS, 2010.

¹⁶ For the "scout syndrome", see Tom Holm, *Strong hearts, wounded souls: Native American veterans of the Vietnam War*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1996; and Grillot diss.

Yet, because they were often invisible in the midst of non-Natives, it is difficult to generalize about the experiences of Indian soldiers. It could reasonably be argued that this invisibility, while itself a product of assimilationist colonialism, precludes any assessment on the colonial nature of their war contributions. Saying that the colonial legacy of America continued to bear on Indian soldiers might even be wrong for many of them. Military service meant escape from the strictures of reservation life, and was appreciated as such. Abundant food, free access to forbidden commodities such as alcohol, and equally free interactions with most non-Natives were for most a welcome change from civilian life, indeed from the colonial subjection that was central to reservation life. Why, then, leaving aside the issue of race, insist on a colonial framework to read the contemporary military experience of Indians?

The answer requires a shift of focus. Native soldiers' experiences were not just shaped by conditions on the battlefield and military regulations. They were the product of complex interactions between realities and expectations, personal itineraries and cultural memories; they were not only a result of Natives' relations with non-Native but also of relations between Indian generations. If a distinct Native American experience of the war is to be found in the 20th century, one surely should look at how its meaning was framed by Indian communities when their soldiers came back home.

In the U.S. as in other parts of the world, World War One and World War Two were largely interpreted as creating rights. Indians on reservations were part of these interpretative movements. They did not agree on what those rights should be: citizenship without restrictions, compensations for land losses, respect or termination of treaties. But they drew on preexisting traditions to bring their various interpretations to bear on the colonial situation that they were a part of. Veterans mobilized for reform of the Indian status, and used military symbols to do so. The U.S. flag became a summary of these contradictory interpretations of the colonial situation. If for most, the colored stripes and stars of the flag stood for the alliance between races, the blood shed in war, and the rights acquired thereby, some saw it as a symbol of frustrated citizenship, while others took it as a sign and a guarantee of their tribes' special relation to the federal state.

After World War One and the apparition of the first generation of veterans in Indian country since the end of the nineteenth century, war thus became a contentious question for Natives. Culture helped Indian communities to both spell out and ignore those potentially destructive contradictions. In dances, veterans of all generations were honored regardless of who their enemy had been, including the U.S., and tribal values were extolled; yet loyalty to the U.S. was also constantly reaffirmed. The culturally-relevant valorization of the figure of the warrior helped bridge those ideological gaps.¹⁷

There lies, I think, what makes the colonial specificity of Native Americans with respect to other peoples colonized by the U.S. While wars led African Americans to seek full citizenship, and Filipinos to eventually regain their independence, American Indians remained torn between those two options. Their colonial experience has lied in this dilemma. Fighting for a land that was theirs in the first place meant fighting for the flag that had taken it from them. There, *post facto*, culture played its most decisive part in shaping American Indians' military experience: the idea of an Indian "warrior tradition", this collaborative work of Natives and non-Natives, smoothly glossed away political contradictions. Indian could be both warriors and soldiers, citizens and aliens, tribal members and recruits of their respective states, because "they had always fought" and would continue to do so without regard to politics. This colonial ideology is still very much alive.

For Further Reading:

Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, « The Persistence of Empires », *Books and Ideas*, 14 February 2011. <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Persistence-of-Empires.html>

Nicolas Delalande, « American Exceptionalism at Its End. An interview with Thomas Bender », *Books and Ideas*, 28 November 2008, <http://www.booksandideas.net/American-Exceptionalism-at-Its-End.html>

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¹⁷ On how Indian communities interacted with their veterans after World War one, see Thomas Grillot, op. cit.