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When America Was Great, Savage White Un-Settlers Raped a Continent and Assaulted a Planet

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Your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings...are...a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

– Frederick Douglass, July 4th, 1852

“Together,” Donald “Make America Great Again” Trump [told U.S. Naval Academy graduates](#) last May, “there is nothing Americans can’t do, absolutely nothing. In recent years, and even decades,” Trump added, “too many people have forgotten that truth. They’ve forgotten that our ancestors trounced an empire, tamed a continent, and triumphed over the worst evils in history.”

I was reminded of Trump’s statement recently as I reflected on the remarkable record of climate-change driven extreme weather events that have hit the United States in recent years. Epic wild-fires, droughts, rains, floods, tornadoes, snowfalls, and hurricanes are humbling U.S.-America. They are only a foretaste of the stern *continental taming* U.S.-Americans can expect at the hands of Mother Nature in coming years. (More on that below.)

Where was one to begin in processing the untruth and affront embedded in Trump's reflection on how "America" was once "great"?

"Our ancestors"? I have a paternal grandfather who may have been descended from original 18th or even 17th century Scotch-Irish immigrants to North America, but my largest ethnic strain is Finnish, thanks to the Luhtala family's "chain migration" to DeKalb, Illinois in the early 20th century, long after the closing of the western U.S. frontier. (The Luhtalas worked in barbed-wire plants to help the continent's capitalist "tammers"/takers mark their territorial conquests off as private property.) Like hundreds of millions of other U.S-Americans, I have ancestors who came long after the nation's original white and mostly English, Irish, and German "settlers." (Currently, 14% of the U.S. population is foreign-born, the largest percentage since 1910, right after my Finnish great-grandparents arrived, when 15% of US-Americans were born in other countries.)

These "ancestors...trounced an empire"? Not really. The U.S. merely broke off from the Western edge of the British Empire, which would go on to rule the world like no global hegemon until the post-World War II Pax Americana (more on that lovely formation below). The British Empire had a pretty damn good run from the end of the Napoleonic Wars through the rest of the 19th century.

For what it's worth, the propertied masters atop the [so-called American Revolution](#) understood their new slave-owning republic as an empire – an "empire of liberty," they called it, with no sense of irony given their dedication to the ruthless ethnic cleansing (to use a 20th century phrase) of the nation's original inhabitants and the expansion of Black chattel slavery.

"Tamed a continent"? Leaving aside the fact that Canada and Mexico also hold much of the North America, Trump's phrase was an insolent slight of the continent's original inhabitants. Here the president channeled the original "settlers" concept of the 10-18 million human beings who lived in North America prior to white-European invasion as pre-historic "savages" who required the stern hand of the "civilized" white man to impose order.

It was Orwellian twaddle and truth inversion. The continent's First Nations people were highly civilized, unscathed by class rule, and harmoniously connected to the natural environment in ways that hold critical significance for human and other living things in our current age of capitalist ecocide. As the Native American author and activist [Ward Churchill wrote](#) more than two decades ago:

"On...the day Christopher Columbus first washed up on a Caribbean beach, North America was long since endowed with an abundant and exceedingly complex cluster of civilizations. Having continuously occupied the continent for at least 50,000 years, the native inhabitants evidenced a total population of perhaps 15 million, cities as large as the 40,000-resident urban center at Cahokia (in present-day Illinois), highly advanced conceptions of architecture and engineering, spiritual traditions embodying equivalents to modern eco-science, refined knowledge of pharmacology and holistic medicine, and highly sophisticated systems of governance, trade, and diplomacy. The traditional economies of the continent were ...based in environmentally sound farming procedures which originated well over half the vegetal foodstuffs now consumed by peoples the world over. By and large, the indigenous societies demonstrating such attainments were organized along extremely egalitarian lines, with real property held collectively and matrilocality a normative standard."

Pre-Conquest North America contained "large-scale societies which had perfected ways of organizing themselves into psychologically fulfilling wholes, experiencing very high standards of living, and still maintaining environmental harmony...War, in the Euro-derived sense in which the term is understood today" – as highly organized mass annihilation – "was," Churchill noted, "unknown" among and between the First Nations.

Also unknown in the continent's original civilizations was economic inequality and poverty on anything remotely like the scale of early modern Europe. The Old World was home to a capitalist order whose relentless enclosure of the European commons and destruction of independent farmer and artisan livelihoods generated a surplus population desperate to spill onto North America. Now the U.S. itself hosts savage inequalities – the top tenth of the nation's One Percent owns as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent and its riches three persons have as much net worth between as the bottom half – that make Western Europe (incubator of modern class rule) look egalitarian.

Tamed a continent? It was more like *raped a continent*. The “Indians” (absurdly so misnamed because the “settlers” mistakenly thought they had discovered “the Indies”) were seen by “Predator” – Churchill's understandable (from an indigenist perspective) term for the European invaders – as animalized brutes fit for elimination and removal even as the newcomers incorporated numerous aspects of Native American culture (moccasins, canoes, and more). A lethal combination of germs, superior numbers, technology, and killing capacities – including the moral capacity to wipe out whole villages with no more spiritual discomfort than that involved in shooting deer and coyotes – inflicted astonishing population decline on Native North America. One after another, original North American nations and tribes were liquidated and dispersed. “By 1890,” Churchill noted, “fewer than 250,000 Indians remained alive within the United States, a degree of decimation extending into the upper ninetieth percentile.”

Predator's massacre chain ran from Connecticut Captain John Mason's burning and shooting of hundreds of Pequot villagers near [Mystic River in May of 1637](#) through terrible events like the [so-called Battle \(massacre\) of Bad Axe \(1832\)](#) and the Sand Creek Massacre (1864) to the Wounded Knee bloodbath (the so-called Battle of Wounded Knee) in December of 1891, when the U.S. Calvary killed 150-300 Lakota men, women, and children on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The United States' beloved first president, George Washington, was [known to the Iroquois as “Town Destroyer.”](#)

In a popular first-person account of the “battle of Bad Axe” – the gruesome culmination of the brutal removal of the Sauk nation from northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin in the “Black Hawk War” [1] – U.S. Army Major John Allen Wakefield offered some remarkable reflections. “It was a horrid sight,” Wakefield wrote, “to witness little [Native American] children, wounded and suffering the most excruciating pain, although they were of the savage enemy, and *the common enemy of the country*...It was enough to make the heart of the most hardened being on earth to ache” But, Wakefield wrote, “*I must confess, that it filled my heart with gratitude and joy, to think that I had been instrumental, with many others, in delivering my country of those merciless savages, and restoring those [invading white] people again to their peaceful homes and firesides*” – on land that had for centuries hosted homes and firesides for the Sauk.

Such sentiments were common among the genocidal white killers across the centuries of North American “settlement” and ethnic cleansing. From the colonial era on, the savage “settlers” reveled in the mass slaying of indigenous people (including women, children, and older men) they saw as inherently “evil” and (curiously enough) “savage.” “Our Great Father,” a government agent told the Sauks, “will forbear no longer. He has tried to reclaim [Native Americans] and they grow worse. He is resolved to sweep them from the face of the earth. ... If they cannot be made good they must be killed.”

This kind of truth-inverting narrative, depicting the continent's peaceful original inhabitants and not their coldblooded butchers as the “merciless savages,” was typical of how the invading white un-“settlers” justified their genocidal extermination of North America's first civilizations.

During the late 18th century and early 19th century, the Native North American Holocaust was meant among other things to clear the way for another kind of Holocaust – the [sadistic forced labor and torture regime](#) of Black chattel slavery, the key to the United States' emergence as a major capitalist power by the mid-19th century. As the United States moved into the railroad and industrial

era, [its rising accumulation of capital fueled above by lucrative, highly profitable southern cotton slavery](#), the great Black ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass – the truly great American who [Trump seemed last year to see as a living contemporary](#) personality (a rapper like his good friend Kanye West, perhaps) – asked “what, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” His answer:

“a day that reveals to him...the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings...mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — *a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages*. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour....Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.”

The two and a half century Holocaust of Black chattel slavery is the persistently unacknowledged and uncompensated historical taproot of a stark Black-white inequality and hyper-segregation that continues to haunt “American” life and feed the nation’s gigantic, historically unmatched system of mass incarceration. The southern Confederacy, whose noxious historical monuments Trump and other white nationalists defend in the name of “history,” treasonously seceded from the Union and forced the Civil War for [one clear reason](#): the southern slave-owning ruling class’s determination that the election of Abraham Lincoln spelled the end of the racist chattel system.

It wasn’t just human beings that the white “settlers” “tamed” – *raped*, that is – when “America” was “Great.” Between European “settlement” and the aftermath of the Civil War, Predator saw fit to [fell 52% of the deciduous U.S. forest](#) east of the Mississippi. A fifth of that remaining woodland bit the dust between 1850 and 1909, thanks to accelerating waves of deforestation led by agricultural clearing and logging in the Great Lakes region and the South (where Black cotton slavery was largely reconstituted in new forms in the last third of the nineteenth century).

Then there was the decline of original wildlife, not so much “tamed” as exterminated. “As the 19th century progressed,” the [National Park Service reports](#):

“wildlife habitat was dramatically reduced by deforestation and wetland filling, combined with over-hunting. New markets for wildlife made *killing wildlife a financially profitable venture for hunters*, who took advantage of improved transportation methods like railroads to gain access to previously inaccessible areas. The lack of legal protection for wildlife led to *the slaughter of many species, some of which were hunted to extinction or near extinction*. Wildlife like passenger pigeons and buffalo, which had been extremely abundant, were *hunted to extinction*(or nearly so). Migratory birds were especially impacted, since there was a huge market for the feathers of birds such as egrets, used to create women’s fashionable hats” (emphasis added).

The elimination of the continent’s once great bison herds was nauseating exterminism. Richard Dodge, an army officer, [reported in 1877](#) that “Buffalo were slaughtered without sense or discretion...Where there were myriads of buffalo the year before, there were now myriads of carcasses. The air was foul with sickening stench, and the vast plain, and the vast plain, which only a short twelvemonth before teemed with animal life, was a dead, solitary, putrid desert.”

Soon the meat barons of Chicago would devise ways to “tame” – to kill and process on a previously unimaginable scale that brought droves of tourists from around the world to marvel at the modern art and science of animal slaughter – many thousands of cows, pigs, and sheep per day in the giant meatpacking plants of Upton Sinclair’s famously sickening “Jungle.” [The harrowing and alienating](#)

[work carried out in these](#) and other vast new mass production workplaces across the nation showed that antebellum and Civil War era labor activists were right to remind Americans that slavery took a waged form as well as a chattel form – and that antidemocratic class rule was not limited to the slavery of the U.S. South and the serfdom of Russia.

As mostly white U.S. workers rose against their ruthless exploitation under the rule of “wage slavery” in the rapidly expanding new industrial capitalism of the post-Civil War, the capitalist press not uncommonly justified the bloody repression of striking and marching proletarians and killing of their radical leaders by [describing them as “white savages.”](#) As the labor historian James Green noted in his classic study [Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and a Bombing That Divided America](#):

“Many [U.S.] editorialists relied on animal metaphors to describe the anarchists, whom they branded ‘ungrateful hyenas,’ ‘incendiary vermin,’ and ‘slavic wolves.’ ...the alien incendiaries were often compared to other hated groups like the menacing Apache Indians. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat applied an old frontier adage about ‘savage’ tribes to the new menace. ‘There are no good anarchists except dead anarchists,’ it proclaimed.”

When railroad workers went out on strike in Chicago, U.S. infantry troops were summoned fresh from Dakotas campaigns against the Sioux to kills dozens of working-class men and boys – “white savages” – on the city’s Southwest side.

“Our ancestors,” Trump said, “triumphed over the worst evils in history”(Trump)? What, like racialized genocide and chattel slavery, the elimination of species, the rampant destruction of natural habitat, the rise of Robber Baron plutocracy, and concentrated wage-slavery on a scale that Karl Marx could barely have imagined? The “taming of the continent” by “our” great gun- and bullwhip-wielding “ancestors” were great triumphs for all of these and terrible historical scourges.

But, of course, the last clause of the final Trump sentence I quoted at the beginning of this essay refers to the 20th century. By “worst evils in history,” Orange (Truth-) Crush(er) meant German fascism/Nazism and Soviet “communism.” And here there are at least five problems.

First, the United States’ interwar establishment was [fairly pleased with European fascism](#) until the Third Reich and its Japanese partner threatened to shut off the world system to America’s rising global economic power. U.S. business class “elites” saw fascism as a welcome disciplining force to crush European trade unions and Leftists and as a bulwark against socialist state in Russia.

Second, Hitler and his [fellow Nazi leaders drew considerable inspiration](#) from how the white “settler” U.S. had “tamed” its “inferior races” with genocide, ethnic cleansing, and brutal, fascist-like racial terrorism, segregation, and disenfranchisement. The United States’ Indian reservations and Jim Crow South were Social Darwinian role models for the social policy architects of the Third Reich.

Third, it was the Soviet Union by far and away that defeated the supreme evil that was the Nazi regime, at the cost of 25 million dead (the United States lost just 277,000 people in Europe and North Africa during World War II).

Fourth, for all its considerable flaws, the authoritarian, bureaucratic-collectivist USSR developed a modern and urbanized society with [health care and education for all](#) and outside and against the savagely unequal and egoistic, accumulation-mad world capitalist system headquartered in London and New York. Washington DC. (The U.S.-forced collapse of the Soviet Union and empire led to drastic reductions in the quality of life in Russia and Eastern Europe.)

Fifth, after it joined with USSR in the defeat of German, Italian, and Japanese fascism, the new global Pax Americana expanded upon its earlier history of genocide and slavery [to become, well, one of “the worst evils in world history.”](#)

“The problem after a war,” [wrote the pacifist A.J. Muste in 1941](#), “is with the victor. He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?”

Consistent with Muste’s warning, victorious and relatively unscathed “America” – the only, global-reach Superpower after the “suicide of Europe” and the Nazis’ devastation of much of Russia – went on a global rampage after “winning” World War II (during which time U.S. imperial policymakers planned to [make sure that Washington finally displaced the United Kingdom](#) as global hegemon after the unprecedented carnage ceased). The planetary death toll resulting from the high-powered aggression of the U.S. and its allies and proxies since 1945 runs well into the millions. Along the way, the U.S. has: [overthrown many dozens of governments](#) (including democratically elected ones); funded, equipped trained and provided political cover for a host of U.S.-allied [“Third World fascist”](#) regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; [subverted and pre-empted democracy across the planet](#); interfered in the internal political affairs of nearly every nation on Earth; spread its military installations into more than 100 “sovereign” states; led the world into a permanent arms race humanity can ill-afford; developed the capacity to blow the world up many times over.

Consistent with its founding genocidal elimination of original North American civilizations that anticipated “modern eco-science” and “maintain[ed] environmental harmony” (Churchill), the United States has also spearheaded the planetary expansion of a rapaciously eco-cideal world capitalist order that has set humanity on course for final environmental catastrophe: the Greenhouse Gassing to Death of Life on Earth, a crime that makes the Nazis look like small-time crooks.

It’s not for nothing that the world’s population has [long ranked](#) the U.S. as the leading threat to and on Earth.

Who will tame the United States? With all due respect for the people and forces that have worked to undermine U.S. global hegemony over many years, the final cards are held by the very Earth that so many U.S.-Americans have been falsely led to believe they could conquer. Nature bats last. The record-setting extreme weather that has hit the U.S. (“America”) in recent years are only early bases-on-balls compared to the late-inning World Series grand-slams Mother Nature is going to pulverize “America” and the world with in coming years. The real existential shit hits the fan when we can no longer grow, hunt, and fish enough food, find enough clean water, adequately cool our bodies, and fend off pandemics.

The socio-pathological [climate-denier Trump](#) is doing his eco-cidal best to speed that existential moment along. One example among many: [but for the opposition of more level-headed operatives](#) in his administration, he would have by now signed an executive order [absurdly citing national security concerns](#) as an excuse for forcing regional U.S. electric grid operators to continue purchasing power from coal-burning and nuclear-powered plants that have outlived their normal operational lifespans! What does a malignant, eco-fascistic narcissist like Trump care if the human race joins the anthropogenic [Sixth Great Extinction](#) after his death takes its toll and he learns that all the money he stole can never buy back his soul. (to paraphrase Bob Dylan)?

“America’s” old, rich, and white masters (Trump is just one of many) – our [parasitic “tamers” and takers](#)– think they can pull up the drawbridges to restrict the coming environmental apocalypse to the poor and nonwhite global South and save the dwindling supply of life’s necessities and luxuries for themselves and their families in heavily guarded and automated compounds. But it doesn’t work that way. They can preserve themselves a bit longer than most, but the “No Planet B” (as the environmentalists say) they can run to after they’ve finally made the planet completely and finally uninhabitable even for the privileged and ecocidal Few. No U.S.-Americans, not even the richest and most powerful ones, can hop planets and galaxies like the Earth-colonizing and Earth-warming aliens who rule America in John Carpenter’s classic left science fiction movie [They Live!](#) Even they will be tamed to the point of erasure. As Earth is our witness, the laws of nature always win out in the end. The continent’s original inhabitants knew that. The Holocaust they met in the name of “progress” was not progress.

Endnote

1) The 1832 “Black Hawk War” was a one-sided affair, typical of the many pitiless mass exterminations committed by supposedly noble “settlers” seeking to “tame the continent.” As penalty for the warrior Black Hawk and his followers’ determination to reclaim rich tribal lands brazenly occupied by whites in northern Illinois, the Sauk and Fox Indians lost 600 people, including hundreds of woman and children. Just 70 soldiers and “settlers” lost their lives. The conflict culminated in the so-called Battle of Bad Axe, on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River, near the present-day community of Victory in southwest Wisconsin. Better described as a massacre than a “battle,” this American military triumph involved U.S. General Henry Atkinson killing every Indian who tried to run for cover or to flee across the Mississippi River. On August 1, 1832, Black Hawk’s band reached the Mississippi at its confluence with the Bad Axe River. What followed was an atrocity, committed despite the Indians’ repeated attempts at surrender. “While the Sauk refugees were preparing rafts and canoes, the armed [U.S.] steamboat *Warrior* arrived,” historian Kerry Trask recounts, “whereupon Black Hawk tried to negotiate with its troops under a flag of truce. The Americans opened fire, killing twenty-three warriors.”

“As we neared them,” one US officer who “served” in the U.S. assault recalled, “they raised a white flag and endeavored to decoy us, but we were a little too old for them.”

Hundreds of Sauk and Fox men, women and children were shot, clubbed, and bayoneted to death on August 2nd. “US soldiers scalped most of the dead. They cut long strips of flesh from dead and wounded Indians for use as razor strops.” The slaughter was supported by cannon and rifle fire from the aptly named *Warrior*, which picked off tribal members swimming for their lives.

By Major Wakefield’s account, the US troops at Bad Axe “shrank not from their duty. They all joined in the work of death for death it was. We were by this time fast getting rid of those demons in human shape... the Ruler of the Universe, *He who takes vengeance on the guilty, did not design those guilty wretches to escape His vengeance...*”

The top “demon in human shape” – the old Sauk warrior Black Hawk – lived six years beyond the “war” that bore his name. He was sent to a US reservation in Iowa after US President Andrew Jackson – a Trump favorite and himself a prolific Indian-killer – had Black Hawk paraded as celebrity war booty – as an exotic “savage” and proof of the United States’ military’s alleged great prowess in defeating such barbarian brutes – before gawking crowds in eastern US cities.

At Chicago’s United Center at least 41 times each National Hockey League season, more than 10,000 U.S. whites wear jerseys emblazoned with a caricature-like profile image of “chief” Black Hawk, whose people were obliterated and dispersed so that northern Illinois’s fertile fields and pastures could be turned into the private property of white farmers, merchants, and industrialists. Oh, but for the return of the days when America was great!