

they gave themselves up in despair, as entirely lost. There was but one continual crying and howling and praying to the Great Spirit for his protection during the nights and days; and there being but few living, and those in too appalling despair, nobody thought of burying the dead, whose bodies, whole families together, were left in horrid and loathsome piles in their own wigwams, with a few buffalo robes, etc. thrown over them, there to decay, and be devoured by their own dogs.

During that epidemic the number of Mandans shrank from about 1,600 to between 125 and 145.

Whether the Europeans and Africans came to the native Americans in war or peace, they always brought death with them, and the final comment may be left to the Superior of the Jesuit Missions to the Indians of New France, who wrote in confusion and dejection in the 1640s, that "since the Faith has come to dwell among these people, all things that make men die have been found in these countries."

## Colonial America Without the Indians

JAMES AXTELL

It is taking us painfully long to realize that throughout most of American history the Indians were "one of the principal *determinants* of historical events." A growing number of scholars understand that fact, but the great majority of us still regard the native Americans—if we regard them at all—as exotic or pathetic footnotes to the main course of American history.

This is patently clear from American history textbooks. As Virgil Vogel, Alvin Josephy, and most recently Frederick Hoxie have shown in embarrassing detail, "Indians in textbooks either do nothing or they resist." In their colonial and nineteenth-century manifestations, they are either "obstacles to white settlement" or "victims of oppression." "As victims or obstacles, Indians have no textbook existence apart from their resistance." In short, the texts reflect our "deep-seated tendency to see whites and Indians as possessing two distinct species of historical experience" rather than a mutual history of continuous interaction and influence.

Attempts to redress the balance have suffered from serious flaws. Some observers have exaggerated and oversimplified the Indian impact. We certainly ought to avoid the fatuity of the argument that "what is distinctive about America is Indian, through and through" or that Americans are simply Europeans with "Indian souls." Historians have been more drawn to other, less sweeping, approaches. Robert Berkhofer described four well-meaning but unproductive remedial approaches to "minority" history, especially the history of American Indians. They are the "great man" or "heroes" approach (the "devious side of treaty-making"), the "who-is-more-civilized"

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approach ("barbarities committed by whites against Indians" contrasted with the "civilized" contributions of Indians), the "crushed personality" and "cultural theft" approach ("change only destroys Indian cultures, never adds to them"), and—by far the most important—the "contributions" approach ("long lists of the contributions Native Americans made to the general American way of life"). The first two approaches offer variations on the theme of Indian heroism and resistance. The third presents Indians as victims. None of the three gives much help in analyzing processes in which both Indians and whites played varying and evolving roles. At best they alert us to the moral dimensions of Indian-white history.

The contributions approach, although flawed, is useful. We inevitably employ it when we seek to define the Indian role in American history, rather than the white role in Indian history. Since most scholars who refer to Indian history are primarily interested in the evolution of the dominant Anglo-American "core culture" and political nationhood they will write in terms of Indian contributions. It is therefore essential to understand the pitfalls in the approach and to devise ways of avoiding them.

A relative disregard for chronology weakens the contributions approach. By focusing on the modern legacy of Indian culture, it usually ignores the specific timing of the various white adaptations and borrowings. Generic "Indian" contributions seem to have been made any time after 1492, it hardly matters when. Such cavalier chronology ought to offend historians not only because it is imprecise but also because it prevents us from determining causation with any accuracy. If we do not know *which* Indian group lent the word, trait, or object and *when*, we will be unable to measure the impact of the adaptive changes in Anglo-American culture at the time they occurred and as they reverberated.

An even more serious flaw is an almost exclusive focus on native material culture (and names of native or American objects and places) that neglects how those items were used, perceived, and adapted by their white borrowers. That focus and the neglect of chronology restrict discussion to a narrow range of additions to contemporary American "life" (i.e., material culture) rather than opening it up to the cultural and social fullness of American *history*. What the approach sadly ignores are the changes wrought in Anglo-American culture, not by borrowing and adapting native cultural traits, words, and objects, but by reacting negatively and perhaps unconsciously to the native presence, threat, and challenge. Without consideration of these deeply formative *reactive* changes, we can have no true measure of the Indians' impact on American history.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-America, the adaptive changes whites made in response to their contacts with Indians significantly shaped agriculture, transport, and economic life. The more elusive reactive changes significantly shaped the identity of a new people and the nation they founded.

One striking way to register the sheer *indispensability* of the Indians for understanding America's past is to imagine what early American history



might have looked like in the utter *absence* of Indians in the New World. The emphasis should be on historical control, not the free flight of fancy. If we posited an Indian-less New World in 1492 and then tried to reconstruct the course of later history, we would end up in a speculative quagmire because each dependent variable could develop in many alternative ways, depending on the others. By the time we reached 1783 we might have a familiar historical product or, more likely, a virtually unrecognizable one. Whatever the outcome, its artificiality would make it heuristically useless. But by following the historical course of events in America and at selected points imaginatively removing the Indians from the picture, we reduce the artificiality of the exercise and the opportunity for conjectural mayhem. Such a controlled use of the counterfactual can invigorate the search for historical causation.

The following series of counterfactual reflections is offered as a heuristic exercise. . . . "Had the Europeans colonists found an utterly unpopulated continent," we ask, "would colonial American life have differed in any major respect from its actual pattern?"

To begin at the beginning, in the period of European discovery and exploration, we can say with confidence that if Christopher Columbus had not discovered the people whom he called *los Indios* (and they him), the history of Spanish America would have been extremely short and uneventful. Since Columbus was looking for the Far East, not America or its native inhabitants, it would not have surprised him to find no Indians in the Caribbean—the new continent was surprise enough. But he would have been disappointed, not only because the islands of the Orient were known to be inhabited but also because there would have been little reason to explore and settle an unpopulated New World instead of pursuing his larger goal. He would have regarded America as simply a huge impediment to his plan to mount an old-fashioned crusade to liberate Jerusalem with profits derived from his shortcut to Cathay.

If the Caribbean and Central and South America had been unpopulated, the placer mines of the islands and the deep mines of gold and silver on the mainland probably would not have been discovered; they certainly would not have been quickly exploited without Indian knowledge and labor. It is inconceivable that the Spanish would have stumbled on the silver deposits of Potosí or Zacatecas if the Incas and Aztecs had not set Spanish mouths to watering with their sumptuous gold jewelry and ornaments. Indeed, without the enormous wealth to be commandeered from the natives, it is likely that the Spanish would not have colonized New Spain at all except to establish a few supply bases from which to continue the search for the Southwest Passage.

It is equally possible that without the immediate booty of Indian gold and silver, the Spanish would have dismissed Columbus after one voyage as a crack-brained Italian and redirected their economic energies eastward in the wake of the Portuguese, toward the certifiable wealth of Africa, India, and the East Indies. Eventually, sugar cane might have induced the



Iberians to colonize their American discoveries, as it induced them to colonize the Cape Verde, Madeira, and Canary islands, but they would have had to import black laborers. Without Indian labor and discovery, however, saltwater pearls and the bright red dye made from the cochineal beetle—the second largest export of the Spanish American empire in the colonial period—would not have contributed to Spain's bulging balance sheets, and to the impact of that wealth on the political and economic history of Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Perhaps most important, without the millions of native Americans who inhabited New Spain, there would have been no Spanish conquest—no "Black Legend," no Cortés or Montezuma, no brown-robed friars baptizing thousands daily or ferreting out "idolatry" with whip and fagot, no legalized plunder under the *encomienda* system, no cruelty to those who extracted the mines' treasures and rebuilt Spanish cities on the rubble of their own, no mastiffs mangling runaways. And without the fabulous lure of Aztec gold and Inca silver carried to Seville in the annual bullion fleets, it is difficult to imagine Spain's European rivals racing to establish American colonies of their own as early as they did.

Take the French, for example. As they did early in the sixteenth century, the cod teeming on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland would have drawn and supported a small seasonal population of fishermen. But without the Indians, the French would have colonized no farther. Giovanni da Verrazzano's 1524 reconnaissance of the Atlantic seaboard would have been an even bigger bust than it was, and Jacques Cartier would probably have made two voyages instead of three, the second only to explore the St. Lawrence River far enough to learn that China did not lie at the western end of Montreal Island. He would have reported to Francis I that "the land God gave to Cain" had no redeeming features, such as the greasy furs of Indian fishermen and the promise of gold and diamonds in the fabled Kingdom of the Saguenay, of which the Indians spoke with such apparent conviction.

If by chance Samuel de Champlain had renewed the French search for the Northwest Passage in the seventeenth century, he would have lost his backers quickly without the lure of an established fur trade with the natives of Acadia and Canada, who hunted, processed, and transported the pelts in native canoes or on native showshoes and toboggans. And without the "pagan" souls of the Indians as a goad and challenge, the French religious orders, male and female, would not have cast their lot with Champlain and the trading companies that governed and settled New France before 1663. In short, without the Indian fur trade, no seigneuries would have been granted along the St. Lawrence, no *habitants*, *engagés* (indentured servants) or marriageable "King's girls" shipped out to Canada. Quebec and Montreal would not have been founded even as crude *comptoirs*, and no Jesuit missionaries would have craved martyrdom at an Iroquois stake. No "French and Indian" wars would mar our textbooks with their ethnocentric denomination. North America would have belonged solely to settlements of English



farmers, for without the Indians and their fur trade, the Swedish and the Dutch would have imitated the French by staying home or turning to the Far East for economic inspiration.

Without the lure of American gold and the Elizabethan contest with Spain that it stimulated, the English, too, would probably have financed fewer ocean searches for the Northwest Passage. If no one thought that Indian chamber pots were made of gold, far fewer gentle-born investors and lowborn sailors would have risked their lives and fortunes on the coasts of America. Unless the Spanish had reaped fabulous riches from the natives and then subjected them to cruel and unnatural bondages, Sir Walter Raleigh would not have sponsored his voyages of liberation to Guiana and Virginia. If the Spanish bullion fleets had not sailed regularly through the Straits of Florida, English privateers would not have preyed on the West Indies nor captured the booty they used to launch permanent colonies in Ireland and North America. Arthur Barlowe's 1584 voyage to North Carolina would probably not have been followed up soon, if he had not discovered friendly natives able to secure a fledgling colony from Spanish incursions.

Sooner or later, the English would have established colonies in America as a safety valve for the felt pressures of population growth and economic reorganization and as a sanctuary for religious dissenters. Once English settlement was under way, the absence of native villages, tribes, and war parties would have drastically altered the chronology of American history. In general, events would have been accelerated because the Indian presence acted as a major check on colonial development. Without a native barrier (which in the colonial period was much more daunting than the Appalachians), the most significant drag on colonial enterprise would have been the lack of Indian labor in a few minor industries, such as the domestic economy of southern New England (supplied by Indians captured in the Pequot and King Philips wars) and the whale fisheries of Cape Cod, Long Island, and Nantucket. Indians were not crucial to wheat farming, lumbering, or rice and tobacco culture and would not have been missed by the English entrepreneurs engaged in them.

Without Indians to contest the land, English colonists would have encountered opposition to their choice of prime locations for settlement only from English competitors. They would not have had to challenge Indian farmers for the fertile river valleys and coastal plains the natives had cultivated for centuries. Without potential Indian or European enemies, sites could be located for economic rather than military considerations, thus removing Jamestown, Plymouth, and St. Mary's City from the litany of American place-names. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston would probably be where they are, either because Indian opposition did not much affect their founding or because they were situated for optimal access to inland markets and Atlantic shipping lanes.

In an empty land, English leaders would also have had fewer strategic and ideological reasons for communal settlement of the classic New England type. Without the military and moral threat of Indian war parties, on the one hand, and the puzzling seduction of native life, on the other, English



colonists would have had to be persuaded by other arguments to cast their lots together. One predictable result is that New England "Puritans" would have become unbridled "Yankees" even faster than they did. Other colonies would have spread quickly across the American map. By 1776, Anglo-American farmers in large numbers would have spilled over the Appalachians, headed toward their "Manifest Destiny" in the West. Without Indians, Frenchmen, or Spaniards in the Mississippi Valley and beyond to stop them, only the technology of transportation, the supply of investment capital, and the organization of markets en route would have regulated the speed of their advance.

Another consequence of an Indian-less America would be that we could not speak with any accuracy of "the American frontier" because there would be no people on the other side; only where two peoples and cultures intersect do we have a bona fide frontier. The movement of one people into uninhabited land is merely exploration or settlement; it does not constitute a frontier situation. In fact, without viable Indian societies, colonial America would have more nearly resembled Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier in which Indians are treated more as geographical features than as sociological teachers. In Turner's scenario, the European dandy fresh from his railroad car is "Americanized" less by contact with palpably attractive human societies than by the "wilderness" or Nature itself. Moreover, the distinctively American character traits that Turner attributed to life on the edge of westering "civilization" would have been exaggerated by the existence of truly limitless cheap land and much less control from the Old World and the Eastern Establishment.

Not only would Turner's mythopoeic frontier really have existed in a non-Indian America, but three other common misunderstandings of colonial history would have been realities. First, America would indeed have been a virgin land, a barren wilderness, not home to perhaps four million native people north of Mexico. If those people had not existed, we would not have to explain their catastrophic decline, by as much as 90 percent, through warfare, injustice, forced migrations, and epidemics of imported diseases—the "widowing" of the once-virgin land, as Francis Jennings has so aptly called it.

Second, colonial history would be confined roughly to the eastern and midwestern parts of the future United States (which themselves would be different). Without Indians, we could ignore French Canada and Louisiana, the Spanish Southwest, the Russian Northwest (whose existence depended on the Indian-staffed seal trade), and the borderless histories of Indian-white contact that determined so much of the shape and texture of colonial life.

And third, we would not have to step up from the largely black-and-white pageant of American history we are offered in our textbooks and courses to a richer polychromatic treatment, if the Indians had no role in the past. We would not even have to pay lip service to the roll call of exclusively male Indian leaders who have been squeezed into the corners of our histories by Indian militance during the last twenty years. Still less



would we have to try to integrate into our texts an understanding of the various native peoples who were here first, remained against staggering odds, and are still here to mold our collective past and future.

To get a sharper perspective on an Indian-free scenario of colonial history, we should increase our focal magnification and analyze briefly four distinguishable yet obviously related aspects of colonial life—economics, religion, politics, and acculturation. The economy of Anglo-America without the Indians would have resembled in general outline the historical economy, with several significant exceptions. Farming would certainly have been the mainstay of colonial life, whether for family subsistence or for capitalist marketing and accumulation. But the initial task of establishing farms would have required far more grubbing and clearing without the meadows and park-like woods produced by seasonal Indian burning and especially without the cleared expanses of Indian corn fields and village sites. Many colonists found that they could acquire cleared Indian lands with a few fathoms of trading cloth, some unfenced cows, or a well-aimed barrel of buckshot.

There would have been no maize or Indian corn, the staple crop grown throughout the colonial period to feed people and sometimes to fatten livestock for export. If Indians had not adapted wild Mexican corn to the colder, moister climates of North America and developed the agricultural techniques of hilling, fertilizing by annual burning, and co-planting with nitrogen-fixing beans to reduce soil depletion, the colonists would have lacked a secure livelihood, particularly in the early years before traditional European cereal crops had been adapted to the American climate and soils. Even if traditional crops could have been transplanted with ease, colonial productivity would not have benefitted from the efficiency and labor savings of native techniques, which were often taught by Indian prisoners (as at Jamestown) or by allies like Squanto at Plymouth. So central was maize to the colonial economy that its absence might have acted as a severe brake on westward settlement, thereby somewhat counteracting the magnetic pull of free land.

The colonial economy would also have been affected by the lack of Indian trade, whose profits fueled the nascent economies of several colonies, including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina. Without fortunes made from furs, some of the "first families" of America—the Byrds, Penns, Logans, Winthrops, Schuylers—would not have begun to accumulate wealth so soon in the form of ships, slaves, rice, tobacco, or real estate. Nor would the mature economies of a few major colonies have rested on the fur trade well into the eighteenth century. New York's and Pennsylvania's balance of payments with the mother country would have been badly skewed if furs supplied by Indians had not accounted for 30 to 50 percent of their annual exports between 1700 and 1750. A substantial portion of English exports to the colonies would not have been sent to colonial traders for Indian customers, whose desire for English cloth and appetite for West Indian rum were appreciated even though throughout the colonial period furs accounted for only .5 percent of England's colonial imports, far less than either tobacco or sugar.



The lack of Indians and Indian property rights in America would have narrowed another classic American road to wealth. If the new land had been so close to inexhaustible and "dirt cheap," the range of legal and extralegal means to acquire relatively scarce land for hoarding and speculation would have been markedly reduced. Within the unknown confines of the royal response to a huge, open continent, every man, great and small, would have been for himself. If the law condoned or fostered the selective aggrandisement of colonial elites, as it tended to do historically, unfavored farmers and entrepreneurs could simply move out of the government's effective jurisdiction or find leaders more willing to do their bidding. The proliferation of new colonies seeking economic and political independence from the felt tyranny of an Eastern Establishment would have been one certain result, as would a flattening of social hierarchy in all the mainland colonies.

Finally, in an America without Indians the history of black slavery would have been different. It is likely that, in the absence of Indians, the colonial demand for and use of African slaves would have begun earlier and accelerated faster. For although the historical natives were found to be poor workers and poorer slaves, the discovery took some time. Not only would the rapid westward spread of settlements have called for black labor, perhaps more of it indentured, but the rice and tobacco plantations of the Southeast probably would have been larger than they were historically, if scarce land and high prices had not restricted them. In a virgin-land economy, agricultural entrepreneurs who wanted to increase their acreage could easily buy out their smaller neighbors, who lacked no access to new lands in the west. Greater numbers of black laborers would have been needed because white indentured servants would have been extremely hard to get when so much land and opportunity beckoned. The slaves themselves would have been harder to keep to the task without surrounding tribes of Indians who could be taught to fear and hate the African strangers and to serve the English planters as slave catchers. The number of maroon enclaves in the interior would have increased considerably.

While most colonists came to the New World to better their own material condition, not a few came to ameliorate the spiritual condition of the "godless" natives. Without the challenge of native "paganism" in America, the charters of most English colonies would have been frankly materialistic documents with pride of motive going to the extension of His (or Her) Majesty's Eminent Domain. Thus American history would have lost much of its distinctively evangelical tone, though few of its millenarian, utopian strains. Without the long, frustrated history of Christian missions to the Indians, there would have been one less source of denominational competition in the eighteenth century. And we would lack a sensitive barometer of the cultural values that the European colonists sought to transplant in the New World.

Without Indian targets and foils, even the New England colonists might not have retained their "Chosen People" conceit so long or so obdurately. On the other hand, without the steady native reminder of their evangelical



mission in America, their early descent into ecclesiastical tribalism and spiritual exclusiveness might have been swifter. The jeremiads of New England would certainly have been less shrill in the absence of the Pequot War and King Philip's War, when the hostile natives seemed to be "scourges" sent by God to punish a sinful people. Without the military and psychological threat of Indians within and without New England's borders, the colonial fear of limitless and unpredictable social behavior would have been reduced, thereby diminishing the harsh treatment of religious deviants such as Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, the Quakers, and the Salem witches. Finally, the French "Catholic menace" to the north would have been no threat to English Protestant sensibilities without hundreds of Indian converts, led by "deviously" effective Jesuit missionaries, ringing New England's borders. The French secular clergy who would have ministered to the handful of fishermen and farmers in Canada would have had no interest in converting Protestant "heretics" hundreds of miles away and no extra manpower to attempt it.

Colonial politics, too, would have had a different complexion in the absence of American natives. Even if the French had settled the St. Lawrence Valley without a sustaining Indian fur trade, the proliferating English population and European power politics would have made short work of the tiny Canadian population, now bereft of Indian allies and converts in the thousands. In all likelihood, we would write about only one short intercolonial war, beginning much earlier than 1689. Perhaps the English privateers, David and Jarvis Kirke, who captured New France in 1629, would not have given it back to the French in 1632. Without the Catholic Indian *reserves* (praying towns) of Lorette, Caughnawaga, and St. François to serve as military buffers around French settlements, Canada would quickly have become English, at least as far north as arable land and lumber-rich forests extended.

Without a formidable French and Indian threat, early Americans would not have developed—in conjunction with their conceit as God's "Chosen People"—such a pronounced garrison mentality, picturing themselves as innocent and holy victims threatened by heavily armed satanic forces. If the English had not been virtually surrounded by Indian nations allied with the French and an arc of French trading forts and villages from Louisiana to Maine, the Anglo-American tendencies toward persecuted isolationism would have been greatly reduced.

As the colonies matured, the absence of an Indian military threat would have lightened the taxpayers' burden for colonial defense, lessening the strains in the political relations between governors and representative assemblies. Indeed, the assemblies would not have risen to political parity with the royal administrators without the financial crises generated by war debts and defense needs. Intercolonial cooperation would have been even rarer than it was. Royal forces would not have arrived during the eighteenth century to bolster sagging colonial defenses and to pile up imperial debts that the colonies would be asked to help amortize. Consequently, the colonies



would have had few grievances against the mother country serious enough to ignite an American Revolution, at least not in 1776. On the other hand, without the concentration of Indian allies on the British side, the colonists might have achieved independence sooner than they did.

Indeed, without the steady impress of Indian culture, the colonists would probably not have been ready for revolution in 1776, because they would not have been or felt sufficiently Americanized to stand before the world as an independent nation. The Indian presence precipitated the formation of an American identity.

Without Indian societies to form our colonial frontiers, Anglo-American culture would have been transformed only by internal developments, the evolving influence of the mother country, and the influence of the black and other ethnic groups who shared the New World with the English. Black culture probably would have done the most to change the shape and texture of colonial life, especially in the South. But English masters saw little reason to emulate their black slaves, to make *adaptive* changes in their own cultural practices or attitudes in order to accommodate perceived superiorities in black culture. English colonial culture changed in response to the imported Africans largely in *reaction* to their oppositional being, and pervasive and often virulent racism was the primary result. Other changes, of course, followed from the adoption of staple economies largely but not necessarily dependent on black labor.

English reactions to the Indians, on the other hand, were far more mixed; the "savages" were noble as well as ignoble, depending on English needs and circumstances. Particularly on the frontier, colonists were not afraid or loath to borrow and adapt pieces of native culture if they found them advantageous or necessary for beating the American environment or besting the Indians in the contest for the continent. Contrary to metropolitan colonial opinion, this cultural exchange did not turn the frontiersmen into Indians. Indian means were simply borrowed and adapted to English ends. The frontiersmen did not regard themselves as Indians nor did they appreciably alter their basic attitudes toward the native means they employed. But they also knew that their American encounters with the Indians made them very different from their English cousins at home.

While the colonists borrowed consciously and directly from Indian culture only on the frontier, English colonial culture as a whole received a substantial but indirect impress from the Indians by being forced to confront the novel otherness of native culture and to cope with its unpredictability, pride, and retaliatory violence. Having the Indians as adversaries sometimes and contraries at all times not only reinforced the continuity of vital English traits and institutions but also Americanized all levels of colonial society more fully than the material adaptations of the frontiersmen. The colonial experience of trying to solve a series of "Indian problems" did much to give the colonists an identity indissolubly linked to America and their apprenticeship in political and military cooperation. In large measure, it was the *reactive* changes that transformed colonial Englishmen into native



Americans in feeling, allegiance, and identity, a transformation without which, John Adams said, the American Revolution would have been impossible.

What identity-forming changes would *not* have taken place in colonial culture had the continent been devoid of Indians? The adaptive changes are the easiest to describe. Without native precedent, the names of twenty-eight states and myriad other place-names would carry a greater load of Anglophonic freight. The euphonious Shenandoah and Monongahela might well be known as the St. George and the Dudley rivers. We might still be searching for suitable names for the *moose*, *skunk*, and *raccoon*, the *muskellunge* and *quahog*, the *hickory* tree and marshy *muskeg*. It would be impossible, no doubt, to find *moccasins* in an L. L. Bean catalog or canned *succotash* in the supermarket. We would never refer to our children playfully as *papooses* or to political bigshots as *mugwumps*. Southerners could not start their day with *hominy* grits.

Without Indian guides to the New World, the newly arrived English colonists could not have housed themselves in bark-covered wigwams and longhouses. Not only would their diet have depended largely on imported foods, but even their techniques for hunting American game and fowl and coping in the woods would have been meager. Without native medicines, many colonists would have perished and the *U.S. Pharmacopeia* would lack most of the 170 entries attributable to Indian discovery and use. Without Indian snowshoes and toboggans, winter hunting and travel would have been sharply curtailed. Without the lightweight bark canoe, northern colonists would have penetrated the country on foot. English hunters probably would have careered around the woods in gaudy colors and torn English garments much longer, unaware that the unsmoked glint of their musket barrels frightened the game. And what would Virginia's patriotic rifle companies have worn in 1775 as an alternative to moccasins, leggings, fringed hunting shirts, scalping knives, and tomahawks?

Without native opponents and instructors in the art of guerilla warfare, the colonists would have fought their American wars—primarily with the British—in traditional military style. In fact, without the constant need to suppress hostile natives and aggressive Europeans, they might have lost most of their martial spirit and prowess, making their victory in the now-postponed Revolution less than certain. Beating the British regulars at their own game without stratagems and equipment gained from the Indians would have been nearly impossible, particularly after the British gained experience in counterinsurgent warfare in Scotland and on the continent.

The absence of such adaptive changes would have done much to maintain the Anglicized tone and texture of colonial life; the absence of Indians would have preserved more fundamental cultural values that were altered historically. The generalized European fear of barbarism that colonial planners and leaders manifested would have dissipated without the Indian embodiment of a "heathenism" that seemed contagious to English frontiersmen or the danger of Englishmen converting to an Indian way of life in captivity or, worse still, voluntarily as "apostates" and "renegades." Without the seduction



of an alternative lifestyle within easy reach, hundreds of colonists would not have become white Indians.

More generally, the Anglo-Americans' definition of themselves would have lacked a crucial point of reference because the Indians would no longer symbolize the "savage" baseness that would dominate human nature if man did not "reduce" it to "civility" through government, religion, and the capitalist work ethic. Only imported Africans, not American natives, would then have shown "civilized men [what] they were not and must not be." Because the settlers were "especially inclined to discover attributes in savages which they found first but could not speak of in themselves," they defined themselves "less by the vitality of their affirmations than by the violence of their abjurations." All peoples define themselves partly by contrast with other peoples, but the English colonists forged their particular American identity on an Indian anvil more than on a (non-English) European or African one.

The Indians were so crucial to the formation of the Anglo-American character because of the strong contrasts between their culture and that of the intruders, which the English interpreted largely as native deficiencies. While English technology had reached the Age of Iron, Indian technology was of the Stone Age, without wheels, clocks, compasses, cloth, iron, glass, paper, or gunpowder. While the English participated in a capitalist economy of currency and credit, the natives bartered in kind from hand to hand. While the English were governed by statutes, sheriffs, parliaments, and kings, the Indians' suasive polities of chiefs and councils seemed to be no government at all. While the English worshipped the "true God" in churches with prayer books and scripture, native shamans resembled "conjurers" who preyed on the "superstitious" natures of their dream-ridden, "devil-worshipping" supplicants. While the English enjoyed the benefits of printing and alphabetic literacy, the Indians were locked in an oral culture of impermanence and "hearsay." While the English sought to master nature as their religion taught them, the natives saw themselves as part of nature, whose other "spirits" deserved respect and thanks. While English men worked in the fields and women in the house, Indian women farmed and their menfolk "played" at hunting and fishing. While English time shot straight ahead into a progressive future, Indian time looped and circled upon itself, blurring the boundaries between a hazy past, a spacious present, and an attenuated future. While the English lived in permanent towns and cities, the Indians' annual subsistence cycle of movement seemed aimlessly "nomadic." While the English waged wars of state for land, crowns, wealth, or faith, Indian warriors struck personally for revenge, honor, and captives. While English society was divided into "divinely sanctioned" strata of wealth, power, and prestige, Indian society fostered an "unnatural" sense of democratic individualism in the people. And while English ethnocentrism was based on a new religion, technology, social evolution, and ultimately race, the Indians' own strong sense of superiority, color-blind and religiously tolerant, could not be undermined except by inexplicable European diseases.

For the whole spectrum of colonial society, urban and rural, the Indians



as cultural contraries were not so frustrating, alarming, or influential as the Indian enemy. As masters of an unconventional warfare of terror, they seared the collective memories, imaginations, and even subconscious of the colonists, leaving a deep but blurred intaglio of fear and envy, hatred and respect. Having the American natives as frequent and deadly adversaries—and even as allies—did more to “Americanize” the English colonists than any other human factor and had two contradictory results. When native warfare frustrated and humbled the English military machine, its successes cast into serious doubt the colonists’ sense of superiority, especially when the only recourse seemed to be the hiring of mercenaries from other tribes. At the same time, victorious Indians seemed so insufferably insolent—a projection of the Christians’ original sin—that the colonists redoubled their efforts to claim divine grace and achieve spiritual and social regeneration through violence. One of the pathetic ironies of early America is that in attempting to exterminate the wounding pride of their Indian enemies, the colonists inflated their own pride to sinful proportions.

The Indians’ brand of guerilla warfare, which involved the “indiscriminate slaughter of all ranks, ages and sexes,” torture, and captivity for adoption, gave rise to several colonial reactions. The first reaction was a well-founded increase in fear and paranoia. The second reaction was the development of a defensive garrison mentality, which in turn reinforced the colonists’ sense of being a chosen if momentarily abandoned people. And the colonists’ third response was a sense of being torn from their own “civilized” moorings and swept into the kind of “savage” conduct they deplored in their enemies, motivated by cold-blooded vengeance. Without Indian enemies, it is doubtful if the colonists would have slaughtered and tortured military prisoners, including women and children, taken scalps from friends and enemies to collect government bounties, encouraged the Spanish-style use of dogs, or made boot tops and tobacco pouches from the skin of fallen foes. It is a certainty that non-Indian enemies would not have been the target of frequent if unrealized campaigns of genocide; it is difficult to imagine English settlers coining an aphorism to the effect that “the only good Dutchman is a dead one.”

It is both fitting and ironic that the symbol chosen by Revolutionary cartoonists to represent the American colonies was the Indian, whose love of liberty and fierce independence had done so much to Americanize the shape and content of English colonial culture. It is fitting because the Indians by their long and determined opposition helped to meld thirteen disparate colonies into one (albeit fragile) nation, different from England largely by virtue of having shared that common history of conflict on and over Indian soil. It is ironic because after nearly two centuries of trying to take the Indians’ lives and lands, the colonists appropriated not only the native identity but the very characteristics that thwarted the colonists’ arrogations.



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