

WHAT HISTORY TELLS US ABOUT THE DINÉ CODE TALKERS

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ABSTRACT

During World War II, the United States Marine Corps (USMC) recruited men from the Navajo Tribe to create a highly confidential combat code using their indigenous language. The Navajo code, never deciphered, proved invaluable in the Pacific Theater. Despite the high caliber of their service, Navajo Code Talkers remained largely unrecognized until 1969. Sally McClain's *Navajo Weapon* and Doris Paul's *The Navajo Code Talkers* celebrate the Navajo as American soldiers, fighting an American war. Such narratives, unfortunately, lose sight of the government's less than just treatment of the Navajo. In order to free the Navajo Code Talkers from such a colonial perspective, this paper "reconciles" perhaps the two most monumental episodes in Navajo-American history: the persecution and internment of Navajo people during the Long Walk and the stock reductions of the Indian New Deal. By so doing, it deconstructs Navajo Code Talker identity by contextualizing it, thus providing a fuller view of their wartime service.

This paper draws on both published and unpublished accounts of the Diné or Navajo people. At its center, lie personal recollections of Navajo history and Code Talker service provided by Thomas H. Begay in three telephone interviews between February 2009 and May 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Elazar Barkan argues that "reconciliation" provides opportunities for discussion between victims and perpetrators that may produce a more impartial national narrative that can "facilitate the closure of a conflict."¹ Such closure of Navajo-American conflicts has not occurred because of historians' unwillingness to discuss Navajo history when examining the Code Talkers. Instead, they praise Code Talkers for their patriotism, emphasizing the effect of their work on the national fabric rather than on Navajo culture. Noah Jed Riseman believes that the Code Talkers have been "recolonised" within a World War II narrative.² This paper offers closure to the Navajo-American conflict by examining injustices committed during the Long Walk and the Indian New Deal and their consequences. Only then will a clearer understanding of the Navajo Code Talkers be attainable.

The Long Walk (1863-68) involved the United States' pursuit of the Navajo, a forced march to the Bosque Redondo Reservation, internment, and a return to the Navajo homeland. Although the Long Walk formally ended in 1868, its effects continued as a result of the assimilationist Treaty of 1868, which set the terms of the Navajos' repatriation. The Indian New Deal, though less overtly violent, was equally deadly, destructive, and demoralizing.³ Both times, the American government attempted to colonize and reeducate the Navajo. Both times, the Navajo withstood American encroachment by adapting to new lifestyles. This mixture of American colonization and assimilationist education prompted Navajo adjustments which gave rise to the culture from which the Code Talkers emerged.

NAVAJO AMERICA: THE LONG WALK

The stage for the Navajo Long Walk was set in 1846 during the Mexican-American War when Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearny and his American troops arrived in the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. Here in "Dinetah," the ancestral homeland of the

Navajo or “Dine,” as the tribe calls itself, Kearny began the American colonization of the New Mexico Territory, newly wrested from Mexico.

Kearney confronted the raiding, horse culture of the Navajo, which became known to American whites as the “Navajo Problem.” The government adopted the same ineffective policies as the Spanish and Mexicans, sending expeditions to forge treaties with the Navajo.⁴ American diplomacy, unfortunately, culminated in the Navajos’ relocation from their sprawling ancestral homelands to a confined wasteland in Eastern New Mexico on the Pecos River known as the Bosque Redondo Reservation. The removal and incarceration of the Navajo were supervised by famed frontiersman Colonel Kit Carson, who commanded the New Mexican volunteers and Ute Indian scouts responsible for relocation.⁵

Carson took orders from eccentric forward-thinking General James Carleton, who believed that on the reservation, the Navajo would be schooled in the ways of the white world, and better equipped for advancement. The colonizing of the Navajo tribe would be a “gain for civilization,” by eradicating the old raiding culture. Carleton’s assimilationist policies, though more debatable today, were widely accepted in the nineteenth century.⁶ Indeed, whites often dismissed Native Americans as subhuman “savages,” whom it was acceptable to subjugate under the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.⁷

Meanwhile, the Navajo and their fleet-footed ponies frequently bested Carson’s “civilized” troops. Unable to “round up” the Navajo by force, Carson graduated to a scorched earth campaign.⁸ Thomas H. Begay recalls the oral accounts of his grandparents: “It was done by Kit Carson. They starve[d] the Navajo and he g[o]t rid of the sheep, cattle, and orchard. Finally, the Navajos gave up because he was a mean evil man. . . . [T]he Navajos were determined to survive but they went on to be driven off to death march to Fort Sumner.”⁹ The elderly, sick, young, and pregnant all died if they could not keep up with these marches to Fort Sumner, the military instillation near the Bosque Redondo Reservation. By the time they concluded in late 1866, roughly two hundred Navajo had succumbed.

Approximately four thousand Navajo defied removal and found refuge in their homeland’s vast wilderness.¹⁰ Begay remembers hearing his ancestors’ accounts of what they called the Fearing Time: “My grandparents they didn’t go. They went and hid down south around Apache Creek Reserve in those mountains. The Navajos on my mother’s side went and they lost a lot of my relatives but my father’s side didn’t go. They hid until they heard from the Apaches that they were coming home.”¹¹ Mismanagement, bad luck, and hemorrhaging of funds plagued the reservation.¹² In May 1868, General William Tecumseh Sherman and Colonel Lewis Tappan arrived at Bosque Redondo to close it. Navajo leader Barboncito persuaded the Americans to permit the Navajo to return to a reservation on their homeland under the Treaty of 1868. Never again would they allow themselves to be driven off their homeland.¹³

By this treaty, the Navajo, as part of their assimilation, agreed that their children must “learn paper.”¹⁴ Two years later, President Ulysses S. Grant issued his “Peace Policy,” which was regarded as a kind of “Protestant Crusade” that relied on education and Christian conversion instead of extermination to solve the Indian problem.¹⁵ Presbyterian mission schoolteachers, the chief early purveyors of education, routinely began with high hopes before returning the next year, utterly discouraged.¹⁶

Their failures were rooted in ignorance of Navajo culture. Navajo children were separated from their families and denied the unbridled freedom to which they were accustomed.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Navajo distrusted outsiders, as the etymology of their name implies. *Dine* means *the People*, which suggests that other human beings are not people but *enemies*, capable of sorcery.¹⁸ Furthermore, it was difficult for Navajos to attend school. Their families were pastoral; bad weather, poor roads, shifting of residences, and morning darkness during the winter months were obstacles that made the education plan unworkable.¹⁹

The failure of reservation schools led to the Compulsory Indian Education Law of 1887, which mandated off-reservation boarding schools.²⁰ These institutions forced children into a life of unwanted hybridism, neither equipped for reservation or successful assimilation.²¹ When

Senator H. L. Dawes questioned Colonel Henry Pratt, prominent assimilationist and leader of the Carlisle Industrial School, on the advantages of reservation day schools, Pratt explained that he did "not believe that amongst his people an Indian can be made to feel all the advantages of a civilized life."²² Unfortunately Pratt's boarding schools survived into the 1930's.²³

Although the Navajo were great adapters, they seemed to "close their minds in sullen resolution" against such compulsory schooling.²⁴ Even at the Bosque Redondo reservation, the Navajo preferred to learn silversmithing, weaving techniques, and fashion informally from officers' wives.²⁵ According to Ruth Underhill, voluntary mentoring of Navajo by reservation traders provided the most effective learning experiences of the post-Long Walk years. They discovered, like traders in Shogunate Japan, power in human interaction.²⁶

The Navajo returned to their land with a fraction of their livestock. Furthermore, a sobering two thousand people died during the Long Walk and internment.²⁷ Many Navajo sustained themselves on government rations.²⁸ With this modest support, they began gradually to improve their circumstances. Thomas H. Begay's family "got back to Fort Defiance, [where] they collected the sheep and went and raised the five sheep into thousands."²⁹ Similar stories are common; by 1928, the Navajo Reservation was stocked with nearly two million sheep.³⁰ This resiliency testifies both to the Navajos' adaptation and, through livestock, to a return to their traditional way of life. Their prosperity, unfortunately, led to new efforts to colonize the Navajo.

THE INDIAN NEW DEAL

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed the secretary of the American Indian Defense Association, John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs.³¹ Historians agree that the "Indian New Deal" (1933-45) rescued Indian communities from abusive federal administration but also damaged them by imposing foreign social and political ideals on Indian peoples who sought cultural pluralism and self-administration.³² Thomas H. Begay thinks highly of Collier: "he saved Indian belief like the singing, healing ceremonies like that. . . . Although lot of Indians blame him for bad stuff, he did good for the Indian – he save the belief."³³

Akim D. Reinhardt regards the Indian New Deal as a restructuring of colonial rule; forced acculturation and direct colonialism were replaced by a system of watered-down American democracy. Despite Collier's ideal of self-determination, this new American paternalism, exemplified by the stock reductions, limited the sovereign powers of Native Americans.³⁴ They began after the Boulder Dam survey project revealed that soil runoff in the Colorado River watershed could shorten the life of the dam.³⁵ Presidential adviser Rexford Tugwell traveled to the Navajo Reservation to pressure Collier. The President did not wish to spend money on an area that might soon become a wasteland.³⁶ Jobs created by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and other New Deal programs had been a lifeline for the struggling Navajo.³⁷ Enforcers of the stock reductions, who sometimes tussled with disgruntled herders, included tribal policemen, soil conservation officers, range riders, and local BIA officials.³⁸

To educate the Navajo and equip them for any kind of self-government, Collier needed to establish an educational system that would foster his vision of cultural pluralism. He combated the Pratt model of cultural hegemony by reestablishing reservation day schools. The children, who lived with their families, traveled to and from school. These schools were informed by philosopher John Dewey's conviction that great communities fostered a great society. Schools included blacksmith shops and medical centers, since Collier believed that such community building would heal assimilationist wounds.³⁹

Collier's schools, unfortunately, did not become community centers because Navajo society lacked the cohesiveness to make them a focal point of their lives. Furthermore, Collier repeated some of his predecessors' mistakes. Navajo families still did not see the value of formal education and the reservation still lacked modern transportation.⁴⁰ The secretary tried to implement a forty-year plan in four years, not knowing he would serve for twelve.⁴¹ Draft boards reported an eighty percent illiteracy rejection rate.⁴² Fortunately, reservation and

boarding schools' failure to displace the Navajo language with English proved invaluable during World War II.

Disgusted by the stock reductions, which appeared cruel and arbitrary, many Navajo rejected anything to do with Collier's reforms. Indeed, loss of livestock caused greater discouragement among some Navajo than any felt since the Long Walk. Even after World War II, grazing lands and flocks were slow to recover.⁴³ According to William Adams, "Though conceived with good intentions, the program was carried out so clumsily and highhandedly as to generate a Navajo resentment that has hardly subsided to this day."⁴⁴

On June 3, 1940, the Navajo Tribal Council passed a resolution swearing to defend the United States and pledging loyalty in time of war. "[T]here exists no purer concentration of Americanism," they declared, "than among the First Americans."⁴⁵ President Roosevelt responded "with the warmest gratitude."⁴⁶ As the war worsened, the Navajos' sense of guardianship for their American homeland prompted new ideas and practices. To accommodate their dispersed lifestyle, the tribe opened eighteen conscription centers.⁴⁷

After the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U. S. into World War II, Navajos and other impoverished Native Americans saw new opportunities in the war effort. By 1943, Native Americans boasted an overall selective service registration rate of ninety-nine percent.⁴⁸ Before becoming a Code Talker, Carl Gorman worked for the federal government inventorying livestock. About his enlistment, Gorman says, "It sounded like the worst that could happen was I'd have a roof over my head and be eating regular."⁴⁹ War brought an end to most New Deal programs, such as the CCC.⁵⁰ The Indian Service budget was also reduced, with funds diverted to the War Department.⁵¹

Enlistment qualifications posed obstacles to which Navajos adapted. Because illiteracy rates were high, the tribe lobbied for all Navajo training units. The War Department responded by relaxing literacy standards and creating Indian training units.⁵² Physical issues further stymied hopeful enlistees. Many Navajo could not make the USMC's minimum 122-pound weight. Hard times caused by the stock reduction and failing economy meant that the already genetically shorter Navajo weighed even less. Determined underweight Navajos often gorged themselves before weigh-ins.⁵³ Many also had to prove or embellish their age in order to join the Marines. Unemployed Carl Gorman lied about his age, reducing it from thirty-five to an eligible twenty-nine. More commonly, hopefuls augmented theirs.

Thomas H. Begay adjusted his age to enlist at sixteen. Like many Navajo, he lived off the grid, without a birth certificate. He still needed his mother's thumbprint to vouch for his age.⁵⁴ Dean Wilson also enlisted at sixteen by sleight of hand: "I was, according to parents, I was just 16 and I remember the day that we physically examined there, Fort Defiance PHS Hospital. At noon, the recruiters had gone to lunch. . . . I saw this stack of folders on the recruiter's desk, mine was sitting way off at the side, tagged with information that parents won't consent. I gently pulled it out and put it underneath the big stack. This is how I got in at age 16."⁵⁵

Many Navajo, unable to find a job, joined the military as a second option: "I volunteered because I went job hunting during the summer at Bellemont Army Ordinance Depot down in Flagstaff, Arizona. The guy told me 'You are too young; we can't hire you,'" recalls Begay. "I keep at. . . I told them I am old enough; I am going to join the Marines and fight the Japanese." Future Code Talker and Navajo Nation Superintendant Peter MacDonald was only fourteen, but since Navajo born at home rarely applied for birth certificates, he brought a friend to the draft board to vouch that he was eighteen. MacDonald took his draft card to the Union Pacific Railroad to prove his age; he landed a job laying track in Oregon. Three months later, to his dismay, MacDonald was drafted by the Marines. By age seventeen, he had two years' combat experience.⁵⁶

By the end of 1942, 1,400 Navajo had enlisted, 350 of them, volunteers. By war's end, 3,600 Navajo had served in the armed forces.⁵⁷ Besides contributing the most Native Americans to the war effort, the Navajo permitted the Interior Department to purchase war bonds with tribal funds, house Japanese-American internees on their reservation, and use their natural resources.⁵⁸

The tribe recognized the opportunity the American war machine presented. Their ability to demonstrate their loyalty using traditional Navajo rhetoric and symbols created a strong patriotic front. Their high participation in the armed forces reflected the Navajo warrior tradition, as soldiering allowed young men to fill traditional masculine roles.⁵⁹ Indeed, the war mutually benefited Navajos and the U. S.

Collier's progressive reforms were supposed to save the "Vanishing People," but like previous white visionaries, he tried to force changes on the Navajo. Instead, the war prompted more significant and surprising adjustments.

"TALKERS"

In 1942, the USMC enlisted Navajos to develop a secure code using the same undocumented Navajo language the U. S. government had tried to eradicate through assimilation schooling.⁶⁰ Despite the irony, the Navajo were exemplary Marines and their code proved indispensable in many battles across the Pacific. The Code Talkers or "Talkers,"⁶¹ as they were called in combat, were weapons comparable to rifles or grenades that the corps carefully built and refined.⁶²

The code was proposed to the Marines by a civilian, Phillip Johnston, whose Protestant missionary parents raised him on the Navajo Reservation. Johnston understood how complex the nasal and tonal mechanics of the language were and that its obscurity made it ideal for military intelligence.⁶³ Johnston, a quasi-colonizer, arranged demonstrations for the USMC high command. The Marines then aggressively recruited on the reservation, involuntarily plucking Navajo from other units.⁶⁴ Johnston gained special commission as a staff sergeant which guaranteed him access to the program and self-promotion in his publications. In 1971, he tried to take credit for developing the code at a Code Talker Reunion. Reportedly lacking fluency, he acted only as a facilitator, as Code Talker Jimmy King, Sr., pointed out.⁶⁵

Most Code Talkers spent their prewar years in government or mission schools, which had prohibited Navajo students from speaking their language. Punishments for its use were often severe. Carl Gorman recalled being chained to a radiator in the basement for three days.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the boarding schools were helpful in preparing Navajo for military life. "In Fort Defiance, Arizona- Indian School," recalls Thomas H. Begay, "we were sort of like given military type of marching. So I was already used to it. It was easy for me." John Benally and Jimmy King, Sr., found no difficulty transitioning to military life after the drilling and calisthenics they experienced at boarding school.⁶⁷

Traditional Navajo are thoroughly spiritual. They are accustomed to memorizing the *Blessing Way* ceremony, which contains a fusion of myth and song that puts Navajo in tune with their deities, the Holy People.⁶⁸ Memory proficiency gained by such practices made it easy for Code Talkers to learn the required twenty-five code words a day. Johnston lauded the code talkers' "phenomenal feat[s] of memory. . . . [T]hey could react so quickly to those substitute words in Navajo in a fraction a second."⁶⁹ Native ceremonies also provided spiritual grounding for the Code Talkers, who carried corn pollen with them, sent clothes home for protection ceremonies, conducted special ceremonies before the invasion of Okinawa, and participated in *Enemy Way* ceremonies when they returned home.⁷⁰

Finally, traditional life on the reservation prepared the Navajo for the physical prowess required of a Marine. Water was often scarce and Navajo were used to walking thirty miles or so to trading posts to get supplies.⁷¹ As Marines, they often marched with full packs when others balked and buckled.⁷² Hunting and protecting livestock also proved beneficial to Navajo soldiers. The first platoon of twenty-nine Code Talkers graduated on July 3, 1942, with a firing record of 93.1, the highest of any outfit on the range at that time.⁷³ Native Americans often embraced the "Wild West" stereotype of being natural scouts, since the reputation brought respect and status.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

Almost two decades after retiring, John Collier astutely characterized the Navajo: "Here is no exclusiveness but concerned hospitality, no fear of new things or change since during hundreds of years the Navajo have changed and changed again, have adopted new arts, technologies, new industries, and have changed to the life-generating course of their society."⁷⁵ Dorothea Leighton and Clyde Kluckhohn recognize a similar "life-generating course" in the Navajos' "hybrid vigor" and "radiant vitality."⁷⁶ Throughout their history, the Navajo have used these characteristics to persevere. Indeed, vigor and determination existed in Navajo culture long before the Code Talkers. Outsiders simply missed these virtues. The Code Talkers' drew on their indigenous epistemology, which gave them unwavering confidence in their abilities as Marines.⁷⁷

The Code Talkers sent tens of thousands of messages without a single compromised transmission.⁷⁸ Fifth Marine Division Signal Officer, Major Howard Conner, asserted: "Were it not for the Navajo Code Talkers, the Marines never would have taken Iwo Jima."⁷⁹ Such admiration was shared by enlisted men. Iwo Jima radio operator Bob Van Doren remembered the Navajo as a serious, hardworking group that did a "splendid job."⁸⁰ But such valuable service was not recognized until the June 1969 Fourth Marine Division Association's 22nd reunion.⁸¹ Thomas H. Begay believes the delay was caused by an unidentified prejudiced Colonel.⁸²

Surviving Code Talkers continue to receive civilian honors for saving American lives. They displayed extraordinary patriotism during World War II, inspired by the Navajo ideal of *hozho*, which demanded both freedom and balance.⁸³ Today the Navajo Code Talkers' legacy continues as their descendants serve in Afghanistan and Iraq.

NOTES

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