

The Indian Veteran: Warrior of Dual Nations...

At the Wounded Knee massacre site there is a stone monument marking the mass grave of the Dakota men, women and children slaughtered there by a troop of US Cavalry. Juxtaposed around the monument are several plain white headstones of American Indians who died in the defense of their country. It is a poignant picture – very moving.

In the cemetery of every village on the Pine Ridge reservation there are those same government-issued headstones, marking the graves of soldiers from the Indian wars to the desert wars of the new century.

Indian patriotism is a curious phenomenon to most non-Indian people. But it is to many Indian people as well, especially those of younger generations. Why, they ask, do Indian men and women fight for a country that tried for centuries to destroy their cultures, to steal their lands, and that continues to oppress their tribal governments?

An Indian organization I directed in the late 1960s sponsored an annual leadership workshop for Indian high school and college students. On a field trip one summer we took them to a powwow at Wounded Knee. This was in 1970, and across the country demonstrations against the Viet Nam war were in full force. Midway in the ceremonies, an honoring dance for servicemen and veterans was performed; American flags were all around the arena, carried by dancers and many on the periphery. Held high by many other dancers were photos of fathers, daughters and sons in uniform. The arena was full, and the sound of women trilling filled the air, reminiscent of dances from time immemorial that honored their warriors.

Some of the workshop students were confused and aghast. “Don’t they know what our soldiers are doing in Viet Nam?” some of them asked. “Are they actually celebrating this unjust war?”

It was explained to them that the people were honoring the men and women who served. It was not a statement about the war – pure and simply, it was about the akicita, the warriors.

But the question is valid. Why has the American Indian served voluntarily in the defense of this country in greater numbers proportionally than any other racial or ethnic group of Americans?

Indians have volunteered their service in all the country’s wars. In fact, heavy enlistment and commendable valor on the part of Native Americans in WWI moved Congress to enact legislation in 1924 granting US citizenship to Indians.

Following Pearl Harbor in 1941, Indians came forward in great numbers to enlist – out of schools and farms and ranches. To accommodate the onslaught of volunteers, several tribes set up offices for recruiters. The Navajo tribe made a special request of the US government to provide a basic training unit for Indian men and women to learn English so that they could be admitted into regular service units. This led ultimately to the company of Navajo code talkers.

Some volunteers in Sioux country, it was reported, even brought their own rifles to the induction centers.

And Indians served with honor, including several who won the Congressional Medal of Honor. War-story sessions of old veterans invariable include accounts of bravery on the part of an Indian member of their squad.

This brings up another question: “Why do Indians make such exemplary soldiers?” The most popular attribution is that soldiering and fighting brings back the warrior image admired by tribes and clans all over Indian country for generations. In the late 1800s the Lakota word *akicita* described a member of an elite warrior society. Today it describes a man or woman in the military.

Others, like the venerable Sioux elder Sid Bird, have speculated that it is because of the regimentation of Boarding school life that has inculcated in them a dependency on regulation of their lives, and prepared them for military discipline. Up until the 1960s Indian boarding schools were operated on the military model of the Carlisle Institute in the 1800s.

Today in Indian country as a whole a different, less favorable view of the military is emerging. Some of our people decry the phenomenon of Indian patriotism. At a presentation recently in a local college, an Indian faculty member in the audience described the custom of displaying the American flag on the coffin of an Indian soldier or veteran as a lingering influence of colonization, and expressed pity for the parents so tainted.

Nevertheless, the modern Indian warriors in uniform are still honored in the tribes. PFC Lori Piestewa, the first American Indian woman soldier killed in combat (in Iraq), was a member of the Hopi tribe, and is honored by all tribes. Indian news periodicals across the country hailed her as a national hero.

Perhaps the answer to the question of Indian patriotism is the fact that a Native American serviceman is loyal to and defending two nations – the United States and his or her own tribal nation.

It’s a lesson that should be grasped by those in the national and state governments who make Indian policy.

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