

## **Narrative Summary -- The Rediscovery of America – D. Van Kley, January, 2024**

What follows is a narrative summary of the Ned Blackhawk's remarkable overview of the history of Native America in the United States, called **The Rediscovery of America**. I am not an expert, but a learner along with you. Any overview of 500 years of history (!) is bound to be limited in detail and nuance, even a scholarly 450-page book like Blackhawk's. So, to reduce that history to a ten-page summary only further dilutes the story. Yet, I hope this short summary provides some perspective and awakens in you a desire to learn more. I highly recommend Professor Blackhawk's book to you.

**The first contact between Europeans and indigenous people in America, at least the first contact we can be sure of, came with Spanish explorers, beginning in 1492.** As children, we heard our teachers praise the courage and vision of Christopher Columbus, and the epic voyage of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, leading to the discovery of a "new world." As if the Americas were an uninhabited planet! But when Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola, there were approximately 75 million people living in the Americas, almost as many as then resided in Europe. An estimated 15 million of those lived in the US and Canada.

Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull in 1493, authorizing Spain to claim this land for Spain, and gave permission to convert and conquer the people they encountered. This declaration became the basis for the "Doctrine of Discovery" which underlay colonial and US policy toward native people and their land for centuries.

The encounter between the Spanish explorers and indigenous people was marked by violence. The Europeans, of course, had guns at their disposal, which native people lacked. Consequently, native people were subjugated, their land taken, and almost one million were taken as slaves—many of whom were shipped to Europe. Stories abound of rape and genocide. As Spanish colonies sprung up, settlers brought with them pathogens for which native people's immune systems had no answer, resulting in millions of deaths. By the time of the US Declaration of Independence in 1776, only about 10% of the original native population of the Americas remained.

The Spanish conquered Mexico in 1519 and pushed south through Central and South America, as well as northward into Florida and New Mexico through the 1500's—eventually, their sphere of influence reached California and the NW Pacific Coast. They were met with resistance and in some places, were unable to conquer the people and lands they sought. In time, negotiations between them and various tribes led to more peaceful relations, trade and coexistence. Roman Catholic missions were established throughout the Spanish-American empire.

In 1620, the English arrived in New England, later establishing colonies up and down the eastern seaboard. The patterns of occupation were similar: of the 150,000 mostly Algonquin people living in the northeast in 1600, less than 15,000 were left by 1700, due to European diseases, warfare, enslavement, and dispossession. Religiously inspired, the Puritans thought Indians were unfortunate and had to be saved from their godless condition. This also meant native

lands were available for colonial development—it was God’s will. As these settlers built family farms, transforming the landscape, hunting and gathering became difficult for natives.

The Dutch arrived in the Long Island and New York area. Less interested in colonizing land, they were intent on establishing and facilitating trade between tribes and with their European partners. As time went on, they were willing to trade Dutch weapons for native furs and other goods—which became a big factor in increasing the native capacity to resist imperial powers.

To the north, the French claimed a vast swath of North America. The initial incursion of the Champlain down the St Lawrence River was met initially with curiosity—at a meeting with native leaders, French guns were fired off, astounding native people. But as he proceeded west up the river, increasingly he encountered resistance, especially from the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy--Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida and so on. At first, superior French weaponry repulsed Indian people, but in time, the sheer number of warriors and their fierce defense of their land—combined with Dutch guns—created a kind of stalemate, and the colonial advance stalled. As the French settled Canada and portions of the northern tier of the US, the fur trade became the cornerstone of life with Indian people, especially Algonquin folk like the Anishinaabe—the Three Fires Confederacy—the Ojibwa, Potawatomi and Odawa.

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In most ways, the same pattern prevailed with the French as with other colonial powers—the loss of native lands as their settlements grew, the arrival of terrible diseases, repeated violence, and a sharp decline in population. As the embattled Iroquois migrated west, they threatened other tribes. With European weapons, they raided other Indian communities, often taking prisoners, and incorporating them into their tribe to replenish numbers. An estimated 15% of Wendat—or Huron--people were taken in this way by the Iroquois. To escape this kind of aggression, other tribes moved west, triggering conflict over land with other resident Indian people. At the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701, Anishinaabe, Lakota, Dakota, Ho-Chunk, and the French met with the Iroquois. The peace promised the Iroquois hegemony south of the Ohio River in exchange for stopping their raids on the Great Lakes Indian communities and disrupting the fur trade.

**Here, in the Upper Lakes, native people far outnumbered French** settlers, traders, and missionaries. While the Anishinaabe moved around for hunting, ricing, and maple sugaring, they also gathered in various places seasonally for community and for trade. About 7,000 Odawa and Ojibwe people came each year to the Straits area, while there were also large settlements at Sault Ste Marie and especially, at Green Bay. Inter-marriage between French and Indian folk was common, resulting in the growth of mixed-race people, called Metis (accent first syllable). Jesuit missionaries like Fr Marquette and Bp Baraga were important figures and gained a measure of respect among native people by learning the language and serving as interpreters. Their efforts to convert Indian people to Christianity were not nearly as successful. In general, the presence of missionaries of all churches across Native America had a somewhat tempering effect. While they sought to assimilate as well as convert indigenous people, they often did so more benevolently and gently than others. Their efforts did yield some improvements in

education, leading to native people exercising leadership among their people. But it was not nearly enough to offset the racial animus and desire for land that led to violent displacement.

As the British colonies along the eastern seaboard grew and pushed west into the interior, they came into conflict with the French and allied Indian tribes, resulting in the Seven Year's War (also known as the French and Indian War). Some Anishinaabe fought on the side of the French and some Iroquois on the side of the English. The war ended in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris, with the French ceding all their north American lands to the English. As a wave of English settlers continually moved west into the lower lakes and Ohio Valley, their farms deforested the landscape, soiled the waters, depleted game, and disrupted native seasonal movements. When the British tried to regulate these movements and trade, they met stiff resistance from both native people and settlers. Skirmishes between settlers and Indians increased. An organized resistance to British rule called the "Pontiac Rebellion" was spurred by a visionary who envisioned a land free of settlers and led by Pontiac, an Odawa leader who'd migrated from the straits area south to Detroit. He and his warriors burned colonial forts, invaded cities, and raided farms. It took the British 6 years to quell the Pontiac Rebellion, fueling settler frustration at the British and hardening attitudes toward Indian people into hatred. Settler uprisings ensued, including bloody massacres in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Local bounties were offered for Indian scalps and in one case, blankets known to be contaminated by smallpox were issued to native people. Increasingly, colonists wanted to get rid of both the British and the indigenous people. Blackhawk contends that the American Revolution was not only about the "taxation without representation," but eliminating or at least controlling native people in the interior.

**After the British surrender in 1783, chaos ensued.** Thousands of settlers allied with the British fled west into the interior, along with liberated slaves. Over 100,000 settlers entered the interior over a twenty-year span: in Kentucky alone, the population of settlers increased from 12,000 to 73,000. Without British protection and few US forces, Indian people could not count on anyone to act as a buffer. The Articles of Confederation offered little in the way of federal control. Even when the federal government did try to exert authority, neither the states nor private citizens accepted it. It was a land rush—and Indians were in the way. Add to that, "Indian hating" and unsurprisingly, the interior was in turmoil.

At the constituting convention, the new US constitution was designed to consolidate and strengthen federal power, giving the government authority to negotiate treaties with Indian nations over land rights. Of course, since white males were enshrined as "we, the people"—the only voting citizens—of the United States, those negotiations would reflect an unequal power dynamic.

Later, in the landmark 1823 Supreme Court case (Johnson v. McIntosh), the court determined that the European discovery of new land gave the United States title to the land indigenous people lived on. This decision reduced Native America's right to their ancestral lands to a mere right of occupancy—and paved the way for dispossession of those lands. As the Seneca chief

Red Jacket put it: “you tell us that our country is within the lines of your states. We had thought our lands were our own!”

Thomas Jefferson once said, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” American expansion was founded on farming and agriculture, which was incompatible with native interests. From the 1789 Treaty with the Six Nations onward, the federal government struck treaties with Indian nations, which ceded large swaths of land to be settled, in exchange for promises that other pieces of land would be left for them. As the tidal wave continued to wash over America, these treaties were broken and re-framed, again and again. Among the treaties affecting our region, were the Chicago Treaty of 1833 (loss of Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwa land in southern and eastern lower Michigan), the 1836 treaty which ceded Ojibwe and Odawa lands in western and northern lower and eastern Upper Michigan, the 1837 treaty which formalized the loss of lands in east central Minnesota and much of northwestern Wisconsin, and the 1842 treaty in which Ojibwe people ceded the land in rest of northern Wisconsin and western Upper Michigan. Nevertheless, many of these treaties insured the right of native people to hunt, fish, and gather on the ceded lands in perpetuity. Indian tribes were seen as domestic nations, to be treated as wards of the state. In exchange for their land, they were entitled to social and financial support by the government.

**Indian people were being forced to either adjust and assimilate to an alien white culture in which they few rights and less regard, or to move.** Believing that African Americans and Indians were inferior to white people, Jefferson had explored the idea of returning black freedmen to Africa and fiercely supported removal of Indian people west. That was part of his motivation in seeking the Louisiana purchase: he wanted all native people out of the eastern US! When some refused, Congress stepped in. With the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Congress granted the federal government the right to relocate Indian people from their homelands to designated spaces.

Most of us are familiar with the Trail of Tears. Over a twenty-year span, 17,000 Cherokee people were removed from the southeast US to Oklahoma. Along the route, some 4,000 died. Seemingly, every tribe has a similar story. The Navajo long walk, from Arizona to eastern New Mexico. The Trail of Death, which removed 1200 Potawatomi people from southern Michigan and Indiana to Kansas—about 100 perishing along the way. Due to a BIA agent’s scheme to force Ojibwe people to relocate in Minnesota, hundreds marched west to Sandy Lake in the fall to collect their delayed annuity payments. These were not available—nor was much in the way of food provided—resulting in the death of 400 people, either at the encampment or when trying to return to their homelands in the dead of winter.

Even so, this level of federal control was not sufficient for many non-Indian people, especially in the south. States like Georgia resented the federal government’s rules and regulations—and felt that right should stay with the states. The federal government was “too soft” with Native Americans! In the years leading up to Lincoln’s presidency and the birth of the Confederacy, the tension between south and north over state’s rights grew by leaps and bounds. Blackhawk

argues that you cannot understand the Civil War without considering America's attitudes and policies toward the "control" of American Indians.

As the Spanish moved into California and the far west, other colonial powers showed interest in trade and possibly, settlements. President James Monroe articulated what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the US would regard any European activity in the North American footprint as a hostile act—staking the nation's claim to all of the continental US. A big "Keep Out" sign to other powers, the Monroe Doctrine practically shouted "This land is your land, this land is my land from California to the New York Islands."

In 1819, the US acquired Florida from Spain and, after winning the Mexican-American War in 1848, resolved all land issues in the west in favor of the new republic. Meanwhile, westward migration continued across America, triggered conflict between settlers and indigenous people over their loss of land, game, grass for grazing, and more. The 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie is an example of the federal government's attempt to negotiate a settlement. Representatives of eight plains tribes, including the Cheyenne, Lakota, Arapaho, and Crow were promised protection, support, and respect for Indian reservation lands in exchange for safe passage for settlers on the Oregon Trail. The entire western half of South Dakota was to be the domain of the Lakota people, including the Black Hills. But within 8 years, the federal government dropped any pretense of trying to honor this treaty.

**The Civil War erupted in 1861.** While the focus of the Civil War may have been on the abolition of slavery, it was also about states' rights to Indian lands vis-à-vis federal protections and treaty-making. It was also about racial animus. Calls for the extermination of Indian people were common during the Civil War period. Nor was that the exclusive domain of the Confederacy. In the west, where there were few confederate soldiers, union soldiers filled the vacuum by conducting genocidal wars against innocent native non-combatants.

The rapid settlement of indigenous land by whites and its impact on native life sparked a rise in conflict between the two. By 1862, during the midst of the Civil War, the white population of Minnesota had grown rapidly to 150,000. Indian families grew hungry as white farms gobbled up their territory and the federal government, occupied by the Civil War, fell behind on annuity payments. Back in 1851, the Dakota had ceded millions of acres in exchange for a reservation along the Minnesota River, but white settlers ignored the treaty, squatting on Dakota lands. When violence erupted on both sides, the "Dakota War" ensued, raging for six months, until federal and volunteer state troops defeated the Dakota. Hundreds of prisoners were captured; some were killed by mobs. Nearly 500 Dakota were tried and 300 sentenced to death. President Lincoln commuted most sentences, but allowed 39 Dakota to be executed—the largest mass execution in US history. These executions were followed by the forced removal of all Dakota people west to the Dakota Territory, enforced by \$200 bounties on Dakota scalps.

Western mines helped the union win the war. Most of these mines were built on native lands seized by prospectors and the mining companies which followed. In addition, mines were

voracious consumers of timber and water. All of this increased pressure on native people in the west.

Following the war, in 1874, gold was discovered in the Lakota's sacred Black Hills by the Custer Expedition, fueling a gold rush. Since Lakota people had already lost much of their "guaranteed" reservation land, the settlement of the Black Hills was a "last straw" which led to fierce resistance, climaxing at the Little Bighorn in Montana in 1876. A combined force of Lakota, Arapahoe, and Northern Cheyenne warriors defeated Custer and his men, leaving 274 dead. The public outcry led the federal government to allocate more troops and finally subdue plains tribes, forcing removal to their shrinking reservation lands. The last large "battle" of the Indian wars was the massacre of 300 Lakota women, men, and children at Wounded Knee, in western South Dakota.

**The period after the Civil War was marked by several streams of policy designed to either eliminate or assimilate Indian people into the dominant culture.**

**Dispossession.** The pressure of white settlements, replacement of native species like buffalo with livestock, mining activity, and the construction of railroads necessitated taking native lands. By way of federal authority, previous treaty obligations were redefined, over and over, resulting in the sharp reduction of reservation boundaries.

**Allotment.** In an effort to assimilate native people to the American way of life, the government sought to remove lands from reservation governance by awarding smaller plots within reservations to individual families. The goal was to reproduce gendered western family arrangements and property ownership, while undercutting the communal and often migratory native way of life. It disrupted the homes of matrilineal Indian families, which included extended groups of people. By dicing up property, it made it difficult for families to share in their traditional activities, like hunting, fishing, ricing, etc. And when a male heir died, complex native family systems made it difficult to assign property inheritance to one survivor within the family.

As a result, many native families leased or sold their allotment land to non-native people, often out of need, and seldom with a fair return. Many acres of reservation land were lost: the map of reservation property became a checkerboard of ownership and governance.

Meanwhile, by the late 1800's, the Indian service started computing native blood status to determine tribal membership rolls. This served to divide people on reservations and, since fewer people were eligible for allotments, meant that more "surplus" lands could be opened for non-native development. While some few reservations managed largely to resist the allotment movement (e.g., Red Lake, MN), many lost an enormous amount of property—some over 80 or even 90% of their reservation lands!

**Boarding Schools.** In a further attempt to assimilate native people, approximately 500 Indian boarding schools were established in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Children as young as

four years old were expected to attend a boarding school, run either by the government or by a Christian mission, partially funded by the government. Most of these were operated by the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal Churches—but the Lutheran Church was operated the Bethany Boarding School in Wittenberg, WI and was involved in several others. While some children attended boarding schools with others from their tribe relatively near to home, others were transported to boarding schools far away from their reservations. Withholding annuities and rations was used as a tool to get parents to comply—not always successfully, as some parents resisted almost to the point of starvation. Other times, authorities just seized children and took them away. To quote John Lame Deer, who grew up on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota: “I was happy living with my grandparents in a world of our own. But a white man from the BIA showed up and said, ‘This kid has to go to school. If your kids don’t come by themselves, the Indian police will pick them up.’ I hid behind Grandma. My father was like a big god to me and Grandpa had been a warrior in the Custer fight, but they could not protect me now.”

The curriculum at these schools often involved burning the children’s existing clothes, cutting their hair, forbidding the use of their language or ceremonial practices, and keeping them from engaging with their parents in traditional cycles hunting and gathering, while teaching them “white” ways like farming, mechanics, sewing, and cooking. Many instances of physical and sexual abuse are documented and many more took place. Thousands of native children died due to disease, overly strict discipline, and deprivation. Unfortunately, the Christian churches were complicit in this effort, believing Indian ways were savage, ungodly, and uncivilized.

**By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the popular myth circulating in the United States was that native Americans were vanishing from the scene,** giving way to the manifest destiny of white America. The prominent Chicago businessman Rufus Blanchard put it this way: “Never before in the history of the world has the ambition of man (sic) been stimulated to the extent as here. Only the Indians were left to contend against the Americans. A prolonged struggle ensued on their part for existence, and ours for advancement...few of their offspring are left among the living today...nothing could save them.”

Early in the twentieth century, the first native activist group was formed, the Society of American Indians (SAI). The SAI advocated for native American citizenship, which was finally granted in 1924, fifty-eight years after all other Americans, and four years after U.S. women won the right to vote. The group also called attention to the corruption and dysfunction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, resulting in reforms. The release of the BIA’s Merriam Report in 1926 revealed the utter failure of allotment and boarding schools to improve the lot of Indian people. The SAI sought passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), which ended the allotment system, initiated the close of many boarding schools, and encouraged the drafting of tribal constitutions and self-government. Among the key leaders of the movement were women: Laura Kellogg (Oneida), Zitkala Sa (Dakota), and Elizabeth Bender Cloud (Ojibwe), as well as Henry Roe Cloud (Winnebago Ho-Chunk) and Simon Pokagon (Potawatomi).

A key Supreme Court decision upheld the land rights of native people in *United States v Santa Fe Pacific RR* (1941), ruling that a railroad could not simply seize Hualapai lands, as they held “aboriginal title” to those lands based on ancestral occupancy. Reforms and policy changes continued through the Depression and World War 2 eras, seeming to signal an “Indian New Deal” and the end of assimilationist practices.

**After WW 2, assimilationist forces resumed efforts to eliminate Native sovereignty.** Buoyed by the euphoria of victory, fueled by technological advance, and increasingly motivated by an anti-communist spirit, America embarked on its new era of progress. Native American reservation lands were seized to build large hydroelectric dams along the Columbia, Colorado, and Missouri Rivers. The Army Corps of Engineers flooded 600,000 acres of native land in North and South Dakota alone, relocating villages on the shores of giant lakes. Lands were taken for nuclear testing in Nevada and for coal mining in Navajo and Hopi country.

Political leaders railed against government policy as another form of communism that fostered dependency among indigenous people. These claims were often liberally sprinkled with overtly racist rhetoric about “lazy Indians.” The new BIA commissioner Dillon Myer (who also led the war relocation authority that incarcerated 120,000 Japanese Americans!), undertook a new policy of assimilation, with the goal of terminating tribes and federal obligations to support them. Beginning in the early 1950’s and extending into the 1970’s, federal policy attempted to liquidate the BIA by defunding reservations and eliminating native lands altogether.

**This new policy was known as “termination”** and was justified as “the best thing” for Indian people. Among its strategies were:

**Urban Relocation.** Native people were offered financial assistance to leave their reservations and move to cities, in exchange for job training, bus tickets, employment counseling, and so forth. A flashy advertising campaign often made wildly inaccurate promises in order to lure native people into accepting the offer.

**Land Settlements.** Tribes were offered compensation for lost lands in exchange for termination. Individuals would receive payments for historic land loss, but would no longer be considered “Indian.” Their tribes would cease to be recognized under current treaty obligations, resulting in the loss of health, education, and housing support, as well as hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. Because of extreme poverty and its attendant problems, tribes were often tempted beyond the ability to resist, resulting in the termination of 100 tribes during the twenty-year period. An example would be the Menominee in Wisconsin: the govt offered 8.5 million to the tribe in land claim money, to be distributed via one-time issues of \$1500 to the 3,270 members. In the end, the loss of treaty rights and tribal identity had a devastating effect on the Menominee. However, through the strong leadership of Tribal Chair Ada Deer, who ultimately became head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under President Clinton, tribal status was restored to the Menominee during the Nixon administration in 1973.



**Foster parenting and Adoption.** Perhaps the most devastating of all, fostering or adoption with non-Indian families served the dual purpose of getting kids off the reservation and into a “typical” white family (ideally, with the man as the breadwinner and the woman as a homemaker, etc.). It is estimated that between a quarter and a third of all Indian children were placed in orphanages or adoptive/foster homes with non-Indian families during the termination era! In one study, 50% of those children reported abusive experiences and, of that 50%, 70% reported sexual abuse.

The tide began to turn again with the rise of native activism in the sixties and seventies. The American Indian Movement (AIM) engineered the takeover of the abandoned Alcatraz Island prison in San Francisco Bay in 1965 and the standoff with FBI agents at Wounded Knee in 1973. The Red Power movement gained traction on university campuses, calling attention to historic inequities, racist attitudes toward Indians, and the need for tribal sovereignty. The Johnson administration’s “war on poverty” renewed financial support to Indian nations and tribes became recognized again as having legitimate governance. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975) transferred some of the power and funding authority from the federal government to the tribes. Fishing rights cases in the Pacific Northwest and Upper Midwest were adjudicated in favor of the tribes, reaffirming treaty rights.

During “belt-tightening” periods of recent US government policy, less funding has sometimes been available, but has been partially offset by tribal economic development in the form of gaming and the sale of tax-exempt cigarettes, fireworks, and gasoline. Gaming has become a huge business, but it’s important to note that the majority of the 600 federally recognized tribes do not offer gaming and of those who do, the majority do not run profitable facilities.

**As we end the first quarter of the twenty-first century,** there are other hopeful signs for native people in America: the rising awareness of the tragic legacy of Indian boarding schools on native communities; the momentum behind the land acknowledgement, reparation, and land back movements; the growing influence of native people in state and federal government; the beginnings of recovery of native languages and traditional ways of life; the leading contributions of native people to environmental protection in an ecologically threatened world (e.g. the Standing Rock Movement). Yet, very serious challenges remain: Indian people continue to rank as the poorest of all American minority groups; generations of trauma experienced by native people has led to violence and substance abuse in and toward Indian communities, and the renewed rise in white supremacy and American “nationalism” has fueled racist sentiments.

What, then, are we to do to support and be in relationship with native people as Lutheran Christians living through these turbulent years of social change?