

Lower-Division 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Argumentative Source Use Essay

Native Americans: Forgotten Victims of Racism in America

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(Written for Mrs. Ighade's English 101 Course)

It is ironic that a race of people that has endured so much racism can still believe in a simple, two-word philosophy called *mitakuye oyasin*, which is a Lakota Native American phrase that means “we are all related.” The United States Government has not always embraced this ideology, and, in fact, it has only recently started to take sincere measures to reduce racism towards Native Americans. The constitutional amendments and policies of the United States Government, which reduced racism towards other nationalities, have had little or no effect in reducing the racism endured by Native Americans. In fact, Native Americans are still in a state of recovery due to centuries of corrupt government policies and broken treaties. These recent steps, while sincere in nature, still continue to fall short of establishing equal opportunities and proper recognition for the Native American people.

The United States has a long history of racial discrimination towards Native Americans ranging from forced separation to forced assimilation (Welch et al. 547). In 1824, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was created to manage the issues associated with the Native American tribal system, and later, the reservations. This department is still in operation today, although it has a history that is less than commendable (Gibbs par. 3). Treaties that had been forged between the Native Americans and the government were continually amended and were essentially disregarded soon after implementation (Capps 155). As one author of *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History* wrote, “Throughout the 1870's, as treaties previously made were broken, and as further compromises were not adhered to, as the degrading miseries of reservation life thrust Indians to extremes, and as white settlers and miners flooded the Plains and into Oregon and California, there was a continuing threat of Indian reprisals” (Thomas et al. 350). Manifest Destiny was the synonym for illegal land acquisition, and the subsequent wars that resulted can best be described as defensive measures by the Native Americans to thwart an invasion by numerically superior American soldiers (Thomas et al. 344, 350). The result was the decimation of a proud people and their culture. They became wards of the government and tenants of reservations where the living conditions were substandard. Native American children who were allowed to attend schools in the larger cities of America were forced to renounce their heritage, beliefs, and identities in order to obtain an education (Thomas et al. pgs. 341, 356). This harsh treatment was leveled against them because they were considered an inferior people whose land was needed for American citizens.

Constitutional Amendments such as numbers fourteen, which established civil rights, and fifteen, which secured the African American right to vote, sought to produce civil rights and equal opportunities for all people (Welch et al. 522). These rights were slow in becoming inclusive, especially for Native Americans. For example, Native Americans did not receive citizenship and the right to vote until 1924. However, “Some states effectively barred Native Americans from the polls for decades. Arizona denied them the right to vote until 1948, and Utah until 1956” (Welch et al. 548). This denial of rights bears sad testimony to the corrupt bureaucracy that many

minorities have felt, but which was intensely demeaning to Native Americans since they were the first Americans.

The residents on reservations today still suffer from centuries of neglect and oppression. The ratio of Native Americans living in poverty compared to other Americans is higher than two to one (Ogunwole 12). The unemployment rates are high and when Native Americans choose to leave the reservation and seek employment elsewhere, the *Census 2000 Special Report* noted, “Overall, American Indians and Alaska Natives who worked full-time, year-round earned less than the total population” (Ogunwole 11). One primary reason that some Native Americans continue to reside on the reservations is because they are landowners and can still retain the remaining fragments of their heritage. However, records indicate only one third of Native Americans continue to reside on reservations (Ogunwole 14).

Federal funding for these Native American citizens is agonizingly low, partially due to the small proportion of the United States population that Native Americans comprise. The *Census 2000 Special Report* states that the population of Native Americans has increased to 4.3 million people (Ogunwole 1). This anomaly can be explained by the popularity that Native American culture has experienced in recent years. In effect, many people falsely identify themselves as Native Americans because it is appealing to them (Welch et al. 550). Even with a misleading population count increase, it is not enough to reach the desks of those that control funding in America. There is, however, an increase in Native American interest group activities that has become somewhat effective in seeking legal action that has returned some delinquent revenues and land that rightfully belongs to Native American tribes, but much more is needed to reverse the many years of government abandonment (Thomas et al. 442).

There is some progress that has been made toward rectifying the offenses of the past, but they are slow and sporadic. For example, many athletic teams have changed mascots and symbols that were offensive to Native Americans. Future racial equality progress would be enhanced by the inclusion of Native Americans in all racial policies that are extended to other minorities. Also, creating and establishing educational curricula to educate other people about Native American culture would help the current and future situation. Furthermore, a total reformation of the reservation system and all related policies is necessary for the improvement of the Native American residents. Finally, America should sincerely embrace the Lakota belief of *mitakuye oyasin* because, after all, we are all truly related.

Works Cited

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