

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN STORY: A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON MT. RUSHMORE

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My mother taught her children the power of reading and learning.

When I was in elementary school, she took me and my siblings to the local library on Saturday mornings. My lifelong love of biographies began when I selected books to check out of the library to read. I read the biographies of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and other American historical figures.

They became heroes to me.

Those perceptions changed dramatically one day during my eighth-grade American history class. The assignment was to read the Declaration of Independence in our red, white, and blue history textbook while sitting in class.

As I read Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence, I had a sudden awakening of how American Indians were viewed in 1776. That's because the same man who wrote the words, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" also included a phrase in the pronouncement about "merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions."

Merciless. Indian. Savages.

That was a defining moment of enlightenment that changed the way I have viewed American history ever since. Jefferson's words that depicted Indians so unfavorably angered and hurt me, because the "Indian savage" he wrote about was not anything like the American Indians I knew in my family or Indian community. They were far from being "savages."

As an American Indian, I now realize that American history is complex and often messy.

The upcoming trip to Mount Rushmore by President Donald Trump reminded me of the dichotomy between the viewpoints held by many American patriots versus the view that many Native Americans have of the tourist attraction in South Dakota's Black Hills that draws 3 million visitors each year.

For Trump, Mount Rushmore represents a great photo opportunity during a presidential election year. Mountains make great backdrops for photographs, of course, but I suppose a mountain with four U.S. presidents' faces provides an even more majestic view in the eyes of many Americans.

The president's visit to the mountain will be met with protests from American Indians. But they will not be there as an extension of the racial-equity protests that have sprung up across the country after George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police last month.

In fact, American Indians have been protesting Mount Rushmore for decades. We know the "other side of the mountain" story that is seldom taught to American students, who only hear the patriotic version of how great the four presidents were in American history — so great that it warranted their likenesses being carved into the side of the mountain.

What American Indians know, particularly those from the great Sioux nations, is that the tribes were originally given the Black Hills in perpetuity in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.

Soon thereafter, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, and greed set in. The U.S. Cavalry moved in by the mid-1870s to protect white miners. The U.S. government took the stance that American Indians had the choice to "sell or starve." By 1877, the Sioux Nations' land was confiscated by the federal government and the Sioux were forced onto reservations.

The Sioux Nations have maintained they are the rightful owners of the Black Hills. They took the federal government to court, and in 1980 the U.S. Supreme Court agreed the land was taken from them wrongfully. As a result, a trust account was set up with \$102 million for compensation.

The Sioux said they did not want the money. They wanted the Black Hills back. The fund is reportedly now worth more than \$1 billion.

Last week, Oglala Sioux Tribal President Julian Bear Runner said he wants the faces of the four presidents removed from Mount Rushmore. He said this should not be done by blowing up the side of the mountain, though, because it would bring more desecration to the mountain that the Sioux still consider sacred.

Historian James W. Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, said in an interview with the *Washington Post* in February 2000, “The other part of the Rushmore story that needs to be told is about its sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. He was a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and his association with the Klan shows how mainstream the group was. President Harding was actually sworn into the Klan at a White House ceremony. In fact, Mount Rushmore has been considered a Ku Klux Klan sacred site.”

As I said, American history is messy and much more complicated than most people even know.

On Sunday, June 28, South Dakota state Senate Minority Leader Troy Heinert (Rosebud Sioux), told me he is concerned about the further spread of COVID-19 with all the Trump supporters, who are not prone to social distancing, in a state that in recent days has seen spikes in new COVID-19 cases. He is also concerned about potential for fires breaking out in the land around Mount Rushmore, since it has experienced drought conditions that have prohibited fireworks there since 2009.

He further said he knows the history of ownership of the Black Hills. He hopes the presidential visit will shed light on the “other side of the mountain” story that Americans should learn.

I agree. Trump’s visit should be an opportunity for Americans to finally learn the truth about stolen land and the desecration of a mountain that depicts the faces of four presidents who are not necessarily heroes to American Indians.

I learned the truth when I was in eighth grade – that there is a real difference between the “history” that is taught in school, and what American Indians know to be true.

NATIVE PEOPLE WOULD NEVER SACRIFICE THEIR ELDERS FOR THE GOOD OF THE ECONOMY

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The COVID-19 pandemic has altered our normal lives in ways that seemed unimaginable until three weeks ago.

Native News Online views its coverage of the deadly coronavirus as a top priority at this time in order to get the word out to help stop the spread of the virus across Indian Country and beyond. In order to bring informative reporting to *Native News Online* readers, we go through a rigorous process of separating fact from fiction by monitoring hundreds of COVID-19 related press releases and articles.

One story that we did *not* cover has been gnawing at my mind all week long. So, I want to address it now.

The story dropped last Monday night, March 23, when Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who turns 70 next month, suggested during a Fox News interview that senior citizens should be willing to die in exchange for restarting the American economy.

“No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that is the exchange, I’m all in,” Patrick told Fox News.

He added, “My message is that let’s get back to work, let’s get back to living. Let’s be smart about it and those of us who are 70-plus, we’ll take care of ourselves. But don’t sacrifice the country.”

As the week progressed, other pundits such as Glenn Beck and Fox’s Brit Hume weighed in to say they agreed with Patrick. To them, saving the American economy is more important than life itself. Well, at least it’s more important than the lives of senior citizens, that is.

Their notion is that the benefits of saving the American economy outweigh the risks to the elderly population, who are more vulnerable to dying from COVID-19 than younger people.

Their comments made me wonder if Patrick, Beck, and Hume had watched the 1990s movie *Grumpy Old Men* a few too many times and now they think that old people are not only grumpy, but that they don't really matter in the larger scheme of life.

The story gnawed at my mind because the whole concept that seniors are expendable conflicts with the American Indian and Alaska Native belief that we are to honor, respect, and revere the older generations. We even opt for the word "elders" over senior citizens when referring to the older ones among us, which distinguishes them as high-status citizens in our society.

The very suggestion that the American public should choose to get the economy going again without concern for the health of our elders is preposterous in Indian Country, where our elders serve an important and honored role in our lives.

They are the keepers of knowledge and wisdom, and they serve as our guides. Elders are seen as being the most beautiful part of our culture. Contrary to Hollywood's definition of beauty, the more wrinkles our elders have, the more beautiful they become to us. The lines on their faces are indicators of life lessons and wise journeys.

In Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Ojibwe, "Gichi aya'a'a" is the word for elder, which when translated to English means "great being." A term for old man in Anishinaabemowin is "akiwensii," which literally means "earth caretaker." The words and language embody the value that elders have in Native culture.

In Native culture, elders have an intrinsic value that is worth more than dollars and cents.

To validate my own belief on the subject, I asked Mike Williams, a friend who is chief of the Yupiit Nation in Akiak, Alaska for his opinion of Lt. Governor Patrick's suggestion. A man known for his honesty, the chief did not disappoint me with his response.

“That is crazy. These guys are nuts!” Williams said. “We take good care of our elders. They are our libraries, full of knowledge and history. We do not want them to pass.”

On Sunday afternoon, March 29, as I watched the livestream from Navajo Nation’s virtual town hall, I was given further validation when I heard Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez admonishing the young Navajo to stay home. He said he is still seeing too many of them ignoring the order to stay home to combat the spread of the virus.

“Young people, especially, I see too many driving around,” he said. “You don’t even know if you have the virus and are passing it around. Don’t be selfish. Think about your grandmas and those people who have health conditions. We have already seen death from this virus.”

After processing all of my feelings about this controversial situation, I realized that it has only strengthened my belief that all life is precious—especially the lives of our elders.