

WARRIORS ALL

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One feature of warfare, or perhaps the psychology of conquerors, is that the victors often endow their enemies with unusual military strengths. The enemy has to be crafty, vigorous, determined, tenacious, as well as brave and brutal. If the enemy were otherwise, the courageous actions of the victorious army would be meaningless.

In a colonial context, economics might dictate why a given nation embarks on such a venture, but colonizers normally justify their actions in terms of bringing progress and civilization to a "savage" indigenous population. A militarily conquered group is given a bit more status in colonization. Savage but courageous natives are somehow more worthy of being civilized. The mythical martial race, overcome only by military adeptness in the first place, has been invented and reinvented by colonizers throughout history.

The idea that American Indians are members of a martial race is at least as old as the United States itself. For example, Colonel James Smith, who had been a captive of an unnamed Indian tribe between 1755 and 1759, and who later served in the Revolutionary Army against the British, wrote in 1799 a short but very appreciative treatise on American Indian modes of warfare. Smith's account was accurate enough, and his observations bolstered the idea that Indians were uniquely adept and brave warriors.

As a product of black powder warfare, in which armies armed with muskets marched within 40 yards of an enemy in order to pour relatively inaccurate lead balls into the foe's closely packed ranks, Smith was especially interested in the psychology of courage and in the ability to outmaneuver an enemy. In Smith's view, Indians were courageous beyond all reason as well as being the tactical superiors of most then-modern armies. In fact, American Indian armies anticipated most of Karl von Clausewitz's ideas and theories concerning warfare. Von Clausewitz, of course, is the most widely taught military theorist in the world.

According to Smith, "The business of private warriors is to be under command, or punctually to obey orders; to learn to march abreast in scattered order, so as to be in readiness to surround the enemy, or to prevent being surrounded; to be good marksmen, and active in the use of arms; to practice running; to learn to endure hunger or hardship with patience and fortitude; to tell the truth at all times to their officers, but more especially when sent out to spy the enemy."

Since Smith's time, whites have added mystical and almost super-human qualities to their imagery of Indian warriors. In combining the idea of Indians as a brutal, yet courageous, martial race with the notion of Indians as ultimate practitioners of woodcraft as outlined in the James Fenimore Cooper novels, whites were infected with the "Indian scout syndrome." Indians, in the mythology, could detect the presence of an enemy from a bent blade of grass or could conceal themselves in an open field. Not only that, but whites believed that apparently these traits were acquired genetically rather than learned.

During the First World War American Indians were integrated into the white regiments and presumably treated like any other soldiers. Yet, the *Indian's Friend*, a newsletter dedicated to the assimilation of Indians into mainstream white society, proudly reported that "Indians in the regiments are being used for scouting and patrol duty because of the natural instinct which fits them for this kind of work." Almost immediately after America's entrance into World War II, the media began to exploit the scout syndrome for propaganda purposes. Stanley Vestal, an ethnologist of high repute, wrote that the Indian "was a realistic soldier" who "never gave quarter or expected it." Even Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior during the war years, stated in an article written for a national magazine that Indians were "uniquely valuable" to the war effort because they had "endurance, rhythm, a feeling for timing, coordination, sense perception, an uncanny ability to get over any sort of terrain at night, and better than all else, an enthusiasm for fighting. He takes a rough job and makes a game of it. Rigors of combat hold no terrors for him; severe discipline and hard duties do not deter him."

By the end of World War II the idea that Indians were a martial race and had special, inherited propensities for warfare and especially scouting were firmly and deeply entrenched in the American mind. The idea certainly followed American Indians into the battles of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. As Jack Miles, a Sac and Fox/Creek veteran of the Korean War once related, "In Korea, my platoon commander always sent me out with our patrols. He called me 'Chief' like every other Indian, and probably thought that I could see and hear better than the white guys. Maybe he thought I could track down the enemy. I don't know for sure, but I guess he figured that Indians were warriors and hunters by nature."

Indian Vietnam veterans habitually tell of the same kind of treatment. A Menominee from Wisconsin related that his platoon commander thought that, since Indians "grew up in the woods," they should know how to track and generally "feel" when something in the immediate area of operations was disturbed or out of place. Another veteran, a Navajo from Arizona, concurred with the judgment that Indians had been labeled falsely, and stated that it had made the war somewhat more dangerous for him personally. He said that he was stereotyped by cowboy-and-Indian movies. He was nicknamed Chief right away. Non-Indians claimed

Indians could see through trees and hear the unhearable. "They believed Indians could walk on water."

Perhaps because of this enduring white mindset, Indians have been vigorously recruited and especially and rigidly conscripted for military service. In World War I approximately 10,000 Indians served the armed forces and during the Second World War over 25,000 Indians, not counting those in the officer corps, saw duty. A large percentage of those who served in World War II joined others freshly recruited for service in Korea. It has been estimated that over 42,000 Indian servicemen were stationed in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. According to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Census figures, there are around 160,000 living veterans who are American Indians. These figures indicate that fully ten% of all living American Indians are veterans. Compared to the general population, nearly three times as many Indians served in the armed forces as non-Indians per capita.

Despite the fact that Indians have served in the U. S. armed forces in numbers far exceeding their proportional population, very little attention has been given to the problems of Indian veterans in general and to American Indian veterans of the Vietnam War in particular. Some scholars consider American Indians outside the mainstream — a tributary subject, a small population, different in cultural values and, to quote a researcher connected with studies of Vietnam veterans, "insignificant."

Some scholars hesitate to study American Indians because of the sheer diversity of Indian tribes. To them there are great difficulties with obtaining a valid random sampling of the Indian population. Does one do an individual tribal study or try to sample Indians as a racial group? If so, the researcher who looks upon Indians as a race group might find there is an over or under sampling of one or two specific tribes. Political considerations also pose a problem for scholars interested in the impact of the war on certain groups. For example, there were certainly more Indians who served in Vietnam than women of all races. At the same time, there are many more scholars interested in studying female Vietnam veterans than Indian veterans. This scholarly attention is due, probably, to the fact that the general female population is much larger than the general Indian population.

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