

Report on Indian boarding schools: A sad and important reminder

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MAY 16, 2022

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of the Interior released an investigative report on Federal Indian boarding schools, which between 1819 and 1969 received Native-American children often forcibly removed from their families in order to physically and psychologically separate them from their tribes and native cultures. It is a reminder of how education can be employed by government to subjugate people perceived as in the way, or simply not proper.

I'll not summarize the whole report — it is a quick, if perhaps a bit bureaucratic, read. But one passage in particular stands out, reproduced from a 1969 Senate report:

Beginning with President Washington, the stated policy of the Federal Government was to replace the Indian's culture with our own. This was considered "advisable" as the cheapest and safest way of subduing the Indians, of providing a safe habitat for the country's white inhabitants, of helping the whites acquire desirable land, and of changing the Indian's economy so that he would be content with less land. Education was a weapon by which these goals were to be accomplished [italics added].

We must remember that bad things can be done with education – it can be employed as a “weapon” – though we tend to overwhelmingly think of it as a good, enlightening, empowering thing. And no doubt many supporters of Indian boarding schools did not intend to hurt Native-American children or even take tribal lands, but to do what they paternalistically thought best: make the children “civilized,” which necessarily meant alienating them from their families and native cultures. As Indian School Superintendent John B. Riley said about federal funding to put Indian children in boarding schools run by missionaries:

The Government aid furnished enables them to sustain their missions, and renders it possible ... to lead these people, whose paganism has been the chief obstacle to their civilization, into the light of Christianity – a work in which the Government cannot actively engage ... They should receive the encouragement and co-operation of all Government employes [sic].

The result of this compulsion was often destruction and misery for tribes, communities, and the children themselves. As the report explains, boarding schools often mixed children from different tribes, required all to speak English, cut the children's hair, made them wear uniforms, and subjected them to military-style regimentation, explicitly to cut their connections to their former lives. All of this in often poor conditions, resulting in health problems ranging from gall bladder disease to cancer rates much higher among Native American adults who had attended boarding schools than those who had not.

Thankfully, the ethos in American education has moved away from overtly forced assimilation. But fear of it remains present in public schooling. When parents on the Right worry about “woke” indoctrination, they are expressing a fear of Left elites molding their children with progressive values. On the other side, concerns about curricula excluding or downplaying the cultures and contributions of minority groups have the same root fear: children taught to believe that the ideal is a straight, white male. And the power to impose on others via government schooling is undeniable: Only government can legally imprison you if you do not do as it says.

The use of government force in education has many times proven a dangerous thing. The federal Indian boarding school initiative is an especially appalling example.

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