

Native American Genocide and Old Growth Annihilation

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Genocide in Mendocino

Yesterday, I received an email with links to articles and papers about the ways in which European settlers in Northern California got rid of the "pesky Indians" who occupied the lands they wanted. Although I had read about it in a general way 30 years ago, I was left deeply affected by reading details of the plunder, murder, pillage, so-called reservations (concentration camps), government bounties, betrayals, enslavement, rapes, massacres and the Trail of Tears that occurred in Mendocino County, California in just the years 1856 -1860.ⁱ In those four short years, the "Indian problem" was "solved." As one Mendocino said in 1860, "...There were so few Indians left in the area that the Whites could not find enough to kill."ⁱⁱ

I felt very much the same as I had after viewing the recent HBO series, "Kill All the Brutes." I experienced a palpable darkness in my core, unable to come to terms with the unspeakable atrocities committed by people who could well have been my ancestors, or indeed, who might well have been myself if I'd lived in that time and circumstances. I wondered, "How is it possible for ordinary people to commit or be complicit in such outrageous genocide."

Obviously, I am not the first person to ask this question, but an answer new to me came like a light in the darkness: *People of European descent have an easy ability to dehumanize and demonize those without power that stand in the way of what they want.* Once "the other" becomes a non-human savage, there are no moral or ethical impediments to doing what would be atrocities if done to fellow humans.

We see this phenomenon in operation all the time not only in distant history, but in the very recent past and present time. We napalmed villages, sprayed Agent Orange to kill crops, and used B-52s to drop thousands if not millions of tons of bombs on civilians in Viet Nam and Cambodia. Few protested, and then mainly only after they and their children were threatened by the draft.

In World War II, our strategic policy was to carpet-bomb and fire-bomb enemy cities. Note, we commonly phrase it as bombing cities, not killing families, women and children.

Perhaps the ultimate example of our ability to deny the humanity of those we oppose was the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese people living in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, our government and most citizens are comfortable with drone strikes that kill "terrorists" and, "unfortunately," innocents when the strikes go awry.

The examples are endless when one begins to think about it.

Moving from atrocities against humans, consider how hardly anyone is disgusted by the wholesale slaughter of animals that puts meat on our tables. Indeed it is so far from being considered an atrocity that official U.S. policy is to categorize animal-rights activists who protest "inhumane slaughter" as "terrorists."

Forest Annihilation in Mendocino

I started working almost 30 years ago to stop industrial logging of Jackson State Forest, located in Mendocino County, the same county whose genocide of Native Americans I just read about. In the course of this work, I read a lot about the early history of logging in Mendocino, which started in 1850, spurred by its vast groves of giant redwoods and San Francisco's apparently insatiable demand for building materials. The first Europeans who sailed up Big River looking for redwoods to cut, were awed by the majesty of the undisturbed forest and expressed regret about what they foresaw happening. [Need citation: Kelly House]

I conjecture that no one coming upon an undisturbed stand of magnificent virgin redwoods for the first time can feel other than awe and wonder. For me, visiting the Rockefeller Grove in Humboldt Redwoods State Park evoked more religious feeling than visiting the most magnificent cathedrals in Europe. Yet, those who set about felling such giants for profit or livelihood had no qualms. They cut the trees, burned what remained, and devastated the forest streams to float the logs to the mills. They left behind a wasteland -- and celebrated their success at annihilating what many now consider a rare, spiritual treasure.

I have asked myself how loggers of that era could commit such desecration, and I find myself with the same answer as the one that explains how the settlers of that era could commit genocide -- *the easy ability in our culture to dehumanize those without power that stand in the way of what we want*. Most, if not all loggers never thought of an ancient redwood that had been alive for 1000 years as a living sentient creature, nor of the interrelated collection of animals, birds, plants, and insects that constituted the virgin redwood forests as a complex civilization deserving reverence.

I see the same self-serving denial of forests' sacred values in today's industrial timber owners, loggers, and state foresters charged with regulating them. Truly, when they look at a forest, they see only standing logs. Their only concern is how to get those standing logs cut down and to the mill as cheaply as possible.

Once we understand that all those in the timber business have no conception or appreciation for the complex living organism that is a forest, we can understand how they continue with no regrets, but rather with pride, to ever more degrade and destroy what remains of our once magnificent forests.

ⁱ [Gary E. Garrett, *The Destruction Of the Indian in Mendocino County 1856 – 1860*, Sacramento State College Master's Thesis, 1962.](#)

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 72.