

PAWNEE MILITARY COLONIALISM

Roger Echo-Hawk

July 2007

Born as a citizen of the Pawnee Nation, I spent very little time growing up among my Pawnee relatives. Instead, my childhood and youth unfolded on various air force bases under the shadows of SAC B52 bombers, including five years at Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico. I lived through the hottest era of the American anti-communist Cold War with the humid muttering of surf and leafy green Caribbean trade winds in my ears.

During the 1950s and early 1960s my Pawnee father, Walter R. Echo-Hawk Sr, served as an air force boom operator. He spent long stretches away from home “on alert” in what was termed a “Mole Hole,” ready to leap into his airplane and soar aloft to refuel the lethal weapons that would seek out and destroy the dreadful enemies of the United States and the Pawnee Nation.

This circumstance may not sound unusual, but it deserves pondering. How did it so happen that a Pawnee soldier and his family would be geared up for war on a distant tropical island far beyond the checker-boarded shores of Pawneeland? How did the Pawnee Nation get drawn into a life-&-death rivalry with an empire on the other side of the earth? In fact, haven't the Pawnees battled many enemies around the globe?

To explore the issues and implications raised by these questions, we must look beyond my 1960s. We must look back a hundred years earlier to the 1860s, and even earlier to another war. A long and deadly war. A brutal Cold War that every so often burst into viciously bloody flame in the ancient central plains homeland of the Pawnee people. And we must delve into unfamiliar sounding ideological terrain, into the meaning of what I call “Pawnee military colonialism.”

The most direct historical and cultural lineage that accounts for my presence on a US military base in the midst of the Cold War goes back to the 19th century history of the Pawnee Scouts, the Nawenakuru. This was a military organization that took shape as the culmination of a long, sporadic war with the Sioux empire. The Sioux empire was a loose confederation of bands that conjointly exerted various forms of colonial control during the 19th century over northern plains nations like the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa, and formed military alliances with others, such as the Cheyenne and Arapaho. In the central plains, the Sioux and their military allies

engaged in a prolonged cultural rivalry with the Pawnee people that often manifested as bloody military conflict.

I have the impression that this sporadic warfare between the Pawnees and the Sioux empire really took off after the mid-1830s. This seems to have developed in response to the harboring by the Skidi of Arikara refugees in 1833-1835 – refugees seeking relief from Sioux colonization of the Northern Plains. In the decades that followed, the Sioux sent army after army into Pawneeland to burn Pawnee cities, to attack Pawnee hunting camps, to wrest away control of Pawnee hunting grounds, and to terrorize the Pawnee people. I have no knowledge or information that points to reciprocation on the part of the Pawnees. I presume that occasional Pawnee war expeditions may have ventured north in quest of Sioux enemies, but it would be more definite to characterize the Pawnee military response as defensive in nature.

In that time, every Pawnee man was expected to take up arms in defense of the Pawnee homeland against Sioux aggression. This heritage is where the present-day Pawnee ethic of military service to the community draws its most direct strength. My Pawnee ancestors had no choice but to do battle with Sioux invaders.

The Pawnee leaders of that time expressed defiance in the face of Sioux aggression. And they also pursued peace, sending occasional delegations into the Sioux empire to negotiate an end to this war. These embassies were rebuffed, ignored, and at best had minimal and very limited success. One such Pawnee delegation was seeking to meet with Sioux leaders at the time of the genocidal slaughter of Pawnee families at Massacre Canyon in 1873.

The Pawnee Confederacy of the 1860s conducted joint military operations in alliance with the United States against the Sioux empire in the context of this long war, formally agreeing to permit the recruitment of Pawnee soldiers into a special organization, the Pawnee Scouts. This military alliance took shape in the wake of decades of economic, political, and cultural interfacing between the Pawnees and Americans. A complex relationship arose during the 19th century, and although plenty of low-level conflict occurred between these sovereign peoples, Pawnee traditions emphasize the absence of military conflict with the United States.

In the Pawnee Scout organization, elements of Pawnee war expeditions were married to elements of American martial culture. Pawnee priests and Pawnee doctors accompanied the Scouts, and individuals termed "Sergeants" would have been men qualified to lead Pawnee war expeditions under the formal authority of a religious bundle. The Pawnee Scouts engaged in a variety of formal ceremonialism, such as name-giving ceremonies and other activities. American military structure and martial code surfaced the organization, but the Americans acted only with the express authority of the Pawnee Confederacy Leader Council. The Pawnee Scouts as an organization helped to articulate both a political alliance and a cultural fusion.

This US/Pawnee political and military alliance subsequently gave rise to a long heritage of military engagement on the world stage. And the Pawnee Confederacy

and later Pawnee Tribe/Pawnee Nation have usefully construed the symbolic heritage of the Pawnee Scouts in terms of the cultural expectation of military service.

The United States has always been an empire, an empire shaped by both active military conquest and political engagement. Unlike the Sioux, who can be said to have been forcibly conquered by the US/Pawnee alliance, the Pawnees were not drawn into the American political system by force of arms. Instead, the participation of the Pawnees in the American system evolved as a result of negotiation. The leaders of the Pawnee people negotiated a place for the Pawnee Nation in the midst of the American empire. The Pawnees and Americans together have sustained this system.

It is popular for 21st century proponents of racial indigenism to assume that it is possible to cleanly separate “indigenous” victims of colonialism from their “Western” imperialist oppressors. In this approach, the Pawnees would be treated as racially “indigenous” people who have been victimized by racially “Western” imperialists. This strategy is useful for promoting and perpetuating anti-white racial bonding among Indians, but it is of minimal value in delineating and understanding the historical processes that have actually given rise to present-day circumstances.

Given the fact that the Pawnees have arguably existed as an integral component of the American political system since the treaty-making period of the 19th century, it is not justifiable to impose upon the Pawnees an analytical framework that views them as somehow non-American. The Pawnee Nation is a fully vested subdivision of the political entity that we know today as the United States. It is a “domestic dependent nation” within the present-day American tripartite system of federal, state, and tribal governments.

In distinction from the federal and state systems of government, the concept of an “Indian tribe” is entirely construed from racial ideology. The inherent sovereign quality of an “Indian tribe” is racially constituted because the Indian treaty-making period in American history coincided with the institutionalization of race as a core value of the idea of American cultural identity. Self-identified white Americans had no intention of treating racially defined Indian tribes as potential full-fledged sovereign participants in the white-controlled American political system.

Race defined American culture, and in this culture white Americans held the reins of power. The exclusion of racially identified “blacks” from social positions of power in America took the form of Jim Crow segregation after the Civil War. And the exclusion of Indian tribes took the form of a special racially designated sovereign status based on Jim Crow Feathers racism. Indian tribes would be incorporated into the American system as “domestic dependent nations.” Sovereignties like Texas and California could enter the union as states, but this option was never available to racially defined Indian tribes. Unlike states, Indian tribes would be sovereigns that lacked representation in the US federal system.

Sovereign participation in the American system on a racial basis comes with the idea of “reserved rights,” meaning that sovereign rights not explicitly ceded to the United States are retained by Indian tribes. This doctrine is only very awkwardly reconciled to the ability of the United States to assert unilateral plenary power over racial Indian sovereignties. Thus, in addition to the total absence of representation in any branch of the federal system, Indian tribes exist entirely at the sufferance of the United States. Indian tribes fully support this racist system because they accept and embrace race and the status of racial Indianhood.

It is proper for historians to debate the degree of unilateralist coercion, racist cultural pressures, and economic manipulation that help account for the history of Pawnee and American interactions. I suggest that the ugliest scenes in this history are attributable to the artificial racial status of the Pawnee Nation as an “Indian tribe” and to the artificial racial definition of Pawnee people as “Indians.” Intellectuals who advocate the continuation of this racial system have no choice but to support the propagation of the idea of biological racialism – the very foundation of Jim Crow Feathers sovereign racism.

Under the rubric of indigenism, racial indigenists claim to stand for enhancing the sovereign independence of “Indian tribes.” But in promoting the continuing racialization of “Indian tribes,” the programmatic results of racial indigenism primarily serve to empower racial identity. Since the American system relies on acceptance of artificial bio-racialism, willing entanglement in American racialism acts to preserve the ongoing status quo of the subaltern status of Indian tribes as race-based sovereigns without formal representation in the American political system.

The very status of “domestic dependent nation” is not only based entirely on race, it proceeds on the basis of deliberately humbling the targeted racial group. Indian tribes, unlike states, are sovereigns that have been reduced to a child-like trust status without adult congressional representation and without formal adult participation in the American judicial system. Racial identity is the basis for this diminished sovereign capacity.

Is there an alternative to the undemocratic status of racially defined Indian sovereignties in the American democratic republic? It does not seem likely that the people of the United States will recognize and act upon the moral quandary of promoting democracy worldwide while preventing racially defined Indian tribes from gaining democratic representation in the federal system. Most Americans, I suspect, would find it far more convenient to terminate tribes rather than act upon their democratic principles in this regard.

Trading Indian sovereignty for non-racial statehood is not a likely option. Achieving statehood entails a purely political process, and the racially driven imperatives of American democracy will not lightly set aside the racial status of Indian tribes in favor of making statehood an option. More importantly, Indian tribes

that treasure their limited sovereign status will not trade what they have in return for statehood and the opening of citizenship to all Americans.

But what about independence? Is it possible for the Pawnee Nation to retrieve its former status as a fully sovereign nation? The Pawnees have a moral card to play as a sovereign without representation in the American federal system. America is a participatory democracy when it comes to states, but not when it comes to tribes. Still, even with this slight moral leverage, launching the difficult quest for complete national independence seems highly improbable as an option.

An essential prerequisite condition for a true Pawnee national independence movement would entail rejection of race as the basis of communal identity. This is necessary because Indian racial activism is ideologically equipped to serve as a means to perpetuate power structures associated with enlivening racial Indianhood rather than truly supporting any specific nationalist agenda. The extant institutions of racial Indianhood, such as the American Indian Movement, the National Congress of American Indians, the Native American Rights Fund, and other such entities have proven very effective in exploiting the power that flows from the bond of racial Indianhood. But this source of communal power has never demonstrated any practical ability to advance successful national independence movements on the part of any specific community. Race perpetuates race.

Race is the American way and the practice of racial Indianhood by Indian communities simply guarantees perpetuation of the American way. One can render a moral judgment about this reality, of course, but the only moral judgment about race that seems truly useful is to determine whether or not race is something that makes our human world a better place for humankind. In the case of Indians, race is a proven source of social power, but the gathering and the deployment of this power can only be done through the polarizing methods of racism.

In the wake of the excesses of German racialism during the 1930s and 1940s, many white Americans acquired a valuable sense of caution regarding the power of racism. Distancing Americanism from Nazi ideology, Americans had to forget the inspiration of the American eugenics movement to the Nazi final solution and emphasize the story of America as the savior of liberal democracy. This master narrative could not readily defeat Nazi ideology and also embrace American racism. White America quietly concluded that racism is not a good thing. The bonds of white racialism took an ideological beating and began to disintegrate and this process served as the necessary precursor to the subsequent success of the black civil rights movement in America, permitting racial integration and affirmative action.

Confronting white racism, white Americans learned something that racial Indians have yet to learn. Racism is not a socially desirable attribute of humankind. Allegiance to racial loyalty is not an ennobling human ideal. The practice of race does not flatter our humanity.

Loyalty to the precepts of racial Indianhood will never empower and sustain any Pawnee movement away from domestic dependent nation status and toward the reassertion of independent Pawnee national identity. The continuing practice of racial Indianhood will only advance the cause of race and attachment to the lingering institutions of American racialism.

For the foreseeable future, given the strength of racial identity among Pawnees, it seems safe to predict that the idea of Pawnee independence has little hope of ever establishing any traction, much less significant momentum. This is due not only to the constraining embrace of race – of racial Indianhood willingly embraced – but also because of another powerful historical legacy.

The legacy of the Pawnee Scouts and Pawnee military colonialism.

A fundamental reason why there never has been (and very likely never will be) a Pawnee independence movement comparable to African independence movements is because the Pawnees of the 19th century saw the United States as an ally – an ally that proved very useful against Sioux aggressors who openly sought to dominate and conquer the Pawnees. The Pawnee Nation entered into alliance with the United States as a matter of survival. This historical circumstance carried forward into a patriotic call for Pawnee men to serve in the US military.

This form of community service endured through the 20th century as a fundamental element of Pawnee cultural identity. Pawnee veterans took part in American efforts to reshape the world through the use of military force, and these veterans were automatically respected in the eyes of the Pawnee community for their US military service. As a result of the American national agenda of military colonialism – an agenda upheld by Pawnee force of arms – the United States now maintains military outposts in scores of other nations and territories worldwide.

The history of the Pawnee Scouts can be usefully contextualized in a variety of ways in terms of both Pawnee military culture and historical circumstances. But the Pawnee Scouts represent an alliance between the United States and the Pawnee Confederacy against mutual enemies. A fusion of military cultures took place, and in the years that followed the disbanding of the final enlistment of Scouts in 1877, this fusion came to serve as a powerful cultural symbol of Pawnee and American unity.

The contemporary significance of the Pawnee Scouts is that this organization piloted an ongoing military alliance between the Pawnee Nation and the United States that has resulted in the imperial military conquest of indigenous nationalities and the empires of indigenous states worldwide, including the Sioux empire, the Spanish empire, the German empire, the Italian empire, the Empire of Japan, Iraq, and other nations. Pawnee soldiers also participated in the military stalemate of the US/Pawnee empire at the hands of indigenous North Korea/China, as well as actual defeat at the hands of indigenous North Viet Nam.

The Pawnees have a special – though not unique – status as a racially defined sovereign within the American system. This means that the Pawnee Nation, just like each of the fifty American states, takes part in the imperial doings of America on the world stage. Given the absence of any official opposition or policy of moderate neutrality or effort at symbolic disengagement from the American national agenda, and given the fact of traditional Pawnee support for patriotic military duty, Pawnees are most accurately seen as active participants in American colonial imperialism, not as helpless victims of it. Our traditional Indians-versus-whites historiography and more recent indigenes-versus-Westerners ideological taxonomy proves minimally useful at best in clarifying this history. These ways of seeing history are primarily handy as rhetorical tools to wield in preserving and promoting the artifice of race.

The unvarnished history of imperial Pawnee-American military colonialism usefully explains how I came to spend my early years far beyond the margins of Pawneeland upon a sunny island elsewhere in the wide world. Puerto Rico became a territory of the US as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American War. This war is represented as a symbol on the flag of the Pawnee Nation because a Pawnee named William Pollock served with the Rough Riders in Cuba during that conflict. Many Pawnees entered the US military in the century that followed.

With this heritage in mind, my Pawnee father took pride in his twenty years of military service. He was a racially self-identified American Indian, a citizen of a racially identified Indian tribe, and he took part fully in the race-based American system. In short, Walter R. Echo-Hawk Sr is better understood as a Pawnee-American military colonialist than as a helpless Indian victim of US colonialism.

I presume that a broad spectrum of feelings and opinions may exist among the Pawnee people regarding the history of Pawnee military colonialism. But in general, it seems safe to observe that the Pawnee Nation today takes great pride in its national identity as a communal source of sincerely patriotic Pawnee-American soldiery. The practice of race and the reality of Pawnee patriotism will no doubt together ensure continuation of the existing status quo into the foreseeable future.

I presume that the Pawnee Nation and other racially defined American Indian sovereignties will ride the long wave of American racialism to the very end. With the strong consensus in American science that race is over as a viable explanation of human biological diversity, this wave is even now beginning to curl.

I wonder what this might mean. I think back to the esoteric meanings of my tropical childhood. Nationalism. Sovereignty. Race. Wind & sand. Peering through the curtains of time, far green shores chime at my feet, full of long-forgotten destinations. When the past whispers its secrets, I try to listen. I try to understand the hidden meanings, yet I can never quite see what the future will bring.