

U.S. Empire and the War Against Native Sovereignty

What disturbed so many U.S. citizens about the attacks on the World Trade Center was that their sense of “safety at home” was disrupted. Until 9/11, many people believed that terrorism was something that happened in other countries, while our “home” was a place of safety. But the notion that terrorism only happens in other countries makes it difficult to grasp that the U.S. is built on a foundation of genocide, slavery, and racism. Likewise, the belief that violence happens “out there,” inflicted by the stereotypical stranger in a dark alley, makes it difficult to recognize that the home is, in fact, the place of greatest danger for women. The antiviolence movement has always pointed to evidence that home is the most dangerous place for women, and shown how our “home” in the U.S. has never been a safe place for people of color.

While the antiviolence movement has contributed this important piece of analysis (discussed at greater length in Chapter 7), some of its strategies to defeat violence are, indeed, based on the premise that violence happens “out there,” rather than at home. For instance, the antiviolence movement relies on the criminal

system as its primary tool to address domestic and sexual violence. That reliance is based on the false notion that the perpetrators of violence are a few crazed strangers that we need to lock up. As I have argued, this strategy will not transform a rape culture which implicates the majority of men.

Furthermore, after 9/11 many organizations reported sharp increases in attacks in LGBT communities, demonstrating the extent to which gays and lesbians are often seen as “aliens” whose sexuality threatens white, nuclear families held up as the building blocks of U.S. society. U.S. empire has always been reified by enforced heterosexuality and binary gender systems. By contrast, Native societies were not necessarily structured through binary gender systems. Rather, some of these societies had multiple genders and people did not fit rigidly into particular gender categories.¹ Thus, it is not surprising that the first peoples targeted for destruction in Native communities were those who did not neatly fit into Western gender categories.

Because the U.S. empire is built on a foundation of heteropatriarchy, it cannot “liberate” other countries from the effects of homophobia and sexism. So mainstream feminist support for the war on terror—in the interest of helping women in Afghanistan fight sexism and homophobia—ultimately helped the Bush administration push its sexist and homophobic policies and its support of the Christian Right at home. As Trishala Deb and Rafael Mutis of the Audre Lorde Project in New York argue,

One of the central messages of colonization is the assertion that we are not entitled to autonomy over our own bodies—they are simply machines to be used in sweatshops, prisons, and farms. Devoid of our own self-determination regarding sexuality and gender, we are as disposable as any other piece of equipment that has lost its use.

As Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Two Spirit People of Color in the United States, we need to insist that we will not accept more lies about the War on Terrorism’s potential to liberate any person or nation. We need to make the connections between the misogyny, homophobia and racism of this war effort with the overall agenda that the U.S. government is rolling out on all these fronts.²

U.S. Empire Within the U.S.

Many Indian tribes came out in support of the U.S. “war against terror.” However, it is important to understand that this war against “terror” is really an attack against Native sovereignty, and that consolidating U.S. empire abroad is predicated on consolidating U.S. empire *within* U.S. borders. For example, the Bush administration continues to use the war on terror as an excuse to support anti-immigration policies and the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border. After the Clinton and Bush II administrations spent \$20 billion on border enforcement, in June 2003 the U.S. launched Operation Desert Safeguard, Operation Desert Grip, and Operation Triple Strike. These policies will, among other things, add 200 more Border Patrol agents, increase Border Patrol encampments, raid smugglers’ homes, and provide 225 million rounds of hollow-point bullets as ammunition. As a result of this increased militarization, more than 300 migrants die each year, according to the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection. (This figure does not include people whose bodies end up on the Mexico side of the border.) This number is a tenfold increase from 10 years ago.³

The Justice Department has also announced that it is entering the names and descriptions of nearly 300,000 people who are overstaying visas or otherwise staying in the country illegally into its criminal databank. Half of those on the list are from Mexico. This information will be available to local police making routine traffic stops. In 2003, a congressional amendment to the Patriot Act explicitly empowered local cops to enforce immigration laws and to exempt them from liability under federal civil rights law for acts carried out in apprehending the undocumented.⁴

Still, many Native peoples may not see anti-immigration policies as attacks against Native sovereignty. But what is at stake for the U.S. government is its ability to determine *who can be on these lands*. By instituting repressive immigration policies, the U.S. government is once again asserting that it—and not indigenous nations—should determine who can be on these lands. That is why popular media often feature stories of American Indians

serving on border control, to present the picture that Native peoples support the interests of the U.S. over the interests of their own nations. In one example, *People* magazine ran an article about 21 Native people who form Shadow Wolves, an elite U.S. Customs Service unit formed about 30 years ago. According to *People*, "It is fitting and perhaps ironic that descendants of America's original – and violently dispossessed – inhabitants are helping to protect their own homeland from new invaders."⁵

Furthermore, Bush has used the argument that the U.S. needs to harness domestic energy reserves to support the "war on terror" as a pretext to increase energy resource extraction in the U.S. And as the vast majority of energy resources are on indigenous lands, and almost all uranium mining takes place on or near Native lands, the rhetoric of developing U.S. domestic energy resources is a veiled attack against Native sovereignty. Former White House speechwriter David Frum offers a laudatory analysis of Bush in *The Right Man*,

For Bush, the point of energy conservation was not for Americans to USE less, but for Americans to IMPORT less. For him, energy was first and foremost a national security issue. He had warned in 2000, "As a result of our foreign oil imports skyrocketing, America is at the mercy more than ever of foreign governments and cartels."⁶

The U.S. government is not encouraging conservation or the consumption of less energy, but rather that people in the U.S. use domestic rather than foreign resources. These resources will come from indigenous lands. Consequently, Native peoples are increasingly vulnerable to U.S. policy. Bush continues to support drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (home to the Gwich'in people) while he opposes making sport utility vehicles more fuel efficient. Since the proposed drilling would affect the calving grounds of the caribou the Gwich'in depend on, this project could be genocidal to the Gwich'in peoples. Another huge blow to Native sovereignty was the recent congressional act to locate a permanent high-level nuclear waste repository on Yucca Mountain, which is on Western Shoshone lands. (See Chapter 3 for more details.)

Before the U.S. attacks other countries, it tests its weapons on indigenous peoples in the Americas; military and nuclear testing also takes place almost exclusively on Native lands. Native women have been disproportionately impacted by nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands and on the Nevada test site on Shoshone land. In Canada, the Inuit have been subjected to NATO war exercises that have been wreaking environmental havoc where they live. The 18,000 low-level flights that take place each year over Inuit land create so much noise they disrupt the wildlife and destroy the hearing of the Inuit. In addition, oil falls from the jets and poisons their water supply. Since the Inuit depend on wildlife for their subsistence, flights threaten their existence. Two jets that crashed contained an extremely toxic substance, hydrazine, but NATO was not required to publish any results of the study regarding the potential effects of this crash. NATO considers the Inuit to be expendable casualties, as illustrated by one of its promotional brochures:

One can spend a one-hour mission at low-level and never see another human being. The only humans are occasional Inuit families who hunt and fish out of small camps on a seasonal basis.⁷

Canada's Department of Defense has disregarded any complaints of the Inuit, arguing that any negative health effects can be attributed to poor nutrition.⁸

Apparently, again, Native peoples do not qualify as human beings. Similarly, at the First People of Color Environmental Justice Summit in Washington, D.C., in 1991, representatives from the Western Shoshone nation reported that low-level flying also takes place on their land. According to the Shoshone, the flying was supposed to take place over the cattle pasturage until the Humane Society interceded and said this would be inhumane to the cattle. Consequently, the war exercises were redirected to take place over Indian people instead. It is clear that when we look at the casualties of the "war on terror" we must look at the unacknowledged casualties in Indian country.

U.S. Exceptionalism

Bush's war against terrorism is a clear attempt of the U. S. government to assert military and economic power throughout the world. Unilateralism has become the watch word of this administration. And Bush has undermined several multilateral processes: the administration has withheld support for the Kyoto Accords; refused to support a permanent tribunal to investigate war crimes; and boycotted the U.N. Conference Against Racism. The U.S. also undermines U.N. processes through economic and political coercion, forcing other member countries to support U.S. policies. The lead up to the U.N. Security Council vote on the resolution which paved the way for the war against Iraq offers a very clear example of this kind of blackmail.⁹ In contrast, Native peoples have been very interested in engaging international law, arguing that as descendants of indigenous nations, they deserve protection under international human rights laws. Some activists have been lobbying the U.N. to pass the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which would recognize the *collective* human rights of indigenous peoples. This protection would allow their sovereignty rights to take precedence over U.S. or other nation-states' domestic laws. As Sharon Venne states,

The aim of Indigenous Peoples is not to be assimilated into the state that has colonized and dispossessed them, but to persist as Indigenous Peoples within their territories. ...Indigenous Peoples are not minorities under international law. The evolving Draft Declaration is striving to incorporate the right of self-determination for Indigenous Peoples into an international instrument. It is the right under which historical wrongs committed through the colonization process may be redressed.¹⁰

The constant undermining of the U.N. by the U.S. hinders the ability of indigenous nations to gain recognition as sovereign nations under international law.

And as Bush increases spending to support the military, he takes money away from social services. We can expect to see more cuts in federal spending for tribally based programs. Already, for instance, former attorney general John Ashcroft shifted monies

from tribally based domestic violence programs to support "homeland security." Because Native peoples are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder in this country, they are disproportionately impacted by cuts in social spending. Native women, in particular, are burdened with taking care of their communities as the economy worsens and their access to social services declines.

Nevertheless, Native women activists have been heroic in their struggles to end violence in Native communities. A multitude of tribally-based domestic violence programs have developed in Indian country to address violence against women and children. The "war on terror," however, makes it much more difficult to address violence within this country. In addition, war escalates rates of sexual/domestic violence in both the U.S. and in the countries it is at war with. The connection is illustrated by the 2002 murders of Teresa Nieves, Andrea Floyd, Jennifer Wright, and Marilyn Griffin, who were killed by their military partners within days of each other at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.¹¹ The Miles Foundation¹² reports rates of domestic violence as much as two to five times higher in military homes. In addition, there have been over 80 allegations of sexual misconduct against female soldiers by their fellow soldiers.¹³ Yet, at the 2002 National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conference held in Orlando, Florida, an artist named MeloD mounted an exhibit celebrating U.S. troops and George Bush. According to her handout,

These visually stimulating images serve as a wake up call for all of man-kind, while at the same time they celebrate the shared patriotic spirit of the *American people*. They convey indisputable certainties while showing that the hope of tomorrow is based upon the values of our forefathers. Freedom has a very dear price and our patriotism is as strong today as when our ancestors and our sons and daughters paid that price!¹⁴

Notwithstanding the obvious point that it has been indigenous peoples and people of color, not white people, who have paid the price to build the U.S., it is simply inconsistent to say it is not okay to beat your partner, but it is okay to bomb civilians in Iraq. We cannot end violence in Native communities, or in any community for that matter, while supporting violence in other countries.

And just as we have to think beyond the state as the “answer” to violence, we need to think beyond the nation-state as the appropriate form of governance for the world. In particular, we must call into question the notion that the U.S. can ever be the guarantor of peace and freedom and recognize the U.S. for the colonial, settler nation that it is. With slogans like “peace is patriotic,” many in the antiwar movement are not calling the legitimacy of the U.S. into question. And organizing work to combat the “decline in civil liberties” has been especially popular since 9/11. The implications of this work is that Bush administration policies signal a decline in the democratic ideals found in the U.S. Constitution.

In looking to the U.S. Constitution as the basis for our democratic “ideals,” one is immediately struck with many contradictions. Generally speaking, liberal discourse (and even many sectors of “radical” discourse) dismiss these contradictions as aberrations from otherwise admirable democratic ideals—white supremacy, genocide, and imperialism are unfortunate mistakes made by the U.S., but do not fundamentally constitute the U.S. itself.¹⁵ But white supremacy, colonialism, and economic exploitation are inextricably linked to U.S. democratic ideals rather than aberrations from it. The “freedom” guaranteed to some individuals in society has always been premised upon the radical unfreedom of others. Very specifically, the U.S. could not exist without the genocide of indigenous peoples. Otherwise visitors to this continent would be living under indigenous forms of governance rather than under U.S. empire.

Indeed, an examination of U.S. democratic ideals reveals the extent to which they are inextricably linked to capitalism and racial exclusion. Liberals and progressives maintain that these democratic ideals are based on notions of citizenship, where individuals engage each other in “reasoned” debate within the public sphere to help shape public policy. However, citizenship and the public sphere are concepts that are based in exclusivity. The public sphere has been articulated as the arena in which “citizens,” or property owners, could publicly debate exercises of state power. Because citizenship has been the basis for engagement in the public sphere, the bourgeoisie argued that excluding non-property owners from the public sphere was consistent. This move has allowed the

bourgeoisie to consolidate power, while masking their will to power. As theorist Jurgen Habermas articulates,

Nevertheless, the liberal model sufficiently approximated reality so that the interest of the bourgeois class could be identified with the general interest....If everyone, as it might appear, had the chance to become a “citizen,” then only citizens should be allowed into the political public sphere, without this restriction amounting to an abandonment of the principle of publicity. On the contrary, only property owners were in a position to form a public that could legislatively protect the foundations of the existing property owner....Only from them, therefore, was an effective representation of the general interest to be expected.¹⁶

Unfortunately, while Habermas argues that the public sphere is fundamentally based on exclusion, he contradicts himself by continuing to hold it up as a model for addressing conflict within society. In fact, it is a consistent practice among progressives to bemoan the genocide of Native peoples, but in the interest of political expediency, implicitly sanction it by refusing to question the legitimacy of the settler nation responsible for this genocide. It is incumbent upon all people who benefit from living on Native lands to consider how they can engage in social justice struggles without constantly selling out Native peoples in the interest of political expediency *in the short term*. I say “short term” because it is fundamentally nonsensical to expect that we can fundamentally challenge white supremacy, imperialism, and economic exploitation within the structures of U.S. colonialism and empire *in the long term*.

In questioning the legitimacy of the U.S., it necessarily follows that we question the nation-state as an appropriate form of governance. Doing so allows us to free our political imagination to begin thinking of how we can begin to build a world we would actually want to live in. Such a political project is particularly important for colonized peoples seeking national liberation because it allows us to differentiate “nation” from “nation-state.” Helpful in this project of imagination is the work of Native women activists who have begun articulating notions of “nation” and “sovereignty” which are separate from nation-states. Whereas nation-states are governed through domination and

coercion, indigenous sovereignty and nationhood is predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility. As Crystal Ecohawk (Pawnee) writes,

Sovereignty is an active, living process within this knot of human, material and spiritual relationships bound together by mutual responsibilities and obligations. From that knot of relationships is born our histories, our identity, the traditional ways in which we govern ourselves, our beliefs, our relationship to the land, and how we feed, clothe, house and take care of our families, communities and Nations.¹⁷

Similarly, Ingrid Washinawatok (Menominee) writes,

While sovereignty is alive and invested in the reality of every living thing for Native folks, Europeans relegated sovereignty to only one realm of life and existence: authority, supremacy and dominion. In the Indigenous realm, sovereignty encompasses responsibility, reciprocity, the land, life and much more.¹⁸

This interconnectedness exists not only among the nation's members but among all creation, human and nonhuman. As Venne writes,

Our spirituality and our responsibilities define our duties. We understand the concept of sovereignty as woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility. This is a cyclical view of sovereignty, incorporating it into our traditional philosophy and view of our responsibilities. There it differs greatly from the concept of western sovereignty which is based upon absolute power. For us absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings...Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent. The idea of a nation did not simply apply to human beings. We call the buffalo, the wolves, the fish, the trees, and all are nations. Each is sovereign, and equal part of the creation, interdependent, interwoven, and all related.¹⁹

These models of sovereignty are not based on narrow definitions of nationhood. It is interesting to me, for instance, how non-Indians often presume that if Native people regained their landbases, that non-Indians would be exiled from those landbases. Yet, a much more inclusive vision of sovereignty is articulated by Native women activists. For instance, Native activist

Lakota Harden of Women of All Red Nations (WARN) and the Indigenous Women's Network describes how indigenous sovereignty is based on freedom for all peoples:

If it doesn't work for one of us, it doesn't work for any of us. The definition of sovereignty [means that]...none of us are free unless all of us are free. We can't, we won't turn anyone away. We've been there. I would hear stories about the Japanese internment camps...and I could relate to it because it happened to us. Or with Africans with the violence and rape, we've been there too. So how could we ever leave anyone behind?²⁰

Activist Sammy Toineeta (Lakota) distinguishes between a chauvinistic notion of "nationalism" and a flexible notion of "sovereignty:"

Nationalism is saying, our way is the only right way....I think a real true sovereignty is a real, true acceptance of who and what's around you. And the nationalist doesn't accept all that...Sovereignty is what you do and what you are to your own people within your own confines, but there is a realization and acceptance that there are others who are around you. And that happened even before the Europeans came, we knew about the Indians. We had alliances with some, and fights with some. Part of that sovereignty was that acceptance that they were there.²¹

There are local organizing models that rely on the dual strategy of what Sista II Sista describes as "taking power" and "making power." On one hand, it is necessary to engage in oppositional politics to corporate and state power by taking power. Yet if we only engage in the politics of taking power, we will have a tendency to replicate the hierarchical structures in our movements. So it is also important to "make power" by creating those structures within our organizations, movements, and communities that model the world we are trying to create. Many groups in the U.S. often try to create separatist communities based on egalitarian ideals. If we "make power" without also trying to "take power," we ultimately support the political status quo by failing to dismantle structures of oppression that will undermine us.

Roberto Mendoza (Muscogee) makes an important critique of some indigenous approaches toward "making power." He notes that Native thinkers valorize "Native solutions" to our problems

without spelling out what they are. Native activists are fond of saying, "We won't follow socialism or capitalism, we'll do things the Indian way." Often then the political strategy espoused is one that advocates that Native nations simply separate from the larger colonial system rather than contest the U.S. itself. For instance, Vine Deloria, whose analysis and activism was and is central to the development of the Red Power movement, argued that there was nothing particularly problematic with the U.S. political or economic system. "It is neither good nor bad, but neutral."²² Similarly, a Cherokee explained why he is not a revolutionary: "We, the Native people have NEVER been a part of your (non-Native) society, therefore our acts are not of the revolutionist; rather a separate People seeking to regain what is rightfully and morally ours."²³ This separatist sentiment is reflected in the following joke: "A survey was taken and only fifteen percent of the Indians thought that the United States should get out of Vietnam. Eighty-five percent thought they should get out of America!"²⁴

Indian people, while espousing separatism, have not necessarily articulated a critique of global or U.S. structures of oppression. Native activist Lee Maracle argues that many sectors of Native sovereignty movements "did not challenge the basic character, the existence or the legitimacy of the institutions or even the political and economic organization of America, but rather, they addressed the long-standing injustice of expropriation."²⁵ And, she notes, it was the power of this U.S. political/economic system that has devastated organizations like the American Indian Movement.²⁶

This approach is not sufficient to dismantle multinational capitalism, argues Mendoza, because it does not "really address the question of power. How can small communities tied in a thousand ways to the capitalist market system break out without a thorough social, economic and political revolution within the whole country?"²⁷ A separatist approach can contribute to a reluctance to engage with other social justice movements. Mendoza concludes, "I feel that dialogue and struggle with Left forces are necessary rather than rejection and isolation."²⁸

We are faced with the challenge of developing organizing models that make power and take power. The community models:

described in Chapter 7, such as those used by Sista II Sista, exemplify this approach. Another important model is Sisters in Action for Power based in Portland, Oregon. Most members are under 18. Its mission is to develop the power of communities of color and low-income communities through grassroots coalition-building and campaigns. The organization draws from an analysis of colonialism as the root cause of gender, race, and class oppression and which continues to shape our realities, our bodies, and our connections to each other. Sisters in Action for Power holds that this colonial system is based on four pillars: taking the land; use of force; killing of culture; and control of mind, body, and spirit. Their work has three components:

- **Issue campaigns.** Issue campaigns are a series of strategic activities, actions, and projects organized to make changes within institutions and influence dominant culture around a specific issue. Members identify issues most affecting them. Then the group examines the issue to get to its root-cause and to determine how it affects other issues. They conduct research to learn who benefits, who loses, and how, under the current conditions. Based on this information, the group determines its demands and then builds support by mobilizing allies. Through the campaign, it builds membership.
- **Leadership Development.** Sisters in Action for Power has a formalized program designed to build collective power and to develop members' organizing and critical-thinking skills. The purpose of the campaign is to develop the leadership skills of the members. Potential members can become involved in Healthy Girl Space. From there, girls have the option of joining the Girls in Action for Power training program, which can take several years. Those who graduate can become paid interns and then staff-apprentices.
- **Modeling the Vision.** This sector of Sisters in Action for Power, often missing in traditional organizing projects, is based on the philosophy that we should model the vision for change in the here and now, and that we must make changes within ourselves and our organizations. This

modeling takes place through a variety of structures and activities that connect mind, body, and spirit, such as teamwork activities, self-reflection, journaling, self-defense classes, cooking, and revolutionary therapy. Just as members support each other in the political work, they support each other in each other's personal work to decolonize their minds, bodies, and spirits.²⁹

Another example of a group that makes and takes power is the Native Americans for a Clean Environment based in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the group that forced Kerr-McGee to close its nuclear conversion facility in Oklahoma, and eventually cease its operations in the U.S. altogether. (See Chapter 3 for more.) Kerr-McGee has been linked to Karen Silkwood's suspicious death in 1974, after her efforts to make the company's disregard for the safety of its workers from nuclear contamination public. Pamela Kingfisher, another leader in this struggle, says one thing missing in the group's activist work was "modeling the vision." In addition to fighting Kerr-McGee, Kingfisher maintains that it was important to fight for an alternative vision.

And at that point, about a year earlier, I'd already started saying, you know all we're doing is fighting. I'm so wore out. I got to work on something I believe in. We realized that we weren't building economic development—clean economic development for that community, and we should have been working with the city council. We should have been working with the businesses because as soon as that plant shut down, all of these nasty newcomers started coming in and going, we'll come in and build this and we'll do that, and we'll save your little town since you lost all this money...

We figured out we had media, law, all this stuff, and we had six strategies. So we said, okay, this is a six-stream strategy. But as Cherokee people, that's not a good number for us. Our magic numbers are four and seven, and those are very magical, very spiritual numbers for us. We've got six; we need one more. And we sat there. I thought about it, and I went home. We had it up on the wall on big papers. We looked at it. And I had a dream, and I came back, and I said you know what we left out? We left out spirituality. And we weren't doing the spiritual work. So we very quickly got my cousin, Eagle Kingfisher, to come on our board of

directors. He had been on it early on and fell out. He's old and elder. So I went to Eagle and I asked him to come back on our board and give us spiritual [guidance].

And we always had a prayer. We always opened everything with the prayers. And we realized we've got to move spirituality to the front. So we started taking medicine men down to the plant and praying for the land under that plant. And praying for land where they had their sludge ponds...

You can study about organizing, but unless you do it with a full heart and your ceremonies intact and your spiritual people behind you, and your medicine people with you, it won't work. I just believe you have to have spirituality in everything you do. Within our schools, our languages, our education, everything has to be centered. It has to be in the middle. It has to be the center of the work we do. And that is the difference with Native communities. We open with prayers. We don't open with, oh here's who I am and the chest stuck out at the microphone. We offer our humble prayers. And ask the creator to guide us.³⁰

The project of creating a new world governed by an alternative system not based on domination, coercion, and control, does not depend on an unrealistic goal of being able to fully describe a utopian society for all at this point in time. From our position of growing up in a patriarchal, colonial, and white supremacist world, we cannot even fully imagine how a world that is not based on structures of oppression might operate. Nevertheless, we can be part of a collective, creative process that can bring us closer to a society not based on domination. To quote Jean Ziegler from the 2003 World Social Forum held in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil: "We know what we don't want, but the new world belongs to the liberated freedom of human beings. There is no way; you make the way as you walk. History doesn't fall from heaven; we make history."