

THE SHRINE OF HYPOCRISY:

THE MEANING OF MOUNT RUSHMORE FOR THE LAKOTA PEOPLE

By Daniele Bolelli

Introduction

Why do they hate us? This is a question that increasing numbers of Americans began asking themselves in the face of an international political situation providing mounting evidence that the United States are not universally loved throughout the world. The question is often animated by that righteous indignation that emerges from a mix of naïvete and sincerity. Are we not the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave? Is it not true that our flag is the symbol of democracy and justice for all? Anyone opposing our colors must therefore be an enemy of freedom itself.

This unfortunately is what happens when people get too attached to symbols. They tend to forget that symbols hold multiple meanings to different people. What separates people, then, may not always be the opposition to, or endorsement of a particular value, but the different values attached to the same symbol. Whereas some will see the American flag and connect it with the ideal of freedom, others will see in it the standard of imperialism and colonization. This is not to say that opposition to the American flag does not sometimes derive from a total opposition to the freedoms of a Western, secular society. However, in many other occasions people opposing the American flag are individuals who greatly value the ideal of freedom and see their freedom threatened by those very same Stars and Stripes.

A prime example of this conflict over the meanings of a famous symbol can be found without even having to leave the boundaries of the United States. The monument of Mount Rushmore, the colossal sculpture of the faces of four presidents (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt) which were carved into the mountains of South Dakota, is a classic American icon. Almost three million people a year visit Mount Rushmore thereby making tourism the second largest industry in a poor state that would otherwise never attract many people (the rest of South Dakota is not exactly known as a prime tourist destination.) (1) In 1962 the images of Mount Rushmore were among the very first ever televised in a commercial satellite broadcast (2). Rushmore served as a backdrop for the defeat of Soviet spies in the

Alfred Hitchcock's movie "North by Northwest." Many American presidents came to South Dakota to pay homage to the monument in person. Calvin Coolidge visited it before it was finished in 1927 and on the same day in which he denied clemency for the famous activists Sacco and Vanzetti, he gave a speech calling Rushmore "...the spirit of patriotism" (3). At the request of the author, F.D. Roosevelt became the first to call the monument "America's Shrine of Democracy" (4). George Bush the elder visited in 1991 for the 50-year celebration of the works (5).

In the eyes of millions of Americans, Mount Rushmore is an enduring symbol of every good value that the United States stand for. If they were to mentally connect Rushmore to other places, they would probably think of other icons of patriotism such as the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell. If members of the Lakota Sioux tribe, however, were to try the same exercise they would probably come up with very different answers. It is likely that they would connect Rushmore to the site of the 1876 Little Big Horn battle between their ancestors and the U.S. Army, and to Wounded Knee, the place where in 1890 over 300 Lakota (mostly unarmed women and children) were massacred by the U.S. Army. For the Lakota, in fact, Mount Rushmore is the ultimate symbol of colonization and oppression. The conflict over the meaning of Mount Rushmore is a classic example of conflict between people who view a symbol through the lenses of their historically specific grievances versus those who gloss over historical realities and view it through lenses tinted by a generic emotional appeal to freedom and patriotism.

In order to make any sense of how different sets of peoples can end up viewing the same symbol so differently, we need to explore in some detail the history behind it.

The War for the Black Hills: The Lakota Nation versus the United States

The Black Hills, the mountains in which Mount Rushmore is carved, are located in the western portion of the state of South Dakota. At their highest point they tower over 7000 feet above sea level (the highest elevation of any peak east of the Rockies), and they extend approximately 100 miles from north to south and 60 from east to west (6). According to the Lakota people, the Black Hills are the spiritual center of their universe; they are "the home of our heart, and the heart of our home" (7). The Lakota also refer to the Black Hills as "the heart of everything that is" and find it only fitting that when satellite pictures of the Black Hills were first taken they revealed that, seen from space, these mountains look like a human heart (8). Contemporary Lakota activist James Weddell argues that a deep sense of reverence and love for the

Black Hills are at the core of what Lakota identity is all about (9). By saying that the Black Hills “are the birthplace of the Lakota people” (10), Lakota elder Matthew King (now deceased) summed up his tribe’s origin stories which tell that the Lakota were created at the dawn of time out of the mountains.

Many Western historians have a less romantic view of the Lakota past and argue that the Lakota first came to the Black Hills in 1775 and pushed other tribes from the area (11). The Lakota readily admit that during the 1600s and much of the 1700s they lived further east (modern day Minnesota and Wisconsin.) However, they also argue that they had inhabited the Black Hills long before this time and that, even during this migration east, members of the tribe still traveled regularly to the Black Hills to carry out ceremonies there. Their return to the area in the 1700s is therefore not considered an invasion of a foreign land but a return home (12). Since Western historians know nothing about the Lakota whereabouts before the 1600s, Lakota oral history remains unchallenged.

What is undisputed is that the earliest reports written by Euro-American explorers indicate the Lakota’s sense of reverence and protectiveness for the Black Hills. Several adventurers who had heard reports regarding the possible existence of gold in Black Hills met the fate of Ezra Kind. In 1887, while building a house near modern day Spearfish in the northern part of the Hills, a certain Louis Thoen unearthed a flat piece of limestone on which was scratched a message dated 1834. The message, conserved in the Adams Museum in Deadwood, read:

Came to the Hills in 1833 seven of us DeLacompt, Ezra Kind, G. W. Wood, T. Brown, R. Kent, Wm. King, Indian Crow. All died but me Ezra Kind. Killed by Ind. beyond the high hill got our gold in 1834. Got all the gold we could carry our ponys got by Indians I have lost my gun and nothing to eat and Indians hunting me. (13)

Several reports indicate that Kind’s was not an isolated episode. Although they were occasionally willing to discuss the cession of some of the other lands under their control, the Lakota did everything in their power to keep non-Indians away from the Black Hills. In a special tribal council held in 1857 the Lakota decided to kill any tribal member guilty of revealing the presence of gold to non-Indians. This was not because they cared much for the gold themselves. Rather it was in order to avoid the invasion of many miners in their beloved Black Hills (14).

It is clear that from very early on the United States perceived the Lakota power as a serious obstacle to expansion and colonization. After meeting the Lakota in 1804 during his famous expedition, Merriwether Lewis described them in this fashion:

“These are the vilest miscreants of the savage race, and must ever remain the pirates of the Missouri, until such measures are pursued by our government as will make them feel a dependence on its will for their supply of merchandise. Unless these people are reduced to order by coercive measures I am ready to pronounce that the citizens of the United States can never enjoy but partially the advantages which the Missouri presents.” (15)

Open hostilities between the Lakota and their Cheyenne allies on one side and the United States on the other began in 1854 and continued sporadically until 1864. At this time, warfare for control of much of the northern plains intensified until 1868. The war did not go as well as the U.S. government was hoping it would. Being nomadic buffalo-hunters, the tribes were very hard to track down, and were very proficient at guerrilla warfare. These tactics frustrated the U.S. army to the point that in 1868 the government agreed to cease the conflict and to sign a treaty that was very favorable to the tribes. From an Indian point of view, the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty is the most important document signed by the U.S. government with any Indian tribe precisely because the tribes involved signed it from a position of strength. In the treaty, the U.S. government, in addition to promising supplies to the tribes, recognized Lakota sovereignty over much of North and South Dakota (including the Black Hills), Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. The government also agreed to prevent its own citizens from trespassing on Indian land, and stated that no future land cession would occur unless 75% of the adult males in the tribe agreed to it. To the Lakota this meant that they had won the war and that the U.S. was forced to respect their territorial boundaries (16).

Subsequent events, however, make clear that the U.S. government had wanted the treaty only to stop a costly war, take a break from the fighting, and elaborate a better strategy for taking the Lakota lands. Since professional hunters were destroying the buffalo at a steady pace, the U.S. government understood that it was only a matter of time until the Lakota economy would be destroyed making the tribe much more vulnerable to conquest. The fact that this was the government’s plan can be clearly understood from this comment contained in the 1872 *Annual Report* by Francis A. Walker, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs; “Temporizing as an expedient in government may be either a sign of weakness and folly or it may be a

proof of the highest wisdom.” And in the case of the tribes whose independent buffalo-hunting days were numbered anyway “... temporizing may be the highest statesmanship.” (17)

American interests had no patience for a long wait so in 1874, just six years after the signing of the treaty, a military expedition under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer went into the Black Hills and discovered gold. The announcement of the discovery would inevitably lead to a massive gold rush. The titles of the newspaper *Yankton Press & Dakotian* euphemistically announced “Prepare for Lively Times.” (18) The “lively times” began with the invasion of gold-seeking squatters trespassing into the Black Hills. When the Lakota began targeting the miners, the government made an attempt to legally buy the Black Hills from the Lakota in 1875. While some Lakota were willing to discuss with the government, others refused all negotiations and threatened to shoot anyone signing land away (19).

Unable to gather the necessary number of signatures the government decided to dispense with legal technicalities. The mentality at the roots of the next step undertaken by the government is perfectly summed up in this passage from the *Bismark Tribune*; “The American people need the country the Indians now occupy; many of our people are out of employment; the masses need some new excitement...An Indian war would do no harm, for it must come, sooner, or later.” (20) In November 1875, President Grant violated the treaty by secretly ordering that the army should not try to stop the miners from entering the Black Hills as supposedly they were required to do according to the treaty. The smoking gun showing this violation is contained in a letter written by General Sheridan to General Terry detailing the presidential orders (21).

Further illegal actions followed when under pressure from popular demands requiring the opening up of Lakota lands to settlers, the administration decided to find an excuse to start another war with the Lakota. The tribes were accused of depredations against settlers in Montana. Never mind that according to the law this did not constitute a reason for violating the treaty. The excuse was indeed painfully thin, but the political climate of the times was such that no one fussed too much over Indian legal rights (22). At a later date, President Grant himself readily admitted this much when he wrote that treaty had not been defended because “...the avarice of the white man [is] such that an effort to remove the miners would only [have resulted] in the desertion of the bulk of the troops sent to remove them.” (23) Which is a nice way of

saying that we have to violate the law because we are greedy. That is who we are and no legal constraints can change this fact.

Earlier in his career, Grant had expressed himself even more bluntly by saying that the interests of the settlers were to be protected “even if the extermination of every Indian tribe was necessary to secure such a result.” (24) Such genocidal fantasies were shared by other elite members of the military. General William Sherman in a letter to Grant had written: “We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women and children. Nothing less will reach the root of the case” (25). The popular press echoed these sentiments. The Kansas Daily Tribune argued: “There can be no permanent, lasting peace on the frontier till these devils are exterminated” (26). The Board of Health of a Black Hills town took this advice to heart when it commended a man who had brought Indian scalps (which were sold for \$ 300 each) because they argued that murdering Indians was beneficial to the health of the settlement (27). The paradox of admitting that the law was on the Indian side while dreaming of their extermination did not seem to trouble too many people in the 1870s. Annie Tallent, the only female member of the first group of gold-seekers to reach the Black Hills, mused: “Ignoring the ethical side of the question, should such treaties as tend to arrest the advance of civilization, and retard the development of the rich resources of our country, ever have been entered into?” (28)

In light of all these comments it should be clear that the treaty had no chance to stand against the prevailing apology of Manifest Destiny that seemed to be widely popular in the United States at that time. The war therefore started again, but the military had again misjudged the situation. The conflict, in fact, had come at a time when some of the Lakota and Cheyenne were still strong enough to fight back. The main battle of this war resulted in a disastrous defeat of the U.S. Army on June 25th 1876 at a place called Little Big Horn. George Armstrong Custer, the man who had discovered gold in the Black Hills and helped precipitate the war, was killed along with hundreds of his troops when they tried to attack an Indian camp and were defeated by a combined force of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors. The victory, however, was short-lived. The buffalo herds were indeed almost completely destroyed and within a year all the Lakota and Cheyenne in the United States had to surrender for lack of food. Just to make sure that the Lakota would not think of rebelling, Crazy Horse, the main Lakota leader of resistance was the target of a successful political assassination within months of his surrender. A similar destiny awaited the other pillar of Lakota resistance, Sitting Bull, when he returned from his exile in Canada a few years later.

With the Lakota defeated, the government made another “legal” attempt to acquire title to the Black Hills. Despite threatening Indians with starvation and with possible violence, and despite considerable evidence of fraud, the 1877 Manypenny Commission managed to gather the signatures of less than 10% of the Lakota adult males, far short of the 75% required by the law. However, demonstrating that math is an opinion, Congress ratified the document and created the illusion that the U.S. government had “legally” acquired the Black Hills. A few years later, in 1890, the Lakota regained some hope that things could go back to the way they were thanks to a religious movement called the Ghost Dance. Originated among the Paiute tribe in Nevada, the Ghost Dance movement predicted that this world was coming to an end, and the dead among the Indians would be resurrected and would return to live on earth along with the buffalo herds. To make sure the Lakota would not cultivate such delusions, the U.S. Army thought well to massacre over 300 unarmed ghost-dancers at Wounded Knee, in what was to be the last chapter of the Indian wars. It was in this way that the land out of which the Shrine of Democracy would be carved a few decades later was acquired.

Gutzon Borglum: The Man behind Mount Rushmore

In 1885, long before becoming the site of the monument, Mount Rushmore received its name from a visiting New York lawyer, Charles Rushmore (29). Mr. Rushmore, however, did not contribute to the monument anything more than his name and some generous financial donation. The heart and the meaning of the monument, however, are inseparable from the ideas of its creator, Gutzon Borglum. This is a topic that most official histories of Mount Rushmore do not like to dwell upon and instead prefer to focus on Borglum’s determination and on his artistic ability. One of the details that most of his biographers like to leave out is the fact that Borglum at one point was a high-ranking member of the Ku Klux Klan. Considering that among its members the KKK counted President Harding and Chief Justice Edward White, Borglum was very much a man of his times (30). A firm believer in the superiority of the Nordic European “race,” he often condemned the Southern European “mongrel races.” In his own words:

“They [the Nordic Races] are the builders of world empire....it may safely be said that all invention, analytical science, deductive philosophy have been pushed forward by these venturesome peoples, who have subdued savages, beautified...the richest, most comfortable, best established, most sought portion of the earth... America has been peopled by these free, independent thinking races.”

And just a few lines later, he even went so far as to argue that the problem with slavery was that “...it has been the character of the cargo that has eaten into the very moral fiber of our race character, rather than the moral depravity of Anglo-Saxon traders” (31).

Considering these ideas, it is not surprising to discover that when he was invited in 1915 to create a monument to the Confederacy in Georgia at Stone Mountain, the place where the Klan would experience its 20th century rebirth, Borglum was thrilled. The project, however, eventually fell through because of disagreements between himself and the directors of the memorial association, and because of the internal factionalism that was plaguing the Klan (32). Right after this disappointment, Borglum was invited to South Dakota in 1925. In the following years, Borglum managed to raise money through the local chamber of commerce, private donors, and finally by the U.S. treasury, which provided the bulk of the funds. Besides sculpting the faces of the four presidents, Borglum planned to carve in the mountainside in letters three feet high, a 500-word heroic history of the United States. Had this project proceeded, the meaning of Mount Rushmore would perhaps be less ambiguous. Borglum, in fact, wanted the official theme of the monument to be the territorial and political growth of the United States. He conceived his task to be the “providing a formal rendering of the philosophy of our government into granite on a mountain peak” (33). In Borglum’s mind, the reason why the four presidents were particularly important was because they had all greatly contributed to the expansion of the United States. Washington was the unifier, the father of the country. Jefferson gained his place on the mountain not so much for the ideals proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence but because of the Louisiana Purchase. Lincoln was chosen for having managed to keep the Union together at a critical time (Borglum apparently saw no contradiction in building monuments to confederate soldiers and to the man they had fought against.) And Theodore Roosevelt won the honors for being a personal friend of Borglum as well as for the commercial expansion of American interests obtained by securing Panama (34).

In other words, Mount Rushmore was conceived to be a monument to Manifest Destiny. In this sense, the purpose of Mount Rushmore can be linked to that of another famous piece of art located in the state of South Dakota, the 1910 painting “The Spirit of the People” by Edwin Blashfield. This painting shows an angelic figure flying in the sky above the wagons of the pioneers pointing the way west. On the earth underneath her armed men are pushing some Indians further west to make room for the expansion of

“civilized” society. The fact that this painting was displayed until 1997 in the governor’s office may reveal that in some part of the country the spirit of Manifest Destiny is far from dead.

Lakota Perceptions of Mount Rushmore

In the HBO documentary “Paha Sapa: The Struggle for the Black Hills”, a Lakota high school honor student states: “Mount Rushmore is the ugliest monument I have ever seen” (35). This is as good as any one-liner ever gets to sum up the feelings of the Lakota towards Mount Rushmore. It certainly is more politically correct than Lakota activist James Weddell’s own one liner (“I hate that fuckin’ thing”), but not any less clear in its message (36).

These statements would certainly be surprising and offensive to the majority of non-Indians who revere the monument. They probably would not understand why would anyone dislike the “Shrine of Democracy.” I recall sharing a meal with several non-Indian guests at a Bed and Breakfast during my last visit to the Black Hills in 2001. It was just a day or two after Independence Day, and naturally the conversation flowed to the events of the previous days. Everyone but me had spent the evening at Mount Rushmore to see the Independence Day fireworks. In a ritual that is a classic for Mount Rushmore, they had all gathered to sing the National Anthem with a hand over their hearts. Tears began to appear at the edge of a lady’s eyes as she recalled how moved she was by the “spirit of patriotism that one can feel there.” The other guests were more restrained but unanimous in their deep appreciation for the monument. They all exploded in spontaneous clapping when someone asked the only child present for breakfast what she thought of Mount Rushmore and she said; “It is the most beautiful monument because it is a monument to freedom.” It is very hard to imagine these people being able to see Mount Rushmore through a Lakota perspective.

The universal Lakota dislike for the monument, however, should not be surprising in light of the extensive historical background presented earlier. The Black Hills were and still are the most sacred lands of the Lakota and of the Cheyenne. The Cheyenne culture hero, Sweet Medicine, received the teachings that have shaped Cheyenne society ever since at Bear Butte, one of the main peaks of the Black Hills. The vision of Black Elk, the famous Lakota holy man whose life was immortalized in the classic *Black Elk Speaks*, took place in the Black Hills. Even down to the present, Lakota and Cheyenne tribal members come to these mountains to practice their religious rituals and to gather medicinal herbs. During a Sun

Dance ceremony, Lakota elder Sidney Keith (now deceased) declared “We don’t need a church. We don’t need a building. We have the Black Hills and everything is sacred there.” (37)

The Lakota pressed in court their claim to the Black Hills throughout the 20th century in a long legal battle that reached its climax in 1980 when the Supreme Court acknowledged the illegality of the government’s actions and awarded over \$ 100 million to the Lakota. Despite being among the poorest people in the United States (in 2000, at a time when statewide unemployment was 2.3%, the Pine Ridge Reservation had an unemployment rate between 73% and 85% and was ranked as the poorest county in the country), the Lakota refused the money. What they wanted, in fact, was not money but to have their Black Hills back (38). James Weddell, a member of the only subdivision of the Lakota that accepted the per-capita distribution, has consistently refused to cash his check even when he did not have money for a Christmas gift for his daughter, or when he badly needed a good attorney but could not pay for one. “I could never take that money. Our ancestors have gone to war for the Hills. I love the Black Hills and could never sell them out, no matter the price” (39).

Considering how attached the Lakota feel to the Black Hills, Mount Rushmore is to them nothing but a slap in the face. The United States violated its own laws to take their lands, and then commissioned a racist sculptor to blast their sacred mountains to pieces in order to carve in it the faces of the leaders of the conquering nations. The message is not ambiguous to the Lakota. It is a statement of power and a glorification of conquest. Throughout history, conquerors have often appropriated the sacred places of the defeated to celebrate conquest. Muslim and Christian conquerors routinely would destroy the temples of their victims (sometimes each other) and place their own centers of worship on it. It is for this reason that Lakota author Elizabeth Cook-Lynn writes: “To the Sioux, the faces on Mount Rushmore seem to exemplify the political criminality of the United States rather than the democratic ideals and virtues to which so much lip service is paid” (40). In a very funny chapter of his autobiography entitled “Sitting on Top of Teddy Roosevelt’s Head,” Lakota holy man John Fire Lame Deer has this to say:

What does this Mount Rushmore mean to us Indians? It means that these big white faces are telling us, “First we gave you Indians a treaty that you could keep these Black Hills forever... Then we found the gold and we took this last piece of land, because we were stronger, and there were more of us than there were of you, and because we had cannons and Gatling guns... And when you didn’t want to leave, we wiped you out, and those of you who survived we put on reservations. And then we took the gold out, a billion bucks, and we aren’t through yet. And because we like the tourists dollars, too, we have made your sacred Black Hills into one vast Disneyland. And after we did all this we carved up this mountain, the dwelling place of your spirits, and put our four gleaming white faces here. We are the conquerors.” And a million or

more tourists every year look up at those faces and feel good, real good, because they make them feel big and powerful, because their own kind of people made these faces and the tourists are thinking: “We are white, and we made this, what we want we get, and nothing can stop us.” Maybe they won’t admit it to themselves, but that’s what many of them are thinking deep down inside. And this is what conquering means. They could just as well have carved this mountain into a huge cavalry boot standing on a dead Indian. (41)

In addition to all these factors, another element of the monument that many Lakota despise are the presidents themselves. Washington is perhaps the recipient of the least amount of scorn. He is simply not particularly liked for his brutal military record against the Indians during the Seven Years War and for his racist comments about Indians being “beasts of prey” different from wolves only in shape (42).

Besides referring to Indian peoples in the Declaration of Independence as “merciless Indian savages,” Jefferson is particularly disliked for being a prime strategist of the policy to remove Indians west of American settlements. In Jefferson’s own words, the American government had little choice but “to pursue [the Indians] to extermination, or drive them to new seats beyond our reach.” (43) Considering that most people who are targeted for “extermination” do not hold the greatest sympathies for those planning to carry out the program, it is easy to see why Jefferson is not a beloved figure in most Indian communities. Expecting otherwise would be like asking Jewish people to find something endearing in Eichmann.

Lincoln is the target of Lakota hatred for having signed on December 6, 1862, the executive order by which 38 warriors belonging to the Santee (a tribe related to the Lakota) were hanged in the biggest legal execution in U.S. history. Some say that Lincoln had been generous since the military tribunals had ordered over 300 Santee to be hanged for rebelling, but the Lakota have failed to appreciate the effort. Rather, some of them have noticed the bitter irony that no comparable execution of Southern soldiers took place during the Civil War despite the fact that Confederate soldiers were not any less guilty of rebellion and violence than any of the Santee warriors (44).

Theodore Roosevelt is disliked for multiple reasons. One has to do with the fact that his career had been launched by the newspapers owned by the Hearst family who had made their fortune thanks to their extensive mining operation in the Black Hills (45). One may argue that this does not have much to do with the president himself, but Roosevelt had other blemishes on his record. In one instance he had called the 1864 Sand Creek massacre of a peaceful camp of Cheyenne elders, women and kids “as righteous and beneficial a deed as ever took place on the frontier.” (46) On another occasion he commented that the extermination of the Indians “was as ultimately beneficial as it was inevitable. Such conquests are sure to

come when a masterful people, still in its raw barbarian prime, finds itself face to face with the weaker and wholly alien race which holds a coveted prize in its feeble grasp. ” And in another declaration, which is safe to say was not what earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, he said: “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth” (47). If this was not enough, Roosevelt also contributed to the expropriation of Indian lands by opening up thousands of acres of Indian land in the Dakotas as well as in other parts of the country to white settlement (48).

In recent years, some conservative enthusiasts have proposed to add the face of Ronald Reagan to Mount Rushmore. From an Indian point of view, considering the record of the other four presidents on the mountain in regards to Indigenous issues, it would perhaps be fitting. Displaying a similar degree of sensitivity to Indian issues as the other four presidents, when he was asked by students in Russia about the treatment of Indians at the hands of the U.S. government, Reagan replied that they had nothing to complain about. He further argued:

“Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should not have humored them in that wanting to stay in that kind of primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said, no, come join us; be citizens along with the rest of us....And so, I don’t know what their complaint might be.” (49)

Besides the obvious racist tone of this statement, Reagan’s historical revisionism betrays either an incredible ignorance or plain dishonesty. His suggestion that the main fault of the U.S. government was giving Indian people too much choice rather than pushing them on the road to becoming “civilized” would be laughable, if it was not tragic. During the late 1800s and good part of the 1900s, most American Indian religious practices were outlawed. Indian children were forcibly separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools where they were beaten if they spoke their own language. Indigenous economic, political and social systems were destroyed in order to facilitate a process of forced assimilation. Is this the choice that Reagan was talking about?

Maybe this should not be surprising. Reagan after all is a president who gave his wholehearted support to the European-descended elite of Guatemala that for years has defended its power and economic interests by using murder and torture against the Indigenous majority of the country. In 1986, during the height of the Reagan presidency, the Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States noted that in Guatemala 100,000 people (almost entirely Maya Indians) had been the victims of

political assassinations over the previous fifteen years and 40,000 more had “disappeared.” Given Guatemala’s relatively small population size, this would be the equivalent to the wiping out of four million people in a country with a population like the United States. Just so that mere numbers do not dull our perceptions, let us get a visual image of what exactly the Guatemalan military would do when Indigenous people did not comply with the government’s expropriation of their lands. This particular case refers to a massacre of 352 Indians that took place in 1982.

At 1:00 pm, the soldiers began to fire at the women inside the small church...Then they returned to kill the children... The soldiers cut open the children’s stomachs with knives or they grabbed the children’s little legs and smashed their heads with heavy sticks. (50)

Under the Reagan presidency, the government whose death squads committed this massacre along with several other repressive regimes in Central America received much military aid to carry out their work. The military aid—Reagan argued—was necessary to help those struggling for freedom. Stating that the wealthy elite of a country defending their economic interests by massacring poor Indigenous peasants are freedom-fighters is the kind of perverse logic that would fit very well on a monument called “the shrine of democracy” that is built on stolen land. Unfortunately for Reagan fans, it looks like despite his tremendous popularity with Rushmore visitors, his face will not be added to the monument because the mountain is too unstable to fit a fifth face. Too bad because from a Lakota viewpoint, this would have truly been the icing on the cake of hypocrisy.

This powerful symbolic quality of Mount Rushmore perhaps explains the reason why when, in the early 1970s, American Indians began to voice their grievances in a more forceful manner than they had done for decades, Lakota activists chose the mountain for a major demonstration. At the end of August of 1970, a group of activists staged an occupation of the mountain in order to draw attention to the government’s expropriation of some land in the nearby Pine Ridge Reservation and about the taking of the Black Hills as a whole. The occupation was repeated in June 1971, but unlike the previous year this time the activists were arrested and dragged off the mountain.

In the following years, the FBI began a campaign to squash the rise of American Indian activism with the methods that their counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) had previously used against the Black Panther Party, anti-war activists, and civil rights figures such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. One of the cornerstones of COINTELPRO was to make activists come across in the media as dangerous

criminals in order to justify a violent crackdown against them. It is in this light that we should view the FBI memos detailing Indian plans to send a “suicide squad which is extremely well trained in military and guerrilla tactics” to blow up Mount Rushmore on July 4, 1975 (51). On June 26, 1975, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a shootout between the FBI and American Indian Movement (AIM) members erupted which led to the death of one Indian and two FBI agents. After a very shady trial tainted by plenty of evidence of FBI misconduct, the court convicted Leonard Peltier, who is easily the most famous American Indian political prisoner today. On June 27, a bomb went off at four in the morning in the parking lot at Mount Rushmore and destroyed the glass windows of the visitor center but did no other damage. This seemed to confirm the FBI warnings about the activists’ plans to demolish the mountain. However, the fact that the bomber made no attempt to attack the actual monument, and that AIM never claimed responsibility (something that they always did for all of their actions,) makes one wonder who really was behind the bombing. In any case, far from producing the suicide squad promised by the FBI, AIM simply staged a demonstration a few days later on July 4 and that was the end of their protests at Mount Rushmore (52).

In addition to the very dramatic AIM protests of the 1970s, Lakota people have also expressed their feelings about Mount Rushmore in ways demonstrating that they have not lost their sense of humor. James Weddell describes: “I’ll tell you about a very sacred Lakota ritual. I’ve participated in it a few times and I was spiritually uplifted every time. A brave warrior will climb to the top of those big faces, pull down his pants and piss on top of their heads. Very uplifting stuff, really. A beautiful Lakota ceremony.” (53) Besides Weddell, several Lakota have boasted of this act, which perhaps expresses Lakota attitudes toward the monument more than any words or any protest can ever convey (54).

Crazy Horse Mountain

Among the various complaints that the Lakota have about Rushmore is what Lame Deer calls the “...disregard for nature which makes him [white people] desecrate one of our holy mountains with these oversized pale faces” (55). Lakota elder Birgil Kills Straight argues that since every cubic inch of Black Hills country is sacred land, doing man-made modification to the natural beauty of the place is a sacrilegious act (56). If this is the case, it is interesting to analyze how the Lakota respond to the other monumental rock-carving project that exists in the Black Hills just a few miles away from Mount Rushmore. The work on Crazy Horse Mountain was started in 1947 by Polish sculptor Korczak

Ziolkowski. The project, which is privately financed and is still in progress, is similar to Mount Rushmore (blasting a mountain to create a sculpture that emerges out of it) but its subject, the Lakota leader Crazy Horse, obviously caters to a very different audience.

Whereas the Lakota opposition to Mount Rushmore is nearly universal, there is much ambiguity among the Lakota regarding Crazy Horse Mountain. Many Lakota are opposed to it just as much as they are opposed to Mount Rushmore because they view any destruction of Black Hills nature, regardless of the purpose, as desecration. In an article published in the Indian-run magazine *Indian Country Today* Oglala medicine man Rick Two Dogs states: “In the Lakota way of thinking, to us it would be more beautiful if left a natural mountain.” And later he adds: “They always said the spirit of Crazy Horse didn’t approve of it. Crazy Horse would be the first to tell you he didn’t want no mountain made in what they thought was his likeness.” (57) Lakota spiritual leaders Fools Crow and Godfrey Chips are also against the project and John Fire Lame Deer agrees with them: “The whole idea of making a beautiful wild mountain into a statue of him is a pollution of the landscape. It is against the spirit of Crazy Horse.” (58) Many of the opponents to the project point to the fact that during his lifetime Crazy Horse was a very modest man who never allowed anyone to take his picture and is therefore unlikely to have approved of a work destroying a mountain for the sake of portraying his image. Even the fact that the finished project is supposed to include the building of a university and medical center for Indian peoples leaves some like Lakota anthropologist Bea Medicine and activist Charlotte Black Elk skeptical (59).

On the other hand, the Cherokee John Gritts, who served as member of the Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation Board of Directors, argues that it is good to have a place to learn about Indian life for non-Indian people who do not know anyone on any reservation (60). Other supporters point to the fact that originally it was a Lakota, tribal councilman Henry Standing Bear, who invited Ziolkowski to build the monument by writing him “My fellow chiefs and I would like the white man to know the red man has great heroes too.” (61) Even today this sentiment is shared by some Lakota. Jim Weddell says: “It’s strange. Blasting the mountains bothers me but in a racist state like South Dakota it’s good to see these rednecks foaming at the mouth at the thought that the Crazy Horse sculpture will dwarf the faces of Mount Rushmore.” (62) This tension between a firm opposition to the typically Western impulse to dominate nature which is evident in both Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse Mountain and the positive political

significance of having a great monument to an Indian leader in the middle of a very racist state is likely to continue dividing the Lakota for generations to come.

Conclusion

Other than for the silent protest of the Lakota “pissing ritual” that Weddell referred to and for the more visible but brief AIM protests of the 1970s, few public actions have been taken against Mount Rushmore. The fact that there is any opposition to the monument at all is something that the vast majority of visitors will never even be aware of. Mount Rushmore is an icon of colonization, is built on land that the Supreme Court agrees was taken illegally, and is a slap in the face to the religious traditions of those tribes who hold the Black Hills sacred. But this is certainly not part of the official meaning that the monument has in the eyes of millions of Americans. Throughout the world, major scandals tend to happen when places that are religiously meaningful to some people are destroyed by others. How could this happen in the middle of the United States and go by relatively unnoticed? Part of the answer lays in the fact that while man-made sacred places (churches, temples, etc.) are protected by the international laws, natural sacred places are rarely recognized by those who come from non-animistic traditions that are used to consider nature only as a resource to be exploited. Just a few years ago, the international community reacted in horror when the Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed centuries old Buddhist statues. What happened at Rushmore is very similar, but it was achieved through the opposite process. The United States did not destroy man-made sculptures that were sacred to the Lakota. Rather, they destroyed a sacred mountain by building in it man-made sculptures.

Other answers to the question may have to do with the small numbers and equally small political weight that the people affected, the Lakota, can muster. Part of it may be motivated by the fact that most people are apathetic and do not care too much for what does not affect them immediately. Large numbers of people in the United States thought little of the fact that the rationale for the most recent war in Iraq turned out to be hollow, so why should they worry about something like Mount Rushmore? Another reason has to do with the extreme attachment that people feel toward certain symbols. Once a certain symbol is associated with values like patriotism and freedom, many people will defend it tooth and nail no matter how little the symbol in question may truly represent the ideal of freedom. But ultimately, the bottom line may have to do with raw power. Conquerors gain the right to do what they want. History is

after all truly written by the winners, and in this case the winners decided to write their history, quite literally, in stone.

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3. Speech quoted in Taliaferro p. 227
4. Ibidem p. 280-281
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6. Sundstrom p. 3
7. Goodman p. 14, Charlotte Black Elk in Little Eagle June 25, 1996.
8. Lakota educator Carole Anne Heart in Little Eagle June 25 1996, and *Paha Sapa* documentary, and Goodman p. 10 for picture.
9. Weddell interview.
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11. White, Lazarus, Calloway, passim. Utley quoted in Gonzales.
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13. The Thoen Stone can be found in the Adams Museum in Deadwood. The complete text is quoted in Lazarus p. 73.
14. Lazarus, p. 73.
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17. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1872, 8 quoted in Utley, p. 92.
18. *Yankton Press & Dakotian*, 9/10/1874.
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20. *Bismark Tribune* 6/17/1874 quoted in Larner p. 77
21. Letter of Sheridan to Terry as quoted in Lazarus p. 343
22. Utley p. 127
23. quoted in Lazarus p. 94-95
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27. Lazarus p. 86
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30. Out of Many p. 718, Larner p. 199
31. Larner p. 218
32. Ibid. p. 194, 225
33. Ibid. p. 12
34. See Larner and Taliaferro passim
35. *Paha Sapa* documentary
36. Weddell Interview
37. Moore p. 32, Black Elk Speaks passim, Sidney Keith speech 1995.
38. Many authors cover this. For example see Lazarus passim.
39. Weddell Interview
40. Gonzales p. 146.
41. *Lame Deer* p. 82
42. Stannard p. 119 Larner p. 280
43. quoted in Stannard p. 120
44. Gonzales p. 145, Larner p. 59
45. Larner 147, 159-162
46. Dyer p. 79.

47. Quoted in Stannard p. 245
48. Gonzales p. 145
49. Reagan speech, 1988
50. quoted in Stannard p. xiv
51. quoted in Matthiessen p. 202-203. For material about the Mount Rushmore occupation see Means, Matthiessen, Taliaferro, and Lerner, *passim*. For primary sources providing COINTELPRO documents see Wall, *passim*. For a general discussion of COINTELPRO see Matthiessen, *passim*.
52. Matthiessen, Lerner, Taliaferro *passim*.
53. Weddell Interview
54. Means p. 170, *Lame Deer* 80
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56. Birgil Kills Straight in *Paha Sapa* documentary.
57. Little Eagle July 29, 1996
58. *Lame Deer* p. 85
59. *Indian Country* July 22, 1996.
60. Little Eagle July 29, 1996.
61. *Ibidem*
62. Weddell Interview

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-1868 Fort Laramie Treaty

The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty forms the foundation of the Lakota claim to the Black Hills. This treaty makes clear that Mount Rushmore is built on stolen land. Copies of the entire text of the Treaty have been printed in several books. I refer to the complete text as presented in Lazarus.

-*Paha Sapa: The Struggle for the Black Hills*. 1992.

This is an HBO documentary entirely dedicated about modern Lakota feelings about the Black Hills. Some parts focus on Mount Rushmore and about the protests that occurred there.

-*Thoen Stone*

This is a stone kept in a museum in Deadwood, South Dakota. It contains the engravings left by an early American explorer who was being hunted down by the Lakota people for trespassing in the Black Hills in the 1840s. This may be interesting to highlight the Lakota possessiveness toward the Black Hills. The text of this has been published in several books. I use the complete text quoted in Lazarus.

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Weddell belongs to the Yankton tribe, the only subdivision of the Lakota to have accepted the money awarded by the Supreme Court in 1980 in compensation for the illegal taking of the Black Hills. Weddell is one of only two Yanktons to have refused to cash the Black Hills' claim check. He has been an activist for his people throughout his life.

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