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## Trump's Postcard to America From the Shrine of Hypocrisy



Mt. Rushmore Reimagined in Four Sacred Colors. Image: Alter-Native Media.  
“This monument will never be desecrated,” Donald Trump bloviated at his second rally during the COVID-19 pandemic, a 4<sup>th</sup> of July white supremacy-fest held in the shadow of Mount Rushmore. The mask-less crowd roared its approval. This is his response to a nation roiled by the dual crisis of an unprecedented pandemic and the racial reckoning rumbling through our nation in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In a time of unparalleled crisis, he chooses to make a promise to our nation. But not a promise to use his office to defend the country from a virus that has killed more than 130,000 of our fellow citizens, nor a promise to protect the livelihoods of millions who have lost their jobs during the pandemic. Not a promise to confront systemic and institutionalized

racism. And certainly not a promise to defend our elections from foreign interference. No, Trump's promise is to defend the Confederacy and the Lost Cause. Maybe Stephen Miller can find him a portrait of Jefferson Davis to replace the one of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office? But then again, Steve Bannon probably didn't tell Trump who Jefferson Davis was.

At this moment, what does this promise really mean for the American people? What is protected by protecting Mount Rushmore? Who exactly is he protecting these MAGA masses from? He promised that Mount Rushmore would never be desecrated.

But Mount Rushmore is a desecration. It is important to understand that the Black Hills or Paha Sapa, where Rushmore is located, is the Holy Land of the Lakota and Cheyenne, and that our spiritual life-ways and Creation narratives revolve around this sacred sanctuary. In Lakota, it is He Sapa Wakan, or "The Heart of Everything That Is." For the Cheyenne, Nóávóse, (Grizzly) Bear Butte, is the Center of the Universe. A day before he was arrested, Nick Tilsen, the president of NDN Collective and a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, told [CNN](#) that the Black Hills "are a sacred place that I take my family and my children to, like the Vatican for Catholics or Mecca for Muslims. The Hills are where I feel most connected to Creator."

Tilsen led roughly 150 protestors, 15 of whom were arrested for refusing to disperse, in an attempt to block the road to Trump's rally in the memory of our ancestors who gave all for this land. Calling Trump's rally a racist political stunt, these indigenous-led activists denounced the United States occupation of the Black Hills and demanded that the monstrosity be removed. Tilsen has been charged with two felonies. This is "law and order" beneath Trump's proudly waving "stars and bars."

Tilsen is right. Mount Rushmore is a constant reminder of colonialism and an affront to the deep spiritual importance of the region. This religious significance is as true now as it was in 1927 when Gutzon Borglum set his chisel to stone, and defaced the natural "monument" our elders revered as the Six Grandfathers, a mountain that was seen by the Lakota as the embodiment of our guides and guardians, who provided direction.

Whatever patriotic association Americans may have with Mount Rushmore, it was originally planned as little more than a tourist trap — a grotesque eye saw of cowboys and Western explorers — not an edifice purportedly dedicated to presidents, democracy and freedom. Its entire purpose was economic development. Doane Robinson, the historian who dreamt up the monument, simply wanted to attract more visitors to an area

that was struggling to keep up a stream of tourism without something similar to Yellowstone to pull in coastal dollars. Fittingly, Mount “Rushmore” was named after a forgotten New York City investor, Charles Rushmore, who liked to vacation in the region to kill our four-legged relatives. Locals named it after him, pandering to his ego, presumably to convince him to return more frequently.

Mount Rushmore has no actual connection to any US history that is worth celebrating. Instead, it is connected to death, hate, violence, colonialism, and war. It embodies the United States merciless pursuit of the material riches of indigenous lands and the serial breaking of treaties, which began with the theft of the Black Hills in 1877 and culminated in the eventual dissolution of the Great Sioux Reservation for white settlers to colonize and mine. According to the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, what became the entire western half of South Dakota was meant to be Lakota land, in perpetuity.

When the activists blocking the road to Trump’s rally said he didn’t have permission to enter the Black Hills and that the land was stolen, they were not being metaphorical. The sacred Black Hills are enshrined in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, to have been set aside forever for the “undisturbed use and occupancy” of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and the allied Arapaho. But forever only lasted 6 years. After the Panic of 1873 and collapse of the Northern Pacific Railroad, Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer furrowed the “Thieves Road,” the 1874 military expedition into the Black Hills which was mounted under the false pretense of seeking a site to build a fort to protect our people against colonists and prospectors. One of Custer’s “practical miners,” H.N. Ross, discovered gold, as was expected from the decades-old rumors, and within two months of Custer’s departure from the Hills, an estimated 15,000 illegal squatters mining for gold had invaded our Holy Land.

When the Lakota wouldn’t sell the Black Hills, the military was dispatched in 1876. It was Custer’s last foray into our territory, and it ended aside the Little Bighorn River. The Grant administration’s response was to literally starve our ancestors, who were placed in internment camps, and forced to enter into a bogus “agreement” to relinquish the Black Hills that is considered invalid by both by the tribal nations involved and the US Supreme Court. The land grab didn’t end with the Black Hills, as the Great Sioux Nation was continually broken up into smaller and smaller disconnected parcels of land that now compromise the current Lakota reservations.

“A more ripe and rank case of dishonorable dealings will never, in all probability, be found in our history,” stated the US Supreme Court on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1980, when it affirmed the decision of the US Court of Claims in favor of the Great Sioux Nation in US v. Sioux Nation of Indians. The US Court of Claims found that the Great Sioux Nation was never compensated for the broken treaty, and that the subsequent “sell or starve” duress invalidated the “agreement.” The Lakota rejected the monetary award from the Court of Claims, some \$17.5 million, which with interest has grown to over \$1 billion. Our people don’t want the money, we want the land returned. \$1 billion is a fraction of the wealth amassed by the Homestake Mine which was illegally established in contravention of the 1868 treaty. If you consider \$1 billion to be a lot of money, then ask how much does Mecca cost? How much for Jerusalem?

The problems with Mount Rushmore go beyond the land. The monument itself is riddled with white supremacist politics. When Gutzon Borglum was hired by Robinson to desecrate The Six Grandfathers, it was directly due to his association with the Ku Klux Klan. With the Klan behind him, Borglum created the largest bas-relief sculpture in the world at Stone Mountain, Georgia, where Trump heroes Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are heroically presented with CSA president, Jefferson Davis. Stone Mountain has been called “the largest shrine to white supremacy in the history of the world” by the NAACP. Borglum was a white-supremacist, openly anti-Semitic, and particularly hateful and prejudiced towards indigenous people. His views were warmly welcomed by the Klan, where he served on several committees and helped negotiate their resurgence.

When he insisted that Mount Rushmore be a celebration of US presidents instead of storied cowboys, Borglum knew what he was doing. He wanted to protect his legacy and knew the power that deifying “patriotic” historical figures could have after working with the KKK. But his destruction of the sacred was also motivated by political opportunism. If you ever thought it was strange that Teddy Roosevelt, a contemporary of the sculptor, was chosen, then you probably won’t be surprised that TR was a good friend and patron of Borglum’s, as well as an ardent eugenicist and Indian hater. It is doubtful that Trump and the “patriots” at his Mount Rushmore rally would be so protective or historically revisionist of a monument to Wild Bill, Wyatt Earp, or any number of other dime novel legends.

In this Trumpian dystopia, defacing Borglum's monument would be to deface the United States itself; protecting it would be to protect the ahistorical and abstract ideals that each of those faces represents to the people attending Trump's rally. Trump, too, is purposefully tapping into this blissfully ignorant patriotic haze of presidential deification to spread his campaign message of willful obliviousness and the demonization of the Democratic Party and the liberal left. For the Lakota, the desecration of the stolen Six Grandfathers is tangible historical trauma, but the subject matter itself adds insult to injury: American presidents, two slave owners, all four white supremacists, carved into a sacred mountain on stolen land, each face a reminder of genocidal Indian policies.

George Washington declared a total extermination of the Iroquois people in 1779. Thomas Jefferson supported the massacre of the Cherokee and the Muscogee, declaring that all Natives should be driven beyond the Mississippi. Lincoln was responsible for the public hanging of the Dakota 38 (+2), the largest mass execution in US history. Theodore Roosevelt is infamous for his racist musings: "I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth." But it is often conveniently forgotten that Roosevelt used the military to ethnically cleanse the indigenous lands he declared as national parks and monuments.

As an ethnic minority facing centuries of poverty, health disparity, and systemic oppression, the continent's first people – my people – are in the highest risk category for coronavirus vulnerability. Tribes endure levels of poverty that most Americans can scarcely imagine, and some reservations already have lower life expectancies than the poorest developing nations in the world. On the Pine Ridge Reservation, a Lakota reservation 90 minutes from Mount Rushmore, the life expectancy of 48 years-old for men and 52 for women is already lower than anywhere in the western hemisphere except Haiti. The unemployment rate hovers around 80 percent. Meanwhile, the Indian Health Service hospitals that serve Indian reservations have a total of 33 ICU beds nationwide, but Trump has responded with a total lack of concern, buoyed by the complicit silence of his regional enablers on Capitol Hill, Liz Cheney, John Barrasso, John Thune and Mike Rounds.

Like the Black communities we have seen disproportionately impacted during the pandemic, tribal members are ravaged by diabetes and other chronic health conditions caused by enduring environmental injustice and decades of American apartheid. From

housing shortages and non-existent hospitals to reservation districts entirely without electricity, internet, or running water, Indian Country provides what Benjamin R. Brady and Howard M. Bahr described in 2014 as the “perfect storm” for a pandemic. Trump’s failure to act on Coronavirus has led to an immeasurable loss on the nation’s reservations, a disaster that only continues to worsen and claim indigenous lives as he swears to protect a monument which embodies this country’s broken promises to those same people.

The COVID-19 crisis has glaringly revealed what the indigenous people of this nation have known for generations: institutionalized racism infects every aspect of what is supposed to be the federal-Indian trust responsibility. The pandemic represents a stark example of the systemic failures of federal Indian policy and administration in Indian Country, and the immense costs these failures have for tribal members. The desperate need for broad and bold action has come and gone, and in its wake our officials have left us with inaction. The Global Indigenous Council (GIC) has advocated for a Marshall Plan for Indian Country, which was furnished to the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates and articulates the necessity of a sweeping approach to Indian Country.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the chaos it continues to wreak on tribal lands only emphasizes the urgency for this plan. A piecemeal approach to a systemic, century-plus crisis, will only perpetuate what has been a cycle of failure for generations of tribal citizens. We need bold initiatives that will begin to repair the utterly broken trust between tribal citizens and the federal government. The Marshall Plan for Indian Country is now an integral part of my policy platform as I challenge Liz Cheney for Wyoming’s US House seat.

By hosting his rally at the “Shrine of Hypocrisy,” Trump made a mockery of the pain and struggles of the indigenous people who consider the Black Hills sacred. When he tells his base that he will protect Mount Rushmore, he is telling them that he will protect them from the Americans who are tired of the mythology of American exceptionalism which allows the erasure and reinvention of history; the erasure of the inequality that diseases the heart of this nation and allows the continued oppression of Indigenous, Black and Brown people in this country. Yes, Trump will protect his faithful’s God-given-right to be racist. Farcically, Trump declared below Mount Rushmore that he “will never allow an angry mob to erase our history.” Whose history is really being erased, though? And who is the angry mob destroying our country?

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