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Native Americans and US Scorched Earth Continuum

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The Navajo and Apache were the last of the great Native American nations to be conquered at the end of the 19th Century. Using a scorched-earth policy, the tribes were massacred by Union troops under the command of Washington. Destruction of settlements and pastoral lands was instrumental in dispossessing the tribes, leading to their eventual subjugation.

Colonel Kit Carson was one of the pioneers of the «white man's» war of extermination on the remaining rebellious Indian Nations. The Navajo and Apache had lived unperturbed for millennia in the southwest region of the North American continent, which would then become the modern states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah in the newly constituted «United

States of America».

Today the Navajo and their Apache cousins are once again under threat. This time not from guns and burning of crops, but from the pollution caused by industrial mining.

Earlier this month, on August 5, a huge toxic spill of waste water from a disused gold mine in Colorado made international headlines when it flowed into several major rivers. Less publicised is that the contaminated waterways are vital for irrigation and drinking water in the Four Corners territory, upon which the Navajo people depend for their livelihoods.

Some three million gallons of toxic waste gushed into the Animas River, which feeds into the San Juan and Colorado Rivers. Over 150 kilometres of river water were turned into a bright orange sludge as a result of the spill. The main hazard is from dangerous levels of toxic metals, such as arsenic, cadmium and lead. These metals were previously used as industrial leaching agents in the now-defunct Gold King mine. Farmers downstream from the spill have been forced to shut off irrigation channels to avoid destruction of crops and poisoning of their herds. But their crops, deprived of irrigation, are now being destroyed anyway from [wilting](#) under searing summer temperatures.

It is also feared that the heavy metals will eventually seep into groundwater sources of drinking water posing untold risks of human contamination.

The affected area comprises the Four Corners territory that abuts the state lines of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. The communities most at risk are the Navajo who live there and who rely on the rivers.

The federal Environment Protection Agency (EPA) claims that the pollution problem [has since abated](#) and that river water concentrations of toxic metals have now diminished to safe levels. Nevertheless, there are concerns among the affected communities that the danger from these metals will re-emerge as river-bed sediments get churned up during future flooding seasons. The fear is that their lands will be poisoned for decades to come. After all, three million gallons of toxic metals just doesn't disappear without trace.

The question is: are the federal authorities exploiting the Animas River spill for an ulterior purpose? Namely, to dislocate the Navajo from their ancient lands.

There are several ominous reasons to believe that an ulterior agenda is being pursued. First of all, the EPA [has admitted](#) that one of its inspection teams triggered the spill when it was working at the Gold King disused mine near Silverton, Colorado. The toxic reservoir at the mine was apparently leaking for some time, and the EPA sent a team to investigate. As a result of the inspection work the reservoir burst its banks, thus releasing an horrendous toxic load.

Secondly, according to local sources, the EPA was extraordinarily remiss in reporting the initial spill, delaying an emergency alert by at least one day. Was the EPA trying to conceal its responsibility for the disaster?

A third cause for suspicion is that subsequently the federal authorities quickly moved to get affected communities downstream from the spill [to sign waiver rights](#) on future compensation claims. The EPA has reportedly been going door-to-door in an apparent all-out effort to obtain waivers from households.

Navajo president Russell Begaye and other elders have been urging households not to sign the EPA legal papers because, they say, if unforeseen damages were to arise in the future then the communities will have forfeited any right to claim additional compensation from the federal government. And if people end up being in possession of poisoned land and groundwater owing to long-term latent impacts they will have little option but to surrender their ownership of the unusable farmlands.

Moreover, crucial to this story are the interests of big mining companies. These companies are among the most prominent lobby groups in the US Congress. Last year in a sleight of hand, and mostly under the radar of public knowledge, Washington [voted](#) through concession rights for mining companies to begin excavation of territories in the Four Corners region. Since the 1950s, the region had been given immunity from mining operations by the Eisenhower administration, owing to the territories being classed as Native American reservations.

For decades the mining lobby has been ogling the Four Corners region because it is rich in natural minerals. Lucrative reserves of copper, uranium and other valuable metals are reckoned to be stored in subterranean deposits. One area in particular is Oak Flat in Arizona, which is home to several Navajo tribes. The Congressional land swap involves the multinational mining corporation Rio Tinto. Rio Tinto is also a major financial donor to the political funds of Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, who sits on the powerful Senate Armed Forces Committee. That committee works hand-in-hand with the military-industrial complex of arms companies, Wall Street, Big Oil and mining. McCain is believed to have been a key mover and shaker in the Congressional vote to award mining rights to Rio Tinto in the Four Corners region.

Navajo communities have certainly not been quiet about the future mining plans. Their land rights have become the subject of [a vigorous contest](#) against the corporations, with local communities labelling McCain as «an Indian Killer» and a modern-day «scout» for the mining industry.

In their campaign to preserve Oak Flat and other ancestral homelands in the Four Corners region, the Navajo have galvanised support from other Native American nations, as well as environmental groups, from across the US. Their resistance to land expropriation has become a thorn in the side to the mining lobby and political advocates like John McCain.

That brings us back to the recent disastrous toxic eruption in Colorado and the Animas River. The full impact of this event has yet to unfurl. But the contamination downstream in the Four Corners region could eventuate in whole communities being forced off their lands because of the poisonous load impacting on farmland and drinking water sources.

Some local activists and Navajo leaders have already likened the EPA's toxic «accident» to a modern-day [scorched-earth policy](#). The underlying powerful motives of the mining industry and

their incentives to Washington lawmakers are suggestive of a deliberate act, or at least an expedient reaction, with the unspoken objective being to dispossess people of their land and to put an end to the associated environmentalist campaign. That the federal Environmental Protection Agency is implicated in this alleged plot is a bitter irony.

The historical precedent is also strongly indicative of a nefarious purpose. The history of Washington's dealings with Native American nations is one of treachery, chicanery and genocide on the altar of capitalist exploitation orchestrated from corporate-controlled politicians sitting in Washington. Time and again, supposed treaties and reservations drawn up by Washington were discarded as soon as Indian lands were discovered to be resource-rich.

There would seem to be an unmistakable resonance with the former times of Colonel Kit Carson and his Union troops, when the Indians were burnt off their land to make way for railroads, cattle ranches and mines.

Today, we may be witnessing another such wave of dispossession of the original inhabitants of North America, this time in the mineral-rich lands of the southwestern states. This suggests a continuum of the scorched-earth war conducted by Washington against the native peoples. The tragic irony is that the latest «battle» is in the very region where the last of the native people were subjugated by the Apache Wars of the late 19th Century.

A wider, global scope is also appropriate here. Washington's imperialist war-making down through history and in every corner of the globe has always involved war on the land as much as war on people in order to advance its inherent for-profit corporate interests.

The poisoning of Vietnam during the 1960s-70s with defoliating Agent Orange is consistent with the present use of cluster bombs in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region by the US client regime in Kiev, where Washington has future interests for fracking of hydrocarbons. It is consistent too with the ongoing destruction of water supplies in Yemen by the US-backed Saudi-led bombing coalition to dispossess resistant people in that Arab country.

That Native American communities may once again be subjected to scorched-earth devices should therefore be of no surprise. The latter instance would only be different in that it is not being conducted presently in the context of an all-out military war on indigenous Americans.

However, its intent and ultimate effect conforms to just another episode of Washington's scorched-earth continuum.