

colonial attitudes towards native americans

Colonial attitudes towards native americans were a complex and deeply influential force that shaped the early development of North America and its relationship with indigenous peoples. This article delves into the multifaceted perspectives that European colonists held, examining their often contradictory beliefs about Native American cultures, their perceived place in the new world, and the profound impact these attitudes had on policies, interactions, and ultimately, the historical trajectory of both groups. We will explore the concepts of manifest destiny, the religious justifications used to frame these views, the economic drivers behind colonial expansion, and the legal and social frameworks that emerged from these deeply ingrained colonial mindsets. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for comprehending the injustices faced by Native Americans and the enduring legacy of colonialism.

Table of Contents

The Religious Lens: Missionaries and the "Savage"

Economic Imperatives: Land, Labor, and Exploitation

The Concept of "Civilization": Imposing European Norms

Legal and Political Frameworks: Exclusion and Control

Resistance and Resilience: Indigenous Responses to Colonialism

The Religious Lens: Missionaries and the "Savage"

From the earliest days of European colonization, religious motivations played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards Native Americans. Many colonists, driven by a fervent belief in their own religious superiority, viewed indigenous populations as heathens in need of salvation. This perspective, often fueled by a desire to spread Christianity, also served as a convenient justification for conquest and displacement. Missionaries, while sometimes exhibiting genuine concern for Native souls, frequently operated under the assumption that conversion required complete assimilation into European ways of life. This meant abandoning traditional spiritual practices, languages, and social structures.

The Divine Mandate to Convert

The belief that they held the one true faith led many European colonizers to see it as their divine duty to convert Native Americans. This was not merely about spiritual guidance; it was often intertwined with a broader vision of societal transformation. The act of conversion was perceived as a pathway to "civilizing" the indigenous peoples, bringing them into the fold of what the colonists considered a righteous and ordered society. This missionary zeal, while sometimes leading to educational initiatives, was invariably based on the premise that Native American cultures were inherently flawed and inferior, requiring radical alteration rather than respectful understanding.

Contempt for Indigenous Spirituality

Underlying the missionary impulse was often a profound contempt for indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices. What Europeans saw as pagan rituals, Native Americans understood as integral parts of their worldview, deeply connected to the land, their ancestors, and the natural world. This misunderstanding, coupled with a fear of the unknown and the perceived "devilish" influences at play, led to the active suppression of Native religions. The destruction of sacred sites and the prohibition of traditional ceremonies were common occurrences, reflecting a colonial attitude that prioritized the eradication of indigenous spiritual identity.

Economic Imperatives: Land, Labor, and Exploitation

Beyond religious fervor, economic considerations were a powerful engine driving colonial expansion and shaping attitudes towards Native Americans. The vast, seemingly untouched lands of North America represented immense potential for resource extraction and agricultural development. Colonists viewed these lands not as the ancestral homelands of established peoples, but as empty territories ripe for the taking. This colonial mindset directly fueled land dispossession and the displacement of indigenous communities.

The Allure of Abundant Land

The primary economic driver for many colonists was the acquisition of land. European notions of private property and individual ownership stood in stark contrast to many Native American communal land-use practices. Colonists saw the land as a commodity to be bought, sold, and developed for profit, while indigenous peoples understood it as a shared resource to be stewarded. This fundamental difference in perspective created an inherent conflict, with colonial expansion consistently prioritizing the acquisition of territory over the rights and needs of its original inhabitants. The idea of "terra nullius," or empty land, was a convenient fiction that ignored the presence and sovereignty of Native nations.

Exploitation of Labor and Resources

In addition to land, the potential for exploiting Native American labor was also a significant factor. Early colonial efforts often involved attempting to integrate Native peoples into the burgeoning colonial economy, whether through trade in furs, agricultural labor, or even as enslaved workers. While outright enslavement of Native Americans was eventually curtailed in some areas due to various factors, including disease and resistance, the underlying attitude of viewing indigenous peoples as a source of cheap labor persisted. The extraction of natural resources, such as timber and minerals, further intensified the pressure on Native lands and peoples, with little regard for environmental impact or indigenous livelihoods.

The Concept of "Civilization": Imposing European Norms

A pervasive theme in colonial attitudes was the notion of European "civilization" as the ultimate standard against which all other cultures were measured. Native American societies, with their distinct languages, governance systems, and social customs, were often deemed "uncivilized" or even "barbaric." This ethnocentric viewpoint justified the imposition of European norms in virtually every aspect of life, from education and governance to dress and diet.

Education as a Tool of Assimilation

Colonial education efforts, particularly those undertaken by missionaries, were rarely aimed at preserving or celebrating Native cultures. Instead, they were designed to strip away indigenous identities and replace them with European values and practices. Children were often taken from their families and placed in boarding schools, where they were forbidden from speaking their native languages, practicing their traditions, or even using their indigenous names. The goal was to "kill the Indian to save the man," a chillingly explicit articulation of the assimilationist agenda.

Redefining Governance and Social Structures

The colonial project also sought to dismantle and replace indigenous forms of governance. European colonists found it difficult to comprehend or accept the decentralized, consensus-based decision-making processes common in many Native American societies. They often favored or even imposed more hierarchical, European-style leadership structures, believing these to be more efficient and orderly. Similarly, social customs related to family, marriage, and gender roles were often viewed with suspicion and actively discouraged, replaced by European patriarchal models. This imposition of foreign social structures caused immense disruption and trauma within Native communities.

Legal and Political Frameworks: Exclusion and Control

The colonial attitudes towards Native Americans were codified into legal and political frameworks that systematically excluded indigenous peoples and asserted colonial control. Treaties, often negotiated under duress or with significant power imbalances, were frequently disregarded by colonial authorities. The legal system itself was designed to favor colonial interests, often treating Native Americans as outsiders with limited rights.

Treaties as Instruments of Dispossession

While treaties were sometimes presented as agreements between sovereign nations, in practice, they often served as mechanisms for acquiring Native lands and resources. Colonial powers frequently

used their superior military and economic leverage to coerce Native leaders into signing away vast territories. Even when treaties were ostensibly fair, subsequent colonial governments and settlers often ignored their provisions, leading to further dispossession and conflict. The repeated violation of treaty obligations by European and later American governments created a legacy of broken promises and deep mistrust.

The Doctrine of Discovery and Indigenous Sovereignty

European legal concepts, such as the Doctrine of Discovery, played a crucial role in justifying colonial claims to Native American lands. This doctrine, rooted in papal bulls and early European exploration, asserted that the first European nation to "discover" a territory gained sovereignty over it, regardless of its prior inhabitants. This legal fiction effectively denied the existence of indigenous sovereignty and established a framework for colonial governance that prioritized European claims. Native Americans were often relegated to the status of "domestic dependents," subject to the whims of colonial powers rather than being recognized as independent nations.

Resistance and Resilience: Indigenous Responses to Colonialism

Despite the overwhelming power of colonial forces and the deeply entrenched negative attitudes, Native Americans did not passively accept their fate. Across the continent, indigenous peoples mounted significant resistance, both through direct confrontation and through the strategic preservation of their cultures and identities. The resilience of Native American societies in the face of colonialism is a testament to their strength and adaptability.

Armed Resistance and Warfare

From the earliest encounters, Native American tribes engaged in armed resistance against encroaching colonial powers. These conflicts, often brutal and devastating, were fought to defend ancestral lands, protect communities, and resist subjugation. While colonial military superiority often led to eventual indigenous defeats, these uprisings served as powerful deterrents and demonstrated the fierce determination of Native peoples to maintain their autonomy. Figures like Pontiac, Tecumseh, and Sitting Bull became symbols of this enduring struggle for freedom.

Cultural Preservation and Adaptation

Beyond direct military confrontation, Native Americans employed numerous strategies to preserve their cultural heritage and adapt to the changing colonial landscape. This included maintaining oral traditions, practicing traditional ceremonies in secret, adapting to new technologies and economic opportunities when beneficial, and engaging in diplomatic negotiations to protect their interests. The ability to adapt while holding onto core cultural values allowed many Native communities to survive

and eventually reclaim aspects of their sovereignty in the modern era. This ongoing effort to maintain their distinct identities in the face of immense pressure highlights their profound resilience.

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