'A People's Dream Died There'
by THOMAS LASK


"What have we done that the American people want us to stop?" Sitting Bull asked wearily of an American Army officer. And though neither answered, both knew the answer: "Living."

For the story of Dee Brown's original, remarkable and finally heartbreaking book is that there was nothing the Indians could do, short of committing suicide, that would appease white Americans or stop their relentless and systematic destruction of Indian life. The tribes could neither avoid nor evade their oppressors. No treaty was binding, no official word was good; no arrangement was ever made for the benefit of the Indian Army officers, with a number of exceptions, time and again behaved in a way that should have disgraced them as officers and gentlemen. General Sherman gave them war and hell; the no less illustrious Phil Sheridan thought and said that the only good Indian was a dead one. From council records, from occasional autobiographies, from first person accounts and other sources, Dee Brown, who has written before on the American West, has compiled this history of the Indians from 1860 to 1890 as seen through their own eyes. It is a book impossible to read and impossible to put down. The sense of frustration, injustice and claustrophobic desperation will drive every man into the clear air and away from his fellowman.

Pattern of Deception

The pattern of maneuver and deception was repeated endlessly. The government went through the motions of making business agreements. But the agreements meant nothing to Washington and, in an entirely different sense, nothing to the Indians. "One does not spoil the earth," said Crazy Horse. The treaties provided that white men were not allowed on Indian territory without the consent of the tribes. But soon a railroad wanted to put tracks down through it; miners and others wanted to use the roads that ran through it; some wanted the timber; others wanted the minerals. All were land hungry. There were all those millions of acres not being used—only lived on. The pressure would mount on Washington until through killing, coercion, imprisonment and chicanery, another treaty was signed removing the tribes to another place or slicing a part off their land. Such dealings provoked violent and bloody reprisal on the part of the Indians, which was put down in an equally bloody way. And often enough the uprising was used as an excuse for a further series of restrictions.

To the whites, the Indians had neither a culture, a language, a religion or a tradition worth preserving or learning about. "The rich and beautiful valleys of Wyoming," said The Big Horn Association, "are destined for the occupancy and sustenance of the Anglo-Saxon race... The Indians must stand aside or be overwhelmed." And the Indians who were not overwhelmed stood aside and watched the land being plundered. It is not likely that anything the Indians could have done in the last two centuries would have left our natural resources in the condition they are in today.

If there were not so much suffering connected with the behavior and policies of Washington, some of it would have been ludicrous. The Comanches of Texas had a long developed agricultural economy. Land hungry Texans drove them out and they went north to become a buffalo-hunting tribe. But when the politicians wanted those lands, they leased the Indians on the virtues of becoming like the white man and learning agriculture.

Perhaps what is most painful in these records is the self-serving piety in the statements of the white men, missionaries, liberals, do-gooders, all of whom were going to raise the heathen Indian to their level. Senator John Logan read one Indian group a sermon on the omnipresence of the government: "You are on Indian reservation by the sufferance of the government... All you have today and are today is because of the government... The government desires to teach you to become farmers and to civilize you and make you as white men."

In contrast, the naked avarice of the governor of Colorado, Frederick W. Pitkin, has about it a cynical directness: "Unless removed by the government, they [the Utes] must necessarily be exterminated... The state would be willing to settle the Indian trouble at its own expense. The advantages that would accrue from the throwing open of 12,000,000 acres of land would more than compensate all the expenses incurred."

The Constant Cry

The book does not speak for all Indians, not for the Pawnee mercenaries, not for those who worked out a way of life with the whites. It speaks for those who wanted to keep their own ways free from interference. "Keep the whites away," was the constant cry. "And there will be peace." But the whites did not want peace. Indian behavior was, often enough, violent, extreme, irrational and quixotic. But in the long run nothing would have made any difference.

Black Elk's words read like an epitaph: "I did not know how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there... The nation's hope is broken and scattered. There is no center any more, and the sacred tree is dead."

The New York Times
Published: February 2, 1971
Copyright © The New York Times