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HEATHER COX RICHARDSON

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In 2008, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law an act making the day after Thanksgiving National Native American Heritage Day.

About a month ago, on Friday, October 25, President Joe Biden became the first president to visit Indian Country in ten years when he traveled to the Gila River Indian Community in Maricopa County, Arizona, near Phoenix. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland traveled with him. The trip was designed to highlight the investments the Biden-Harris administration has made in Tribal Nations.

At a press gaggle on Air Force One on the way to Arizona, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre noted that under Biden, Tribal Nations have seen the largest direct federal investment in history: \$32 billion from the American Rescue Plan and \$13 billion through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to build roads and bridges, bring clean water and sanitation, and build high-speed Internet in Tribal communities.

Jean-Pierre added that First Lady Jill Biden has also championed Native communities, visiting them ten times to highlight investments in youth mental health, the revitalization of Native languages, and to improve access to cancer screening and cancer care in Native communities.

Secretary Haaland, herself a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, agreed that the Biden-Harris administration has brought “transformational change” to Native communities: “electricity on the Hopi Reservation in Arizona for homes that have never had electricity; protecting cultural resources, like salmon, which Pacific Northwest Tribes have depended on for thousands of years; new transportation infrastructure for the Mescalero Apache

Nation in New Mexico that will provide a safer travel route and boost their economic development, their local economy; addressing toxic legacy pollution and abandoned oil and gas infrastructure that pollutes our air and water for the Osage Nation in Oklahoma; providing clean drinking water for Fort Peck in Montana.”

“Tribal leaders are experiencing a new era,” Haaland added. “They’re at the table. They’re being consulted.”

When Biden spoke at the Gila Crossing Community School, he said he was there “to right a wrong, to chart a new path toward a better future for us all.” As president of the United States, Biden formally apologized to the Native peoples—Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Native Alaskans—for the U.S. government policy that forced Native children into federal Indian boarding schools.

The apology comes after the release of an Interior Department study, The Federal Boarding School Initiative, that Secretary Haaland directed the department to undertake in 2021. According to Assistant Secretary of the Interior Bryan Newland, a citizen and former president of the Bay Mills Indian Community (Ojibwe), the initiative was “a comprehensive effort to recognize the troubled legacy of Federal Indian boarding school policies with the goal of addressing their intergenerational impact and to shed light on the traumas of the past.”

The initiative set out to identify federal Indian boarding schools and sites, to identify the children who attended those schools and to identify their Tribal identities, to find marked and unmarked burial sites of the remains of Indian children near school facilities, and to incorporate the viewpoints of those who attended federal Indian boarding schools and their descendants into the story of those schools.

The report looked at the Indian education system from 1819 to 1969 as a whole, bringing together federal funding for religious schools in the early 1800s with later explicitly federal schools and their public school successors during and after the 1930s. But historians generally focus on the period from 1879 to the 1930s as the boarding school era.

In 1879, the government opened the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a boarding school for American Indian children in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, explicitly designed to separate children from their families and their culture and to train them for menial jobs.

The boarding school era was the brainchild of Army officer Richard Henry Pratt, a Civil War veteran who, in the years after the war, commanded the 10th United States Cavalry, a Black regiment stationed in the American West whose members Indigenous Americans nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldiers.” Pratt fought in the campaigns on the Plains from 1868 through 1875, when he was assigned to oversee 72 Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, and Caddo prisoners of war at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida (now known as the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument).

Many Indigenous prisoners at Fort Marion, taken from the dry Plains to the hot and humid coast of Florida where they were imprisoned in a cramped stone fort, quickly sickened and died. Pratt worked to upgrade conditions and to assimilate prisoners into U.S. systems by teaching them English, U.S. culture, Christianity, and how the American economy worked. He cut their hair, dressed them in military-type uniforms, and urged them to make art for sale to local tourists—it’s from here we get the world-famous collection of ledger art by the artists of Fort Marion—but focused on turning the former warriors and their families into menial workers.

After the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 and the subsequent pursuit and surrender of leading Lakota bands throughout that year and the next, leading to the murder of Crazy Horse in 1877, popular opinion ran heavily toward simply corralling Indigenous Americans on reservations and waiting either for their assimilation or extermination. At the same time, with what seemed to be the end of the most serious of the Plains Wars, Army officers like Pratt had reason to worry that the downsizing of the U.S. Army would mean the end of their careers.

Indigenous survivors of Fort Marion returned home to see that the American government had no real plans for a thriving American Indian populace. There was little infrastructure to link them to the rest of the country to sell their art, and Indian agents rejected tribal members for jobs in favor of white cronies.

But Pratt considered his experiment at Fort Marion a great success, and he came to believe he could make his system work even more thoroughly by using a loophole in the treaties between Plains Tribes and the U.S. government to force Indigenous Americans to assimilate as children. He planned, he said, to “Kill the Indian and save the man.”

Treaties between Plains Indian Tribes and the government required the U.S. government to educate American Indian children—something their parents cared deeply about—but the treaties didn’t actually specify where the schools would be. So Pratt convinced the U.S. Army and officials at the Interior Department to give him the use of the Carlisle Barracks to open an industrial school, designed to teach American Indian children the skills necessary to be servants and menial workers.

In summer 1879, Pratt traveled to western reservations of the Lakotas and Dakotas, primarily, to gather up 82 children to begin his experiment in annihilating their culture from their minds. He forbade the practice of any aspect of Indigenous culture—language, religion, custom, clothing—and forced children to change their names, use English, practice Christianity, and wear clothing that mirrored that of Euro-American children.

Crowded together, many children died of disease; bereft of their family and culture, many died of heartache. Some found their newfound language and lessons tolerable, others ran away. For the next fifty years, the Carlisle model was the central model of government education for Indigenous children, with tens of thousands of children educated according to its methods.

In the 1920s the Institute for Government Research, later renamed the Brookings Institution, commissioned a study funded by the Rockefeller Institute—to make sure it would not reflect government bias—to investigate conditions among Indigenous Americans.

In 1928 that study, called the Meriam Report, condemned the conditions under which American Indians lived. It also emphasized the “deplorable health conditions” at the boarding schools, condemned the schools’ inappropriate focus on menial skills, and asserted that “[t]he most fundamental need in Indian education is a change in point of view.” In 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act reversed the policy of trying to eradicate Tribal

cultures through boarding children away from their families, and introduced the teaching of Indian history and culture in federal schools.

But the boarding schools remain a central part of the experience of American Indians since the establishment of the U.S. government in North America, and the Federal Boarding School Initiative recommended that “[t]he U.S. Government should issue a formal acknowledgment of its role in adopting a national policy of forced assimilation of Indian children, and carrying out this policy through the removal and confinement of Indian children from their families and Indian Tribes and the Native Hawaiian Community and placement in the Federal Indian boarding school system.”

It continued: "The United States should accompany this acknowledgment with a formal apology to the individuals, families, and Indian Tribes that were harmed by U.S. policy."

On October 25, 2024, President Joe Biden delivered that apology.

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Notes:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2024/10/24/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-secretary-of-the-interior-deb-haaland-en-route-phoenix-az/>

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