

4d – Reclaiming Lost Lands

In 1890, a Sioux elder described the history of U.S. government dealings with the Indians this way: "They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land and they took it. "

Indeed, since the arrival of European colonists, Native peoples' land base has shrunk from 2 billion acres to 56 million acres - barely 2 percent of the United States. In recent decades, however, Native Americans have waged successful battles in the courts to reclaim some of their lost lands.

For thousands of years, Blue Lake, in present-day New Mexico, has been the Taos Pueblo's holiest shrine. In 1906, the U.S. government adjoined the lake, without the Taos peoples' consent, to the Carson National Forest. For the next 65 years, the Taos Pueblo tirelessly lobbied Congress and appealed to the American public for the return of this sacred site. Finally, in 1972, the U.S. government restored Blue Lake and 48,000 acres of land surrounding it to the Taos people.

In 1971, Alaska's Native peoples won the largest land settlement in American history, attaining federal recognition of their title to 44 million acres of the state. In addition, they were awarded \$962.5 million as compensation for other lands that they lost when Alaska was made a state in 1959.

In 1980, the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes were able to prove that they held legal title to nearly two-thirds of the state of Maine. The tribes accepted a multi-million dollar settlement and the return of 300,000 acres of land.

In the longest unresolved Indian land claim in the country, the Lakota - also known as the Western Sioux, a name now considered derogatory - have demanded the return of their sacred Black Hills in South Dakota. Under treaties made in 1851 and 1868, the Lakota were guaranteed title to the Black Hills, but the government opened the land to White settlement when gold was discovered in the area. This led to military conflicts with the United States, including the famous 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Ultimately, the U.S. government ceded the lands, and the Lakota have fought for more than a century to get them back. In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the Lakota claim to the Black Hills and awarded the tribes \$105 million as compensation for the land they lost. But the Lakota - who live in the poorest county in the U.S. - rejected the cash settlement. Today they continue to fight for the return of the Black Hills, which they consider central to their cultural and spiritual identity.

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