Introduction

On attending a Native American ceremony, particularly the Powwow, one will find the American flag and the tribal flag fluttering next to each other, either at the entrance or near the main stand. A Powwow is preceded by the grand entry of the participants, of which the leading line is formed by war veterans who carry the stars and stripes, and in some cases even wear American military uniforms. Those who enter first are the ones who are usually most honored in the tribe. In fact, they have received status and prestige additional to their tribal standing, and are honored as “warriors.”

Those who are aware of the ill-fated history of Indian-U.S. relations find the scene incongruous, particularly when they consider the long-standing animosity Native Americans feel toward the United States government, which colonized Indian land and forced assimilation on the people. The rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 60’s, and subsequent resistance against the U.S. government—of which the Wounded Knee seizure drew national attention—together with current demands for tribal sovereignty make this phenomenon even more puzzling. How has the
Native American warrior tradition come to coexist with praise for American war veterans?

In this paper I examine Native American participation in American wars throughout the 20th century and its relevance to their gaining citizenship status. Through this examination, the concerted efforts of both the U.S. government and Native American tribes in American wars will be contrasted with their differing intentions. Since assimilation of Indians into white society had been the stated goal of federal Indian policy since the 1880’s, the government viewed the wars as an unexpected but welcome opportunity to advance the cause of Indian assimilation. However, the large number of Native American volunteers in World War I, which eventually resulted in their gaining citizenship status, and the high rate of Native American enlistment in World War II, cannot simply be accounted for by their patriotism for the nation. Rather, I wish to focus on the incorporation of the Native American warrior tradition into participation in American wars as a self-reliant and strategic accommodation to the social engineering intentions of assimilation, which partly succeeded in reinforcing Native cultural identity. To support this view, I will also discuss the revitalization during the war era of both the warrior society and traditional Native ceremonies in one particular tribe.

Native American Participation in World War I

After the U.S. government declared war against Germany in April, 1917, finally entering World War I, Congress quickly passed the Selective Service Act in May and the first call to register for the draft followed immediately. The federal government required that all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one report to their local boards. Native Americans also had to enroll, but only those possessing citizenship were liable for the draft.
In 1917, over one-third of all Indians were not citizens and citizenship status itself was an issue of a great ambiguity. Provost Marshal General Enoch Herbert Crowder had a flexible attitude toward Indian registration. Instead of requesting Indians to present themselves before the regular draft board as whites did, he ordered Cato Sells (Commissioner of Indian Affairs, BIA) to establish registration boards on several Indian reservations. This helped Indian registrants in remote reservations, who had trouble speaking English without the service of native translators.

Yet, because citizenship status determined whether or not Indian registrants could be drafted, the determination of Indian citizenship was literally a matter of life or death. The BIA, avoiding the quagmire of determining Indian citizenship, turned the issue over to the draft boards. The draft board, without clear guidance, determined citizenship status on a case-by-case basis, which only resulted in inconsistent rulings and created more confusion. BIA Commissioner Sells in 1918, prior to the second enrollment on June 5th, finally dispatched general guidelines for determining Indian citizenship status as follows:

1. Indians whose trust or restrictive fee patents were dated prior to May 8, 1906 (The Burke Act amended the Dawes Act and provided 25 years of citizenship deferment), were considered citizens as provided in the Dawes Act of 1887.
2. Indians whose trust or restrictive fee patents were dated after May 8, 1906, and who had received patents in fee for their allotments were considered citizens by virtue of the competency clause in the Burke Act.
3. Every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States who had voluntarily lived apart from his people and had adopted the habits of “civilized life” was considered to be a citizen.
4. Minor children of parents who had become citizens upon allotment, and children born to Indian citizens were also considered American citizens.
Still, local boards attempted to include non-citizen Indians on the assumption that non-citizen Indians who exercised de facto citizenship rights should be treated as citizens to serve military duty. Furthermore, each county needed men to fill in the racial quota of white and black registrants. If Indians were classified as “white,” the actual number of whites inducted would decrease. Thus, the counties with predominantly black populations kept counting Indians with Whites. This clearly is a violation of racial identification.

As a closing remark on the issue, the Provost Marshal General’s Office, in April 1918, distributed formal guideline for non-citizen Indians to enter military service. In ultimate simplicity it reads “It seems reasonable to say that a non-citizen Indian should not be barred from enlistment simply because he is a non-citizen Indian.” This facilitated the non-citizen Indian who wished to enlist to do so by waiving his exemption to the reservation superintendent, who would forward the applicants to local boards.

The U.S. government saw induction of Native Americans into the military as a useful measure to promote assimilation and cultural modification. Indian boarding schools became “automatic recruiting stations.” Urged on by enthusiastic school administrations, Indian school students and alumni enlisted in large numbers. From Standing Rock Indian School at Fort Yates, North Dakota, 130 boys served, Chilocco Indian Agricultural School sent more than 100, and from Sherman Institute at Riverside, California, 70 students. Renowned Carlisle Indian Industrial School and Hampton Institute followed with 60 and 44 boys respectively.

War propaganda by reform organizations through their publications also became active. The National Indian Association and its The Indian’s Friend, founded in 1879 to aid in the civilization and evangelization of Indians, saying “our Indians responded to their country’s call so promptly,” highly praised Simon Webster, Oneida Tribe, who walked 50 miles to enlist in the Army in their Sept. 1918 issue. The Society of American Indians (SAI)
and its *The American Indian Magazine*, along with Red Progressives such as Arthur C. Parker and Dr. Charles Eastman, supported the war effort, for they viewed the war as a means to gain respect and appreciation for Native Americans.

Tribes opposed to the war and the draft on the grounds of legality and spirituality existed. Dr. Carlos Montezuma, a Yavapai physician reflects general sentiments of Indians that the U.S. had mistreated the Indians badly. In addition he insisted that American war aims for self-determination and democracy were never given to Indians. Eastern Cherokees questioned the legality of Indian liability to the draft. The former treaties with the federal government exempted the tribe from fighting. The more sophisticated Indian demanded that if the federal government declared they were citizens and thus subject to the draft, they should also be enfranchised. Goshute, taking this opportunity, reproached the corrupt administration of the reservation superintendent. BIA asked Wovoka, medicineman and prophet of the Ghost Dance to mediate the situation. Others opposed on spiritual grounds. Peace-loving Hopi of the Southwest and Creeks in Northern Oklahoma rejected registration saying they would have to consult with the Great Mystery or Higher Powers and they would wait for a message from above.

However, the figures indicate that a great many Native Americans actively cooperated with the American war effort. Prior to September 1918, 11,803 Native Americans registered for the draft. The government inducted 6,509 into the service, which was over 55% of the Indian registrants and an estimated 13% of the adult male population. After September, an additional 5,500 Indian men registered, bringing the total number of registrants to more than 17,000. “The ratio of Indian registrants inducted was twice as high as the average for all registrants, which demonstrated that the Native Americans supported the great cause” reported Provost Marshal General Crowder to the Secretary of War. However, the actual number of Indians
enlisted is a matter of considerable dispute. John Chambers suggested that 6,000 Indians enlisted in addition to 6,509 draftees bringing the total number of Indian soldiers to around 12,500. This number is also close to the BIA estimate that over 10,000 Indian soldiers participated in the war. More than 20% of the adult male Indian population with a 50% enlistment ratio served in World War I. This extremely high figure again supports positive war participation on the side of Native Americans.

**Aftermath of the War and Citizenship**

Having fought on a foreign continent, Indian soldiers were discharged with a uniform, coat, a pair of shoes and a bonus of sixty dollars. Although they had helped “make the world safe for democracy” and came home with a sense of pride and expectations for a brighter future, government indifference and second-class treatment had never changed. The government did send words of gratitude with decorated phrases; former Army Chief of Staff Hough L. Scott admitted that Indian soldiers “played a higher part in the war on the side of patriotism than the ordinary white soldiers.” The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Cato Sells, said that “a voluminous narration of scenes, episodes, eloquent appeal, stirring action, and glorious sacrifice should be written into a deathless epic by some poet born out of the heroic travail of a world-embattled era.” Crow chief Plenty Coups, known to be government friendly, was invited to the second anniversary of the armistice, and given the honor of placing the wreath upon the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The federal government awarded Indian tribes with American flags and certificates of appreciation which the president personally signed expressing the nation’s thanks for the Native American’s “willing sacrifice and the bravery.”

Beyond, ritualistic gratitude and symbolic gesture however, virtually no
substantial support was given to the Native American veterans. Returning home, they still had to face poor economic conditions, discrimination and insatiable demand for Indian land. The post war nationwide agricultural recession and poor weather conditions hit Indian farmers and ranchers severely. Conditions were so desperate in some reservations that in the Blackfoot reservation in Montana, people resorted to eating even skunks. Many Blackfoot veterans, according to Joseph Dixon, were “dying by the roadside from sheer hunger.” A Sioux veteran, Nahiv-Ata, a highly decorated sniper during the war was stranded penniless in Columbus, Ohio. Joseph Oklahombi, a Choctaw, who is one of the most decorated war heroes was unable to find work and, destitute, had to live on only 12 dollar a month veteran’s pension.10

In June 1921, New York State officials ruled that Indian veterans residing on reservations and who were not citizens of New York State were not entitled to receive state bonuses for war veterans. Although the case was reversed at the end with a strong resistance of the Six Nations and support from the press, this incident make it clear that a strong case of discrimination against Native Americans persisted after the war.

Demand for Indian land also persisted. The Interior Department proposed to provide farms for American veterans at bargain prices, with stock and implements if they were willing to improve unused land. This unused land by their definitions often belonged to Indians who “have more land than they need.” Moreover, Indians allotted land by the Dawes Act11 were not qualified under this plan because they already had land.

In spite of the apathy and unfair treatment of Native American veterans, the U.S. government with the aim of proving the achievement of its long-held goal of assimilation, was eager to publicize how military service had civilized Indian people. Indian veterans were reported to have returned home “well disciplined and speaking English with improved manner and greater motivation.” The popular media, following the
government lead, emphasized how Indian veterans had been transformed and were ready and willing to take up a more responsible role in society. The government was also mindful of the confusion and difficulty they went through in the process of drafting Native Americans due to their ambiguous citizenship status. An estimated 125,000 Native Americans in the postwar era still did not possess American citizenship.

It is in part due to these circumstances, that the federal government moved to bestow citizenship upon Native Americans. However, the immediate cause of the postwar crusade to grant citizenship was their participation in World War I. Indian reform organizations, such as the Society of American Indians advocated strongly the Native Americans’ sacrifices during the war made them worthy of an improved legal status, i.e., citizenship. They stated “a grateful government and people will not withhold from the Native American race full rights as free men under the constitution.” The American Legion, as a homage to their Indian comrades, adopted a resolution that American Indians who honorably served in the late war be granted citizenship and pressured the federal government.

The road to Native American citizenship was being paved. In June, 1919 Homer Snyder, House Representative of New York State, introduced the Indian Citizenship Bill. The Snyder Bill passed the Senate and with President Wilson’s signature, became law in November. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1919, however, restricted citizenship to veterans and required them to go through a tedious, bureaucratic process to gain certificates of citizenship and naturally not many veterans were so eager to go through this hassle. A new law with a simple, expedient mechanism was needed, and in June 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act was passed. The Act extended blanket citizenship to the remaining non-citizen Indians living in the United States. The Native American service, their bravery and contribution were no doubt the initial and perhaps most important catalyst
It is a Good Day to Die for Indian citizenship.

**World War II and War Heroes**

In World War II, all the Native Americans were liable for the draft due to their citizenship status. 25,000 Native Americans served in the American armed forces and 40,000, including women were employed in defense industries. John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, exploited the immense participation of Native Americans in military and defense work. In fact, the war years opened new avenues of opportunities for Native Americans educated and trained under many of the Indian New Deal programs. The enthusiasm exhibited by Native Americans in World War II gained far more public attention than any propaganda campaign. Media was eager to publicize Indian bravery and their “natural talent” for battle. In Collier’s participation in a massive drive to recruit Indians for Selective Service registration, he would be able to boast of a 99% Indian registration rate for World War II. In fact as Takaki notes “8,800 of the 60,000 Indian males between the age of twenty-one and forty-four were in military uniform, much higher rate than for the general population.”

World War II produced Indian national war heroes. John Rice (Winnebago) a highly decorated fighter pilot is among them and Ernest Childers (Creek) who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his action in disabling two enemy fortifications is another. But the most publicized was perhaps Ira Hamilton Hayes, whose figure is eternalized in the United States Marine Corps War Memorial in Washington, D.C. A Pima, Marine private, helped raise the United States flag on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima in 1945. After Iwo Jima, President Roosevelt assigned him to participate in the efforts to sell war bonds. The image of the flag raising became a national symbol, making Hayes a national war hero. Returning to the Pima Reservation, however, the war hero became restless and
started drifting. During thirteen years before he died of exposure in the Arizona desert on January 24th, 1955, he was arrested fifty times due to alcohol related offenses. A journalist Herald Fey wrote “He drank his way to oblivion and death . . . Alcoholism is a major affliction to a frustrated and discouraged people.” The tragic case might indicate the difficulty the Native heroes face in dealing with the American war and public expectations and being torn between two warrior traditions.

The collective heroes, not individual, were Navajo Code Talkers. Navajo has the largest reservation in the southwest, the population being the second largest after Cherokee among the native nations. Their complex language was used as a code and it is supposed to have been one of the few unbreakable codes in the history of warfare. It played a vital role in America’s victory in the Pacific during the World War II. “Were it not for the Navajo, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima,” said Major Howard M. Conner, communication officer of the Fifth Marine Division. About four hundred Navajo Code Talkers served in the war and they immortalized themselves. Still at present The Navajo Code Talkers Association with its over two hundred members takes pride as an association of war heros.

**Warrior Tradition in the Native Community**

As to what drove these young men to the battlefield and as to what caused the high enlistment rate of Native Americans, many list financial motives; military pay greatly aided the poor economic condition of the native families. Others point particularly in World War II to hostility to the Third Reich; Native Americans saw the Nazi concept of racial superiority as a threat to their own minority status, as seen in the statement of The Six Nations that reads “It is the unanimous sentiment among the Indian people that the atrocities of the Axis nations are violently repulsive to all sense of
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Motives are not single and they are composite of several among many. Yet what I want to focus here is the cultural tradition of the warrior that gave undeniable impetus to Indian soldiers. Most tribes viewed military service and training as honorable endeavors and being a soldier was almost synonymous with being a “warrior” in their interpretation of the term. In other words, they redefined their warrior tradition to accommodate participation in the American war. Native Americans in fact fought ‘the white man’s war’ but they went to war on their own terms. Many tribes prepared and delivered the warpath ceremonies for departing soldiers. Zuni Medicinemen gave “Eutakya,” a brief blessing ceremony for the protection of the warriors. The Navajo performed the “Blessing Ceremony” for their inductees. The Chippewa held “Going Away” and “Chief” dances to protect them overseas. Such ceremonies fulfilled both religious and social functions in addition to granting communal recognition of the traditional status of the warrior, which assured young men a great psychological satisfaction as well as reinforcing their tribal identity.

During the Vietnam War, which is the more recent war experience for Native American, 41,500 men served. As the research on the reasons for entering the service shows, the highest percentage (51.2%) of men listed ‘family tradition’ as the very important factor followed by ‘duty’ (44.1%) and ‘tribal tradition’ (43.5%). Many Indian boys, still in contemporary time grew up hearing stories of courage and self-sacrifice in battle and they had seen as children the rituals used to honor their relatives who had returned from World War II and Korean War. They wished to follow the ways of their grandfathers and fathers, and like the old-time warriors, wished to gain respect from their own people for having done what young men have always done in time of conflict.

The nature of traditional warfare among the Native American seems to have given noble characteristics to the warriors. Traditional Native
American warfare cannot be defined in the western sense of the term. While Westerner’s warfare is described as predatory with the purpose of a total destruction of enemies, Native American warfare was primarily cultural and social. They developed their own unique forms of combat and often elevated it into a kind of ritualistic, spiritual contest. The majority of tribes usually limited violence to intertribal conflict and raiding. The causes for intertribal hostilities were assumed to be territorial and economic, however, the large number of tribes and the remarkably small number of known tribal conquests seem to give evidence that warfare just for the sake of territorial or economic gain was hardly commonplace. Tribes usually had well-defined and sacred territorial boundaries, and the idea of colonizing a strange territory was even deemed to disrupt the natural order and balance of the world.

Rather, intertribal wars were motivated often by vengeance toward traditional enemies. The “mourning war” was religious and highly ritualized, for it was intended not only to ease the grief of the relatives of the dead tribesman, but to regain the portion of the tribe’s collective spiritual power diminished with the individual death. Furthermore, having traditional foes and being involved in a constant state of war helped them to maintain tribal identity and ritual.

Warriors were ritually prepared for war and offered protective medicine to assure their safe return to the community. Many tribes devised purification ceremonies upon departure. On the warpath, they were protected by symbolic accoutrements; a shield, a coup stick, a medicine pouch, and face paint, connected to their spiritual power, thus offering strength in battles. At the actual battle, killing the enemy was not the ultimate purpose, for the battle was fought for honor. The most heroic act on the battle scene was to ‘touch’ the enemy with his coup stick, for it required the most courage for a man to come so close to his enemy. When he successfully touched the enemy, he ‘counted the coup.’
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a line every time he touched an enemy, and more lines he had, the more valiant he was proven to be. Often, the keepers of the social philosophy and order are warriors who had counted many coups. On returning, they were welcomed by an honoring ceremony and a victory dance. War ceremonies were part of the matrix of tribal customs, sacred rites and beliefs that support holistic power and solidarity.

Warfare was conducted by warrior societies, which are prevalent among Native American tribes. Warrior societies were extremely important religious and political institutions. They not only served as militias and the keepers of the tribe's spiritual power in warfare but they kept order during hunts, in encampments, or on the move. They also punished the criminals, guarded the camps against surprise attack, and when attacked, bought time with their lives for the women, children and elders to escape. They were much revered for fulfilling their sacred duties. Among these, Lakota-Sioux warrior societies were renowned for their bravery and efficiency.

The warrior society is called Akichita in Lakota and among many, six distinctive Akichita are recognized. They are Kit Fox, Lance Owner, Badger, Brave Heart, Crow Owner and White Badger. Although they are fraternal in nature, one can never seek admission to the society but must always be invited. In order to be qualified, a young man must usually have been on at least one war party and desirably have touched or killed an enemy, or gone on a “vision quest” to seek an inner self. More importantly, through communal life, he must have demonstrated the potential of living up to the four virtues of the Lakota-Sioux society, namely generosity, courage, respect, and wisdom. Those who committed murder or adultery, or amassed wealth without giving anything away were never eligible for membership.

Each Akichita had well-organized rituals and military capacity. Taking Kit Fox for example, they were composed of Pipe Bearers, Drum Bearers, Keepers of the Rattles, Whip Bearers and Lance Owners in
addition to general warriors. To be a member of the Kit Fox was a great honor to an individual and his family and to be appointed to one of the above-mentioned capacities brought even greater honor. If appointed to a position of Lance Owner, he would fight by his lance staked in the ground, never retreating until his fellow member removed it, thus proving his great courage.

Indeed, warfare offered young men the opportunity to demonstrate his bravery and his sacred duties and to receive acknowledgment that he was the embodiment of tribal virtue. The warrior was highly applauded and rewarded both for his courage and for defending the traditional value system of the community. In fact, many tribes bestowed special honors on warriors, and often looked to these individuals for leadership even in civil affairs. Warfare seen in this light was a way for men to gain honored status in the tribal society and maintain their spiritual power.

The Revival of the Rituals

After the subjugation and the onset of reservation life, along with the strongly enforced assimilation policy, warrior societies were becoming devoid of members in many tribes because there were no wars and the related ceremonies were dying out. Ironically however, World War I and World War II helped revived these ceremonies and warrior traditions. Both wars gave many Indians the opportunity of becoming not just American soldiers but warriors in the tribal sense of the term. World War II, because it lasted longer and more men were involved, gave more Native Americans the chance to gain prestige among Whites and most importantly to obtain status within tribal societies. Many veterans, upon returning home, served as tribal councilmen not only contributing to civil service but also reviving tribal traditions. Kiowa veterans for example revived the Tia-piah-Ground Dance Society, and Sioux veterans prompted the revival of the Kit Fox
warrior society, where they sought to redefine warrior spiritualism. Both attempts among many served to retain and carry forward the traditional social order and continuity.

My research on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Sioux Reservations in South Dakota also found resurgence of ceremonialism during wartime. Their traditional rituals, such as Hunka, Sweat Lodge, Allownpi, and Yuipi\(^2\) were either revived or much activated. Strongly enforced assimilation policies deemed traditional rituals barbarous and outlawed them. However, tribal members, considering traditional rituals as powerful instruments to seek protection, gathered frequently to join the prayer for the safe return of their husband, son, brother, and father or any tribesmen in service. One of my informants, supposedly a devout Episcopalian then, confessed that she would attend the Sunday service at the church in the morning, and at night, rush to Yuipi and pray for her beloved husband’s safe return. Upon returning, the once diminished Victory Dance welcomed veterans and an honoring ceremony was conducted where they received their own song and a new name as a warrior.

The warrior tradition remains strong among many tribes and a recent byproduct is forming of a trans-tribal network. One notable event in 1981 is the foundation of the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Inter-tribal Association. They organized the first National Vietnam Veterans’ Powwow in December 1982 in Oklahoma. Warriors seem to have acquired a new type of solidarity beyond the tribes to which they belong.

Native Americans, by redefining their older warrior tradition, incorporated American wars into a new tradition of warrior that helped to revive and foster tribal solidarity that possibly extend to trans-trival networks and their traditional cultural identity.
Notes

1. Originally the traditional ritual dancing and singing to heal the illness, but in modern days it has been rendered to an intertribal dancing contest festival which attracts large audiences in the summer.


4. Ibid. p. 58.


7. Britten, p. 54.


10. Ibid. pp. 165-167.

11. Also known as the General Allotment Act of 1887, dividing tribally owned reservation land to individual ownership. The Act’s intention to safeguard the Indian land ended up in reduction of two thirds of Indian land through the Indian’s poverty and the land grabber’s desire.


Also see Townsend, Kenneth, *World War II and the American Indian*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000, chapter two for the discussion of Nazi-Indian relations.

18. See Franco, chapter two.


22. Plain's Indian initiation ritual, in which a boy spends four days and nights alone in a remote place without eating and drinking, seeking for a vision.

23. Sacred rituals which were given to the Lakota people by the legendary White Buffalo Calf Woman.
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