

Three Interesting Things from “Birth of A Nation”

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Introduction

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s chapter “The Birth of a Nation” in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* asks readers to reconsider how the United States came into being and whose experiences are centered in conventional national history. The chapter does not treat the Revolution and the formation of the republic as an entirely new beginning detached from colonization. Instead, it places independence within a longer struggle over Indigenous land, settler expansion, warfare, slavery, and competing political authority. Three especially important ideas emerge from this perspective: Indigenous peoples acted as political and military nations rather than passive victims; the new republic inherited and intensified a settler-colonial drive for land; and national myths can transform violence into a story of inevitable progress. (Dunbar-Ortiz)

These ideas are “interesting” not because they are unusual facts to memorize, but because they change the structure of the historical narrative. A familiar account begins with European settlement, moves through conflict with Britain, and presents the Constitution as the creation of a self-governing nation. Dunbar-Ortiz asks what that sequence looks like when Indigenous sovereignty is treated as historically real. From that viewpoint, British colonists were not entering empty land, the Revolution did not liberate everyone, and westward expansion was not simply demographic growth. The chapter therefore encourages readers to distinguish national identity from national innocence.

Indigenous Nations as Active Historical Powers

The first major insight is that Indigenous peoples were not merely background figures who disappeared as the United States developed. Native nations formed alliances, maintained diplomatic relationships, defended territories, traded, negotiated, adapted military strategies, and made decisions according to their own interests. Different nations did not respond to British, French, Spanish, and American power in the same way. Some attempted neutrality, some entered alliances, and others resisted through war or diplomacy. Treating Indigenous communities as a single group erases this political diversity and reproduces the colonial habit of viewing Native people only through their relationship to settlers.

During the revolutionary era, many Native nations recognized that colonial independence could increase the danger to their lands. The British government had at times attempted to limit settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains, while colonial land companies and settlers often sought

expansion. This did not make British imperial rule benevolent, but it explains why the conflict could look different from Indigenous territory. The Revolution was a war against British authority for colonists, yet for many Native communities it was also part of a longer defense against settler encroachment. The concept of resistance therefore extends beyond battlefield victory. Cultural continuity, rebuilding communities, maintaining language and governance, and asserting treaty rights are also forms of political survival.

Independence and the Expansion of Settler Power

The second important idea is that the formation of the United States did not end colonialism for Indigenous peoples. It transferred and reorganized power. The new nation claimed sovereignty over an enormous territory even though much of that land remained under the authority of Native nations. Settlers, speculators, states, and federal officials pursued access to land through war, treaties made under pressure, settlement, surveying, and legal doctrine. The language of liberty coexisted with systems of slavery and dispossession. This contradiction is not an incidental failure at the margins of the founding; it is central to understanding who could benefit from independence. (Smithsonian Libraries and Archives)

The Constitution created a stronger federal structure, but constitutional order did not automatically produce equal relations among peoples. Native nations were treated through a complicated mixture of recognition, dependency, negotiation, and coercion. Treaties acknowledged tribes as political entities, yet the United States repeatedly violated agreements when land and resources were desired. The chapter's title is therefore deliberately challenging. A nation was born, but its birth involved more than political theory and heroic leadership. It involved military capacity, territorial claims, and the conversion of Indigenous homelands into property available for settlement.

National Myth and the Language of Inevitability

The third insight concerns myth. National myths do not have to be completely fictional to mislead. They often select real events and arrange them into a moral story in which expansion appears natural, resistance appears backward, and the victorious state appears destined to exist. Terms such as frontier, wilderness, discovery, and settlement can hide prior ownership and political organization. If land is described as empty or unused, taking it seems like development rather than dispossession. If Indigenous resistance is described only as savagery, military campaigns appear defensive even when they facilitate expansion.

Dunbar-Ortiz's approach challenges the "essential" American imagined as white, independent, armed, and entitled to move across land. This figure appears in popular culture, textbooks, political speeches, and family stories. The problem is not that all settlers had identical motives or lives. Many were poor, displaced, or seeking survival. The problem is that personal hardship did not cancel the political

consequences of settlement on Indigenous territory. A critical history can recognize differences among settlers while still examining the system that rewarded expansion.

Myth also affects the present. When conquest is confined to a distant past, contemporary treaty disputes, land claims, sacred-site protection, jurisdiction, and tribal sovereignty may appear as special requests rather than ongoing legal and political issues. Historical memory shapes which claims seem normal. If the public learns that the nation simply inherited its territory, Indigenous sovereignty appears disruptive. If the public learns that territory was contested and governed, current Native claims become part of an unfinished history. (National Congress of American Indians)

Reading the Constitution Through a Wider Historical Lens

The chapter also encourages a more complex reading of the Constitution. The document established a durable framework of federal government, separation of powers, representation, and amendment, yet its original political community was limited. Enslaved people were denied freedom, women lacked formal political equality, and Indigenous nations occupied an ambiguous position outside and within the expanding state. Studying these exclusions does not require dismissing every constitutional principle. It requires asking how principles were distributed and how later movements forced the country to interpret them more broadly.

A student's educational journey becomes more meaningful when constitutional study includes both institutional design and historical experience. Learning the branches of government is important, but so is understanding how federal power was used in treaty making, removal, war, land policy, and later recognition of tribal self-government. Civic education should help students see the Constitution as a living site of conflict over power and rights, not as a sacred object beyond criticism. Respect for constitutional democracy is strengthened when people understand that reform has often come from those whom the original system excluded.

The chapter also changes how technology is understood. Surveying instruments, maps, roads, firearms, forts, and written property records were not neutral signs of progress when they were used to reorganize Indigenous space for settler purposes. Technology expanded the state's ability to measure, claim, occupy, and police territory. This does not mean every tool was inherently colonial; it means tools acquire political meaning through the institutions that use them. A map can record a treaty boundary, erase a Native place name, or support a land claim. Historical analysis must therefore connect invention with power rather than assuming that technical development benefits all groups equally. (Smithsonian Libraries and Archives)

Another important lesson is that Indigenous histories are not only histories of loss. Native nations survived revolutionary war, removal campaigns, allotment, boarding schools, and repeated attempts to dissolve political identity. They continued adapting legal, diplomatic, cultural, and educational

strategies. The presence of federally recognized and state-recognized nations, as well as communities still seeking recognition, demonstrates continuity rather than disappearance. Treating survival as active history prevents the chapter from becoming a narrative in which Indigenous people matter only as victims of the nation's birth.

Finally, the chapter demonstrates why terminology matters. "Indigenous," "tribal," "Native," and the specific names of nations are not interchangeable labels without context. Whenever possible, history should identify the nation involved because political status, language, geography, and experience differ. Specific naming resists the tendency to turn hundreds of nations into one timeless cultural category. It also makes treaties and conflicts legible as relations among governments rather than encounters between civilization and an undefined population.

Conclusion

Three ideas make "The Birth of a Nation" especially valuable: Indigenous nations acted with agency and political purpose; American independence expanded settler power rather than ending colonialism for Native peoples; and national myth can disguise conquest as inevitable progress. Together, these ideas shift the reader's perspective from a story in which Indigenous people stand outside United States history to one in which their lands, diplomacy, resistance, and survival are fundamental to it.

The chapter does not ask readers to replace one simple myth with another. It asks them to examine power, evidence, language, and perspective. The United States can be studied as a constitutional republic and as a settler state, as a site of democratic ideals and of exclusion. Holding these truths together produces a more honest national history. It also makes current questions about sovereignty, treaties, land, and public memory easier to understand. (National Congress of American Indians)

References

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2014.

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