



Native Americans in America's Wars

Native Americans have played indispensable roles in the military history of North America and the United States. They served as warriors, scouts, guides, diplomats, interpreters, intelligence agents, soldiers, nurses, industrial workers, and code talkers. At other times, they fought against the United States to protect their homelands from invasion and settlement.

Native peoples never constituted a single political bloc. They belonged to hundreds of sovereign nations with different languages, governments, alliances, and interests. Nations sometimes chose opposing sides in the same conflict, and political divisions occasionally placed members of related communities on opposite sides of the battlefield.

This history presents a profound American paradox: Native people repeatedly defended a country that had taken—and continued to take—their lands.

The French and Indian War

The French and Indian War, fought from 1754 to 1763, was the North American theater of the larger Seven Years' War. Britain and France competed for control of territory that was already occupied and governed by Native nations.

Indigenous alliances were indispensable to both empires. Native warriors served as scouts, guides, raiders, diplomats, and battlefield allies. Their knowledge of forests, waterways, trails, and seasonal conditions gave them military value far beyond their numbers.

Many nations in the Great Lakes and Ohio Country—including the Odawa, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Shawnee, and Lenape—generally favored France. French settlements were less numerous, and French trading relationships appeared to present less of an immediate threat to Native land than British agricultural settlement.

The British relied heavily upon their relationship with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, particularly the Mohawk. Nevertheless, Haudenosaunee communities often attempted to preserve neutrality and maintain a balance between the European powers. Native leaders understood that helping either empire become dominant might eventually endanger their own independence.

Indigenous forces influenced reconnaissance, supply lines, frontier raids, diplomacy, and major engagements. Yet when Britain defeated France, Native nations were excluded from the peace settlement. Britain acted as though France had transferred ownership of western lands that France had never truly possessed.

This presumption helped provoke the intertribal resistance of 1763 associated with the Odawa leader Pontiac. Native forces attacked British forts in an attempt to prevent the military occupation of their country. The conflict helped persuade Britain to issue the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which formally restricted colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. Colonists frequently ignored the boundary.

The American Revolution

Most Native nations initially attempted to remain neutral during the American Revolution. They correctly anticipated that a conflict between Britain and its colonies could become a destructive war fought in Indigenous homelands.

When neutrality became impossible, many Native communities sided with Britain. British officials appeared more willing than the American revolutionaries to restrict westward settlement, although Britain's commitment to Native sovereignty was inconsistent and largely self-interested.

The Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and many Onondaga generally supported Britain, as did numerous Cherokee, Shawnee, and Great Lakes warriors. Mohawk leader Joseph Brant became one of the best-known British-allied Native commanders and diplomats.

Other Native communities supported the American cause. The Oneida, Tuscarora, and Stockbridge-Munsee provided warriors, scouts, spies, guides, messengers, and supplies. Oneida representatives carried corn to George Washington's hungry army at Valley Forge and taught soldiers how to prepare it. Oneida warriors fought at Oriskany and supported other American operations.

The Revolution divided the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and sometimes placed members of allied nations on opposite sides of the battlefield. In 1779, Washington ordered the Sullivan-Clinton campaign against British-allied Haudenosaunee communities. American troops destroyed more than forty towns, together with crops, orchards, livestock, and winter food supplies.

The Treaty of Paris ending the war made no provision for Native allies or Native sovereignty. Britain transferred its territorial claims south of Canada to the United States without the consent of the Indigenous peoples who lived there. The new republic subsequently treated Native nations as defeated enemies—even those that had supported American independence.

The Early United States and Settler Encroachment

From the Native perspective, the era following independence was not truly “post-colonial.” The United States may have overthrown British rule, but settler colonial expansion into Indigenous lands accelerated.

Native nations responded through confederation, warfare, diplomacy, legal action, selective accommodation, and cultural survival.

Intertribal Confederacies

Leaders such as Little Turtle, Blue Jacket, and Buckongahelas helped organize the Northwestern Confederacy to resist American settlement north of the Ohio River. Its warriors inflicted a catastrophic defeat upon the U.S. Army under Arthur St. Clair in 1791.

A generation later, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa attempted to unite Native nations from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Tecumseh argued that Indigenous land was held collectively and that no single leader or nation could sell it without the consent of all.

During the War of 1812, Tecumseh allied with Britain in the hope that victory would create an independent Indigenous territory. His death at the Battle of the Thames in 1813 weakened the last major effort to construct such a continental confederacy.

Armed Defense of Native Homelands

As American settlement moved westward, Native nations defended their territories in a succession of conflicts.

The Sauk leader Black Hawk challenged the disputed surrender of his people’s lands east of the Mississippi. Osceola and other Seminole leaders resisted removal from Florida. Red Cloud fought the construction of forts along the Bozeman Trail, while Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull opposed the invasion of the Black Hills and northern Plains.

In the Southwest, Cochise, Victorio, and Geronimo defended Apache country against Mexican and American forces. The Diné resisted campaigns that culminated in the Long Walk and their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo. In 1877, several bands of the Nez Perce attempted to escape forced confinement, traveling more than a thousand miles before Chief Joseph and other leaders were compelled to surrender near the Canadian border.

These conflicts were often described in American accounts as outbreaks of “Indian hostility.” In most cases, however, they arose from disputed treaties, invasion by settlers, destruction of food sources, military occupation, or forced removal.

Diplomacy and Legal Resistance

Other leaders employed negotiation, petitions, literacy, courts, and constitutional government. Cherokee principal chief John Ross resisted removal through American political and legal institutions. Chief Joseph spent decades appealing for the return of his people to Oregon's Wallowa Valley.

Diplomacy did not necessarily represent surrender. It was often another means of defending land, preserving political identity, and preventing further deaths.

Scouts and Intermediaries

Native men also served as scouts for the U.S. Army. They tracked opposing forces, carried messages, interpreted languages, and guided troops through unfamiliar terrain. Pawnee, Crow, Shoshone, Apache, and other scouts sometimes worked with the Army against traditional enemies.

Their service reflected complicated rivalries, personal circumstances, and strategies for survival. It should not automatically be interpreted as approval of American expansion.

Native Americans in the Civil War

The Civil War again divided Native nations. Allegiances were shaped by geography, treaty relationships, internal political divisions, economic interests, slavery, and promises that one side or the other would protect tribal territory.

Approximately 3,503 Native Americans served in the Union Army. The number serving the Confederacy is less certain but was probably larger. Thousands more aided one side or the other without formally enlisting.

Civil War in Indian Territory

The Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, and Seminole nations had been forcibly removed to Indian Territory before the war. Confederate representatives promised to recognize their governments and protect their lands. Leaders of these nations signed Confederate treaties, although significant groups opposed the alliance.

Slavery also influenced the decision. Some wealthy citizens of the Five Tribes enslaved African Americans and therefore possessed economic and political ties to the South.

The result was a civil war within Indian Territory itself. Native soldiers fought Native soldiers, communities divided, refugees fled their homes, and farms and livestock were destroyed.

Cherokee leader **Stand Watie** became a Confederate brigadier general and commanded an intertribal cavalry force. He was the only Native American to attain that rank in the Confederate Army and was among the last Confederate generals to surrender.

Other Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, and Native soldiers served in Union Indian Home Guard regiments. The Battle of Honey Springs in 1863 was one of the most important engagements in Indian Territory and included Native troops on both sides.

Native Service Elsewhere

Native soldiers from the East and Midwest also joined Union units. Company K of the First Michigan Sharpshooters included many Anishinaabe soldiers.

Seneca officer **Ely S. Parker** served on Ulysses S. Grant's staff, attained the rank of lieutenant colonel, and prepared the formal Confederate surrender documents at Appomattox.

The Civil War did not stop western dispossession. While federal armies fought the Confederacy, federal and territorial forces continued campaigns against Native nations. The Dakota War of 1862, the Long Walk of the Navajo, and the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 all occurred during the Civil War years.

After the war, the United States compelled several nations in Indian Territory to sign new treaties. These required additional land cessions and the emancipation and incorporation of formerly enslaved people, or Freedmen, into tribal political communities—an issue whose consequences continue.

World War I

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, approximately one-third of Native Americans were not recognized as U.S. citizens. Nevertheless, more than **12,000 Native men served**, representing approximately one-fourth of the adult Native male population.

Native soldiers participated in every major American campaign in France. Their casualty rate was unusually high: approximately 5 percent were killed, compared with about 1 percent of American forces overall.

Native women volunteered as Army nurses, while thousands of Native civilians worked in wartime industries, raised funds, donated supplies, and supported the Red Cross.

The war also introduced military code talking. Choctaw soldiers used their language to transmit battlefield messages that German forces could not understand. Ho-Chunk, Cherokee, Comanche, Cheyenne, Osage, and other Native language speakers performed similar duties.

Native people enlisted for many reasons:

- To protect their communities and ancestral homelands
- To continue family or tribal traditions of service
- To demonstrate patriotism

- To seek wages, training, travel, or opportunity
- To strengthen their claims to citizenship and equal treatment
- To compel the United States to honor its treaty obligations

In 1919, Congress granted citizenship to Native veterans of the war. The Indian Citizenship Act extended U.S. citizenship to all Native Americans born in the United States in 1924. Citizenship, however, did not guarantee voting rights in every state or end federal violations of tribal sovereignty.

World War II

Native participation expanded dramatically during World War II. More than **44,000 Native men and approximately 800 Native women served in uniform**, drawn from a total Indigenous population of fewer than 400,000. Approximately 150,000 Native people participated through military service or wartime agricultural and industrial work.

Native servicemembers fought in every theater of the war.

Ira Hayes, a Pima Marine, participated in the famous flag-raising on Iwo Jima. The 45th Infantry Division included a substantial Native contingent and fought through Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany before participating in the liberation of Dachau.

Alaska Native communities organized the Alaska Territorial Guard to watch coastlines, construct facilities, and defend remote territory. Native women served in the Women's Army Corps, WAVES, nursing services, and Marine Corps Women's Reserve. Thousands of Native civilians worked in shipyards, aircraft plants, farms, and munitions factories.

The Code Talkers

Code talking became one of the most distinctive Native contributions to the war. Approximately **534 Native code talkers** were deployed.

The Marine Corps recruited about 420 Diné, or Navajo, speakers for service in the Pacific. They developed a rapid code based upon the Navajo language and created special terms for military equipment and operations.

Comanche code talkers landed at Utah Beach on D-Day and transmitted messages during the European campaign. Meskwaki, Hopi, Choctaw, Cherokee, Lakota, Crow, Seminole, and speakers of other Native languages also served in communications roles. Neither Germany nor Japan succeeded in breaking their battlefield codes.

The irony was profound: Native languages that federal boarding schools had attempted to suppress became strategically valuable weapons of the United States.

The Korean War

Approximately **10,000 Native Americans served during the Korean War**, many of them veterans of World War II. Some reenlisted because of their military experience, family traditions of service, employment opportunities, or a continuing commitment to defend both the United States and their ancestral homelands.

Native soldiers participated in some of the war's most difficult engagements. Five American Indians and two Native Hawaiians received the Medal of Honor for service in Korea.

Among the best known was **Mitchell Red Cloud Jr.**, a Ho-Chunk soldier and World War II veteran. During a Chinese attack in 1950, Red Cloud held his position despite being severely wounded. His stand warned his company and gave fellow soldiers time to organize their defense. He was killed during the battle and posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Woodrow Wilson Keeble, a Dakota soldier who had also served in World War II, distinguished himself during a 1951 assault by attacking enemy positions that had pinned down his unit. After decades of review, he received the Medal of Honor posthumously in 2008.

Pascal Cleatus Poolaw Sr., a Kiowa veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, earned forty-two medals and citations during his career. He is frequently described as one of the most highly decorated Native American servicemen in United States history.

Native communities welcomed returning veterans with honor dances and ceremonies intended to restore them to family and community life. Some veterans subsequently became tribal leaders or advocates for treaty rights, health care, education, and the renewal of ceremonies previously suppressed by federal policy.

Their service continued the central paradox of Native military history: they defended American freedom while many of their communities still struggled for voting rights, adequate services, and recognition of tribal sovereignty.

The Vietnam Conflict

Approximately **42,000 American Indians served during the Vietnam era**. This amounted to roughly one in four eligible Native people, compared with approximately one in twelve non-Native Americans. Some were drafted, but many volunteered because of family military traditions, economic necessity, patriotism, or a commitment to protect their communities.

Native servicemen served as infantry soldiers, Marines, pilots, medics, engineers, communications specialists, and members of reconnaissance and special-operations units.

Their assignments were diverse, although military stereotypes sometimes caused commanders to assume that Native soldiers possessed an instinctive ability to track, scout, or fight in wilderness environments. Such stereotypes could place Native servicemen in especially hazardous roles while reducing people from many tribal and personal backgrounds to the romanticized image of the "natural warrior."

For some Native soldiers, Vietnam created a painful historical parallel. They were fighting an Indigenous population defending its own country while remembering that the United States had invaded and occupied Native homelands. Some veterans later spoke openly about the moral and emotional conflict this produced.

Returning veterans frequently faced post-traumatic stress, disability, unemployment, racism, and limited medical services. Native communities responded with honor songs, purification rites, dances, and other ceremonies intended to recognize their service and assist their return to community life.

A number of Vietnam veterans subsequently became tribal officials, artists, educators, and activists. Their experiences contributed to a broader period of Native political resurgence in which Indigenous people demanded treaty enforcement, religious freedom, land rights, improved health care, and greater control over tribal affairs.

Vietnam therefore represents more than another chapter of battlefield service. It illustrates the complicated position of Native Americans as citizens of the United States, citizens of their tribal nations, defenders of ancestral homelands, and participants in a war whose colonial dimensions some found impossible to ignore.

Service, Sovereignty, and the American Paradox

Native military service cannot be reduced to either uncomplicated patriotism or forced assimilation. Many Native people understood themselves as defending two homelands simultaneously: the United States and their own tribal nations.

Military service offered honor, employment, education, travel, and an opportunity to defend family and country. It also strengthened demands that the United States recognize Native citizenship, treaty rights, and self-government.

Service did not erase injustice. Native veterans returned from American wars to communities affected by poverty, federal control, restricted voting, land loss, and inadequate services. In some states, veterans who had fought overseas were still prevented from voting.

Across these historical periods, Native Americans were never merely background figures. They shaped imperial wars, influenced the outcome of the American Revolution, resisted continental expansion, fought on both sides of the Civil War, and made exceptional contributions in the world wars, Korea, and Vietnam.

Their history is one of military courage, but also of diplomacy, adaptation, sacrifice, cultural endurance, and the continuing defense of Native sovereignty.