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The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The Long Journey Towards Recognition Amanda Dahl

The history of World War II has largely been framed in terms of what historian Studs Terkel called the “good war.”¹ It paints a picture of the Allies rallying to a virtuous cause in order to fight the evil that the Axis represented. One of the major problems with this representation, however, is its failure to look at the complexities of the Allied side, in this case, specifically within United States. The history of many minority groups in World War II has been neglected, and only a limited scholarship in this area has focused on telling these groups’ stories.

In the case of the Navajo, much of what has been written has focused on reclaiming their place in this history. Through examining the story of the Navajo beginning in the pre-war era and continuing into the post-war era, I hope to delve further into the racial dynamics that spanned the war and demonstrate how this affected the Navajo war experience. I argue that although racist attitudes eased during the war, when the country was unified against a common enemy, with the return of peace, the American people once again splintered into groups, leading to the resurgence of racial prejudice. For the average white American, Native Americans became a distinctly different group once again, and the Navajo, although praised during the war, returned to a lower status upon their return home. Post-war, the Navajo did not receive praise for their efforts in part due to the classified nature of their role as code talkers, and this by no means helped unseat much of the entrenched prejudice. As much as the classification could be blamed for the lack of recognition, it was clear that during the war there was public awareness of the Navajo’s involvement, nonetheless. Thus, it becomes clear that racial prejudice also played a heavy hand in the failure to recognize the Navajo’s wartime heroism. Instead, the Navajo were regarded with contempt for the problems their community faced. As a result, it was not until many years later that they received suitable recognition.

¹ Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and, 2000), 5.

A History of Oppression

The history of Native Americans and the United States government has always been fraught with tension and mistrust. Like many other Native American tribes, the Navajo people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in the latter half of the 19th century. Their displacement, known as the “Long Walk,” occurred in 1864 during which the Navajo were forced into confinement in Fort Sumner.² Although the Navajo were eventually allowed to return to their lands, government intervention persisted. One of the major ways in which the American government interfered with Navajo life was the implementation of boarding schools for young Native Americans. The first boarding school for Native American children was established in 1860 and by the 1880s more had opened their doors.³ Although their ostensible goal was to educate children, many Navajo saw the ultimate aim of these schools to be Americanizing Navajo children and erasing their culture. There was such resistance within some communities that in order to increase attendance, children were “caught, often roped like cattle, and taken away from their parents, many times never to return.”⁴

Student testimonials further demonstrate the discriminatory nature of boarding school policies. In an interview, Samuel Tso, a Navajo code talker, spoke about his experience at a federal government school. He recounted that school officials, “wouldn’t even let me speak my own native language.”⁵ Although these policies were supposedly to encourage students to become proficient in English, enforcement was harsh and punishing. In 1931, *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported that one boarding school student who “could not speak English...had been punished at the Burke School and shut up in a closet for speaking Navajo, the only thing she could speak.”⁶ The students were punished for expressing any element of their culture. Americanization may have existed under the guise of education, but

² Margaret T. Bixler, *Winds of Freedom: The Story of the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II* (Darien, CT: Two Bytes Publishing, 1992), 15, 16.

³ American Indian Relief Council, "History and Culture: Boarding Schools," *American Indian Relief Council*, accessed May 22, 2016, http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools.

⁴ Alice E. Duffy, "Hardship of American Indian Educational System Revealed," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 22, 1931.

⁵ Bill Robinson, "War Heroes Can Talk the Talk - WWII Navajo Code Talkers Visit Lexington 1 Schools to Tell Their Stories," *The State* (Columbia, SC), February 6, 2007.

⁶ Duffy, "Hardship of American Indian Educational System Revealed."

the policies demonstrated a desire to repress all aspects of Native American culture.

Even in critiques of schooling conditions, racist undertones were present. Despite advocating for better management of boarding schools, Dr. Mary Roberts Coolidge also expressed the belief that Native Americans were less intelligent than white Americans. Based on the intelligence testing of the time, Coolidge stated that “California Indians had a medium score of 85.6 as compared with 100.3 for American-born whites, and higher than most [sic] of the darker races.”⁷ She implied that this higher intelligence made reform worth the effort and claimed that the Navajo also showed “superior qualities.”⁸ Tacit in the mention of the study, however, is the idea that Native Americans are intellectually inferior to whites. Dr. Coolidge reveals the prejudice that defined race relations during this era: she accepts intellectual inferiority based on skin color and ethnicity as a fact. In the pre-war era, overt repression of Native American culture through boarding school policies existed simultaneously with subtler forms of discrimination found in the ways people discussed Native Americans.

The Development of the Code and a Shift in Attitudes

With the entrance of the United States into WORLD WARII, the government and military officials quickly realized that it would be beneficial to reassess their attitudes of Native Americans. The military needed a means of communication that the enemy would be unable to understand. Thus when Philip Johnston, a former U.S. Army engineer, proposed the idea of creating a code from the Navajo language, the government decided to experiment with the idea.⁹ There was already a precedent set in WORLD WARI for using Native American languages as a code, and after WORLD WARI, the Navajo were among the few tribes that Germany had failed to infiltrate and learn their language during the inter-war period.¹⁰ Johnston specifically targeted the Navajo tribe because of his “intimate knowledge of its reservation, the people, and their language,” which he

⁷ "Indian Theme at Berkeley Club," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 1929.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Navajo Code Talkers* (Washington, D.C.: Navy & Marine Corps WWII Commemorative Committee, Navy Office of Information, 1995).

¹⁰ Bixler, *Winds*, 38.

had learned by living on an Arizona Navajo reservation with a missionary family.¹¹ Additionally, with 49,338 members, the Navajo were one of the most populous Native American tribes. The complexity and oral distinctiveness of the Navajo language as well as the small number of speakers outside of the tribe also contributed to Johnston's choice.¹² These factors made the Navajo language ideal to use as code. Consequently, in May 1942, twenty-nine Navajo Marines were recruited and brought to Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, CA where they met Philip Johnston and worked to develop the code.¹³

Demonstrations of the code proved that it had great potential for use in the war. As General Clayton Vogel noted in a letter to the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Core, "[m]essages were transmitted and received almost verbatim."¹⁴ Impressed with the success of the program, General Vogel called for the additional recruitment of two hundred Navajo who were proficient in both English and their tribal language to transmit coded messages.¹⁵ Some of these young men, such as Thomas H. Begay, were recruited straight from boarding schools,¹⁶ while others, such as Keith M. Little, saw recruiting posters encouraging them to enlist.¹⁷

This recruitment effort, based on the ability to speak Navajo, contrasted with earlier policies that rejected Navajo recruits if they could not speak English.¹⁸ The irony of this situation only underscores how prevalent racist attitudes were quickly subsumed when the minority group became useful for the war effort. Through recruitment campaigns, over 400 Navajo were engaged as code talkers, in addition to the numerous Navajo who participated in the war in other capacities.¹⁹

¹¹ Philip Johnston, "Philip Johnston's Proposal for Establishment of The Code Talkers as Presented to the Commanding General of the Amphibious Corps Pacific Fleet, Camp Elliott, San Diego," in Bixler, ed., *Winds of Freedom, II*, 127.

¹² *Navajo Code Talkers* (Washington, D.C.: Navy & Marine Corps WWII Commemorative Committee, Navy Office of Information, 1995).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Enlistment of Navaho Indians," Clayton Vogel to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps., March 6, 1942, https://research.archives.gov/id/6207442#.V_uPIVtYWzU.link.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Quay County Sun, "WWII Navajo Code Talker Speaks at Mesalands," *Quay County Sun* (Tucumcari, N.M.), November 19, 2014.

¹⁷ Keith Little, "Keith Little- Navajo Code Talker Living History," interview, YouTube, October 17, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cwi6_oktIU4.

¹⁸ Charles Poore, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, May 16, 1959.

¹⁹ Scott Smith, "Marine Didn't Talk About His Mission - Navajo Code Talker," *The Daily Review* (Hayward, CA), July 8, 2002.

Worthy of Praise: Navajo on the Frontlines and the Homefront

The government's stance on the Navajo was not the only view that changed during the war. Both fellow soldiers and newspapers praised their dedication and achievement both on the frontlines and on the home front. On the battlefield, their comrades came to respect the fundamental role the code talkers performed and soon the code talkers were highly praised. Major Howard Connor, a 5th Marine Division Signal Officer, believed that "were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima," and he was not the only white officer to have made such a comment.²⁰

Despite these commendations, there was still prejudice within the military. Begay recalls racist episodes where soldiers called him "chief" or asked where his feather was.²¹ Thus although many military personnel recognized the Navajo for their important contributions, it did not preclude the continuation of racist behavior, such as these comments.

Back in the United States, there was also recognition of the Navajo soldiers abroad. One Chippewa writer, Wa-be-no O-pee-chee, praised Native American contributions to the war in a piece for the *Los Angeles Times* written in 1943.²² She informed the public that there was an "entire platoon of Navajos" serving in the army and estimated that there were 30,000 enlisted Native Americans total.²³ O-pee-chee's praise speaks to the changing times, as a Native American writer was published in a major newspaper like the *Los Angeles Times*. The war, at least temporarily, appeared to open up more avenues to minorities if they acted in favor of the war effort and achieved victory. Another column from the *Los Angeles Times* recognized the Navajo who trained with Staff Sergeant Philip Johnston, praising them as "crack shots" and heralding Johnston as a brilliant leader.²⁴ These "crack shots" were certainly the forty-two code talkers who initially created the code. Even without knowing the impact of the code, the skills of the Navajo were

²⁰ Angela Simoneaux, "Talking the Talk - Breaux Bridge Honors Navajo Code Talkers," *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), July 4, 2002.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Library of Congress, Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries. New Series: 1931, Part I*, vol. 28, New Series (Copyright Office, Library of Congress, 1932), 403.

²³ Wa-Be-No O-Pee-Chee, "A War Bond Example for All," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1943.

²⁴ "Indians Prove Crack Shots," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1943.

commended. There was, however, a focus on Sgt. Johnston as their leader. Although the Navajo were praised, the white man leading them received higher recognition for essentially cultivating their success. By describing their relationship in this way, the paper constructs their relationship as one comparable to a parent and children, revealing the racial prejudice still inherent during the time. The Native American was inferior to the white man, and this notion reveals the subtle presence of racism during the war.

At home, many Navajo became involved in efforts to support the war. The press again commended the Navajo for their work and many writers noted the willingness of the Navajo to purchase war bonds. In her *Los Angeles Times* piece, Wa-be-no O-pee-chee noted how Native Americans in general “have been doing more than their share in the bond campaigns and thus have become examples for all.”²⁵ Other non-Native American writers also echoed her commendation. Another piece run in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1942 showcased the example of Ulti Nez, a Navajo sheepman, who used his life savings or “\$1000 in \$5 bills and \$500 in \$10 bills” for Defense Bonds.²⁶ Through explicitly stating that the money was in small bills, the author emphasizes the magnitude of this donation. However, the push for donations was attributed to a white trader known as O’Farrell rather than the Navajo themselves.²⁷ Thus once again a white man was given a substantial amount of credit for what a Navajo man had done. Further underscoring racist undertones is the piece’s title: “Braves Give Wampum to Help Uncle Sam Along Warpath.”²⁸ The title betrays a vast ignorance of Native American culture: Wampum, although historically a currency with European traders, was used in New England.²⁹ The Navajo certainly were not a New England tribe. Moreover, the title praises the Native Americans for their contributions while failing to make the distinction between different tribes. The use of the term “brave” is also a generic term used for Native Americans, further emphasizing the idea that all Native Americans groups were the same and ignoring the complexity of their cultures.

²⁵ Wa-Be-No O-Pee-Chee, “War Bond.”

²⁶ Los Angeles Times, “Braves Give Wampum to Help Uncle Sam Along Warpath,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1942.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Tara Prindle, “Wampum History and Background,” *NativeTech*, accessed May 23, 2016, <http://www.nativetech.org/wampum/wamphist.htm>.

Other reporters recognized the large number of Navajo who entered war industries. A 1943 *Los Angeles Times* piece by Charles B. Wilson recognized 2,500 Navajo for their work on the construction of the Ordnance Depot in Fort Wingate, New Mexico, even crediting the workers with saving the government \$400,000 due to their efficiency.³⁰ Wilson, part Native American himself, continued his article by critiquing the claim by German broadcaster Dr. Goebbels, who asserted that the fate of the “American Indian” was sad.³¹ Wilson worked to disprove this claim by providing multiple examples of Native Americans groups who demonstrated zeal and a proclivity toward the war effort.

Overall, during the war there was generally a positive perception of the Navajo in the military and at home in the press. It was demonstrated that they were contributing heavily to the war efforts, especially in proportion to their population. This positive perception was also likely due to the strong patriotism of the period. Everyone was an American and fighting against the enemy in a unified front. At least for the Navajo, it seemed as though racial differences were less harshly persecuted. The differences were even embraced to a degree within the military, largely because of the utility of the Navajo language. Public propaganda and articles on the war also tended to conjure the idea of a strong and united America. However, racist undertones persisted in many of the ways in which the Navajo were discussed and treated.

The Return of the Soldiers: Non-recognition and a Resurgence of Racism

Unfortunately, this quasi-acceptance of the Navajo, and Native Americans in general, lasted only for the duration of the war. Most striking was the reception some Navajo received upon returning to the United States. George Willie Sr. recalled arriving at a port where “a lot of people and balloons waiting for the ship,” yet the Navajo were “taken off the other side of the ship on wooden planks and immediately put on buses and sent home on trains.”³² Despite the recognition they had received during the war, the Navajo were denied a victorious return home. Instead they were removed from the spotlight and whisked away as if they had committed some offense. When Native Americans returned to their communities,

³⁰ Charles B. Wilson, "No War Whoops, But...", *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1943.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Scott Kirk, "Navajo Code Talker Visiting Abilene Talks About His Unique WWII Service," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 6, 2013.

they confronted renewed discrimination. Some businesses put up signs reading “No dogs or Indians.”³³ Explicit racism, it seemed, had returned in full force. In some ways this is comparable to the experience of returning black soldiers in the Jim Crow south. The black soldiers were expected to return to a status subordinate to that of white men and women.³⁴ One black soldier returning to Mississippi was warned by his father not to return in uniform, lest he be beat by the local police.³⁵ Although this was much more severe discrimination than what returning Native Americans faced, the sentiments were the same. White men wanted the returning minorities to resume their pre-war statuses, essentially reversing any progress made during the war.

It was this shift back to an extremely discriminatory climate that in large part led to the non-recognition of the Navajo post-war. The Navajo code talkers were ordered to keep their role in the war a secret, even from their families.³⁶ As such, it is easy to argue that because their role was not revealed, the Navajo naturally could not receive recognition. According to code talker Keith Little, many of those who returned home were reluctant to talk about their experiences even without orders to remain silent on the subject.³⁷ It was not until 1968 that the code talker program was finally declassified.³⁸ And in 1969 the Navajo code talkers were officially recognized with a formal ceremony in Chicago.³⁹ Despite the long gap between the war and declassification, there is no truly satisfactory justification for the lack of recognition of the Navajo in general.

During the war there were numerous articles published about the Navajos' contributions. The public was by no means ignorant of their role. This makes it difficult to support the claim that ignorance caused the failure to acknowledge the Navajo. Additionally, there were several slips that revealed the role of the code talkers. One article published in a 1943 *Arizona Highways* magazine even

³³ David Vergun, "Pentagon Exhibit Highlights American Indian Wartime Achievements," *U.S. Army*, November 13, 2013.

³⁴ Richard Wormser, "Jim Crow Stories." *PBS*. Accessed May 23, 2016.
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_ww2.html.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Tobie Baker, "Navajo Code Talker Talks About Legacies," *Associated Press State Wire* (Cortez, CO), August 17, 2013.

³⁷ Little, "Navajo Code Talker Living History."

³⁸ Kirk, "Navajo Code Talker Visiting Abilene Talks About His Unique WWII Service."

³⁹ Simoneaux, "Talking the Talk - Breaux Bridge Honors Navajo Code Talkers."

mentions the use of the Navajo language as a code.⁴⁰ In the book, *Indians in the War: Burial of the Brave* (1945), the role of Native Americans in the war was recognized, the efforts described in depth and the awards soldiers received outlined.⁴¹ In one section called the “Navajo Code Talker,” it explicitly outlines the role of the code talkers and indicates that “[p]ermission to disclose the work of these American Indians in marine uniform has just been granted by the Marine Corps.”⁴² An article in the 1945 *New York Times* also announced the existence of the code and was entitled “Navajo Code Talk Kept Foe Guessing.”⁴³ Although the *Arizona Highways* article upset the War Department because it appeared mid-war, the other two pieces, written by Sergeant Murrey Mader, a Marine Corps Combat Correspondent, were military sanctioned and published just after the war, implying that at the end of the war the military must have decided to disclose the Navajos’ role in the war and then changed its stance.⁴⁴ In theory, some of the public may have been aware of the Navajo code talkers’ role in the war, yet even those who were not would likely have been aware of their overall positive contribution to the war. Thus it is suspicious that after the war there was a drastic decrease in the number of newspaper articles praising the Navajo war efforts.

The Navajo: People or Problem?

Instead the articles praising the Navajo were replaced with articles that constructed Native Americans as a problem that needed solving. This sort of discrimination correlates well with the reception Native Americans received upon their return home. Although appearing before the end of the war, an article in the 1944 *New York Times* claimed that “World War II has again focused attention on one of the country’s oldest problems – what to do with the Indians” and discussed the problem of what to do with all the Native American soldiers when they returned.⁴⁵ While revealing a darker side of mid-war coverage of the Native Americans, the piece is arguably a look ahead at what is perceived to be a future

⁴⁰ Bixler, *Winds*, 50.

⁴¹ *Indians in the War: Burial of a Brave* (Chicago, IL: United States Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, 1945), <https://archive.org/details/indiansinwar00unit>.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³ Murrey Marder, "Navajo Code Talk Kept Foe Guessing," *New York Times*, September 19, 1945.

⁴⁴ Bixler, *Winds*, 50.

⁴⁵ "New Indian Problem Is Posed by the War," *New York Times*, October 16, 1944.

issue and is not a commentary on the war effort. The negativity stemmed from what the *New York Times* called the “New Indian Problem.”⁴⁶ This piece foreshadowed the shift back to a more discriminatory public attitude.

In the years following the war, many articles were published outlining the problems faced by Native Americans, including the Navajo. The people themselves were not explicitly constructed as a problem; however, the issues these articles highlighted – namely starvation, lack of education, and high infant mortality rates – were implied to be the responsibility of the American government.^{47, 48} Although it is true that the US government did have a responsibility to the Navajo in light of past promises of aid, the portrayal of the Navajo nation as helpless and in need of a white, federal savior inherently and implicitly constructs them as a burden to be dealt with.⁴⁹ Although these journalists may have been well intentioned in their efforts to raise awareness on the issues, they also created an innately racist construction of the Navajo.

While the Navajo code talkers’ role in the war was not widely revealed until many years later, there was no reason to avoid recognizing the Navajo for their other war efforts. Certainly nothing justified transforming the Navajo into a problem that needed solving. Thus in large part, the return of racist attitudes contributed to the lack of recognition of the Navajo. Press attention was transferred to the problems the Navajo faced, not their triumphs. It was not until 1982 that National Navajo Code Talkers Day was established under the Reagan administration.⁵⁰ In his proclamation, Ronald Reagan stated “the dedication and unswerving devotion to duty shown by the men of the Navaho [*sic*] Nation in serving as radio code talkers in the Marine Corps during World War II should serve as a fine example for all Americans.”⁵¹ This well-deserved praise was years delayed. In addition, it was not until 2001 that the original twenty-nine code talkers, only four of whom were still alive, received the highest honors:

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Indians: The Hungry Ones,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 14, 1947.

⁴⁸ Terrence O’Flaherty, “The Red Menace,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 9, 1968.

⁴⁹ “Indians: The Hungry Ones.”

⁵⁰ Ronald Reagan, *Proclamation 4954 - National Navaho Code Talkers Day (1982)*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42794>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Congressional Gold Medals.⁵² Other code talkers received the silver Congressional Medal.⁵³

Conclusion

Prior to World War II, there was active government oppression of Native American culture. Boarding schools were harsh and militaristic and focused on Americanizing young Native Americans.⁵⁴ With the United States' entry into the war, there quickly became a need for a secret means of communication, prompting Philip Johnston's proposal to use the Navajo language for code. This quickly led to the recruitment of the Navajo, often directly from boarding schools.⁵⁵ Although their role in the war was secret outside of the military, other soldiers came to respect the Navajo code talkers for their skill; and within the American public, the Navajo received recognition for their other contributions to the war effort at home and abroad. In light of their success, there was an overall decrease in explicit racism and repression of the Navajo culture during World War II compared to the pre-war era. Racism was by no means eliminated, however, and there were still racially charged comments directed at Navajo service members. Moreover, subtle racism manifested in the way the press covered the Navajo war effort. On the whole, however, there was an improvement, in large part due to the unifying atmosphere of the war. Everyone was an American fighting for his or her country.

Yet upon the Navajo soldiers' return, they did not receive a hero's welcome; instead, they were greeted with slurs and expected to re-assume their prior low-class positions from the pre-war era. This return of strong racial prejudice led to the construction of the Native American as a problem once again. The Navajo were not the only tribe who faced many difficulties at the end of the war, but they became just another problem for the government to solve. And although code talkers may not have received recognition until after 1968 with the declassification of the code, this secrecy should not have precluded recognition of the Navajo soldiers in general.⁵⁶ Even after declassification, it was decades before the Navajo

⁵² Gerry J. Gilmore, "World War II Navajo Code Talkers Visit Pentagon, Meet With Pace," *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 10, 2007, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=47020>.

⁵³ Native Words Native Warriors, "Recognition," *Native Words Native Warriors*, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter7.html>.

⁵⁴ American Indian Relief Council, "History and Culture: Boarding Schools."

⁵⁵ Vogel, "Enlistment of Navaho Indians."

⁵⁶ Vergun, "Pentagon Exhibit Highlights American Indian Wartime Achievements."

code talkers received praise befitting their contributions. The classification of the code talkers may have initially prevented proper government and public recognition of the Navajo role in World War II, but racist attitudes toward the Navajo further prolonged this journey toward recognition. Undoubtedly representing the sentiments of many of the Navajo, at the presentation of the Congressional Gold and Silver Medals in 2001, one code talker was reported to say, "Just maybe, just maybe, I have become an American citizen."⁵⁷ It had been a long journey through an era fraught with racial tension and prejudice, but finally, the code talkers and the Navajo nation had received the recognition that they had earned long ago.

⁵⁷ Little, "Navajo Code Talker Living History."