

Rewriters of the Plains

By Bruce Gilley

The National Park Service has started rewriting the history of American westward expansion as a grinding tale of “indigenous resilience in the face of, and resistance to, the impositions of settler colonialism.” Under a three-year [program](#) to create a “national context narrative” on the Southern Plains Conflicts of 1864-1869, the agency will contract a group of writers to follow a pre-written script that will result in a politically-charged view of our past. This project should be stopped not just because it will distort Southern Plains history but also because it is an insult to a free society.



Leftists assailed the Trump Administration’s 20-member 1776 Commission, which produced a report on American history in 2021. But the Biden Administration’s institutionalization of official history within a state agency is far more nefarious. The *1776 Report* was a one-off written by outsiders and having

no official standing in government or education. The Southern Plains Conflicts report, on the other hand, is being managed by bureaucrats who work for the taxpayer, and it will be used as the official handbook for government operations, including tour guides, historical preservation, and, of course, grants to tribes. "The narrative will provide a framework of the US government's policy towards Indigenous populations, and its support of American economic development and settlement west of the Mississippi River," the program notes.

Most people associate officially-approved histories with the Soviet Union or Mao's China. The state, we assume, should not be in the business of foisting its current political attitudes onto our understanding of the past. But our Scandinavian Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, who is never seen without native American jewelry to emphasize her indigenous *bona fides*, has made a point of doing just that.

The call for proposals went out in early August, giving scholars only two weeks to submit applications. NPS staff contacted those they wanted on the project, giving little time for others to respond. No doubt they knew in advance the sort of history their political boss was demanding.

The reports must use "multi-cultural perspectives on American colonialism," especially "Native American perspectives," in order to generate "a more holistic and balanced understanding of Indigenous resilience and resistance to settler colonialism." Writers must also document "the destruction of traditional culture" by white settlers, as well as the "refusals to concede to specific treaty terms" by natives. All reports must accept as settled truth that white pioneers "demanded that the US government acquire tribal lands and secure 'peace' for ongoing extraction." To ensure that only tribe-approved history makes it onto the docket, writers must pre-commit to "respectfully and appropriately collaborate with Tribal Historic Preservation Offices and American Indians."

In the Soviet Union, the members of “the proletariat” in Marxist dogma were deemed the immutable and eternal victims of capital-H History. They therefore gained a privileged status in the writing of official small-h history. Most historians had to have what the party identified as a sufficiently working-class background. The NPS’s version features Native Americans in the starring role of the perpetually aggrieved and is now reconfiguring history accordingly. The result is to pander to the worst prejudices of Native American activists and allow them to seize political power in the name of justice.

One independent historian who has documented the conflicts between Indians and settlers, Dr. Jeff Broome, refused a last-minute invitation to participate because of the pre-written script. “Nearly everything you have narrated in the proposal reflects historical distortions of epic proportions,” Broome replied in an email to the NPS that he shared with me. “I could not be paid enough to put together such a false narrative.”

Broome, author most recently of *Indian Raids and Massacres: Essays on the Central Plains Indian War*, called out dozens of falsehoods in the NPS contract. These include its description of Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle—whose raids and killings on settler camps were notorious—as a “peace advocate.” They also include the claim that the [Sand Creek](#) battle in Colorado of 1864 that left 67 Indians dead (not the 230 claimed by the NPS) was unprovoked. In fact, a similar alliance of tribes had massacred over 700 settlers near New Ulm in Minnesota in 1862.

As two scholars wrote in a 2010 [article](#), experts in any field taken over by the party in Soviet times either had to conform rigidly to avoid retribution or, better yet, trample opportunistically over colleagues and produce works even *more* ideological than what the party demanded. A few deviants might engage in “passive resistance” such as “discreetly questioning the dogmas with documented facts.” But

those unwilling to sacrifice their integrity had just one choice: "withdrawal."

Broome has admirably chosen withdrawal, but the NPS will surely not lack for conformists and opportunists. The chosen writers will mostly be those claiming native ancestry or else whites who have proven their worth by publishing ultra-radical books. The Soviet Union had an Institute of Red Professors doing much of its history writing. The NPS is now creating an equivalent for Southern Plains history.

"Day by day and almost minute by minute, the past was brought up to date," Orwell wrote in *1984*. The NPS is now bringing the past "up to date" in a manner far more alarming and damaging than has ever been thought possible in the United States.

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