Mass Shootings Are Connected to America’s Legacy of Anti-Indigenous Violence

In this op-ed, Ruth Hopkins, a Dakota/Lakota Sioux writer, biologist, attorney, and former tribal judge, writes about the throughline between events like the Sand Creek Massacre and today's mass shootings

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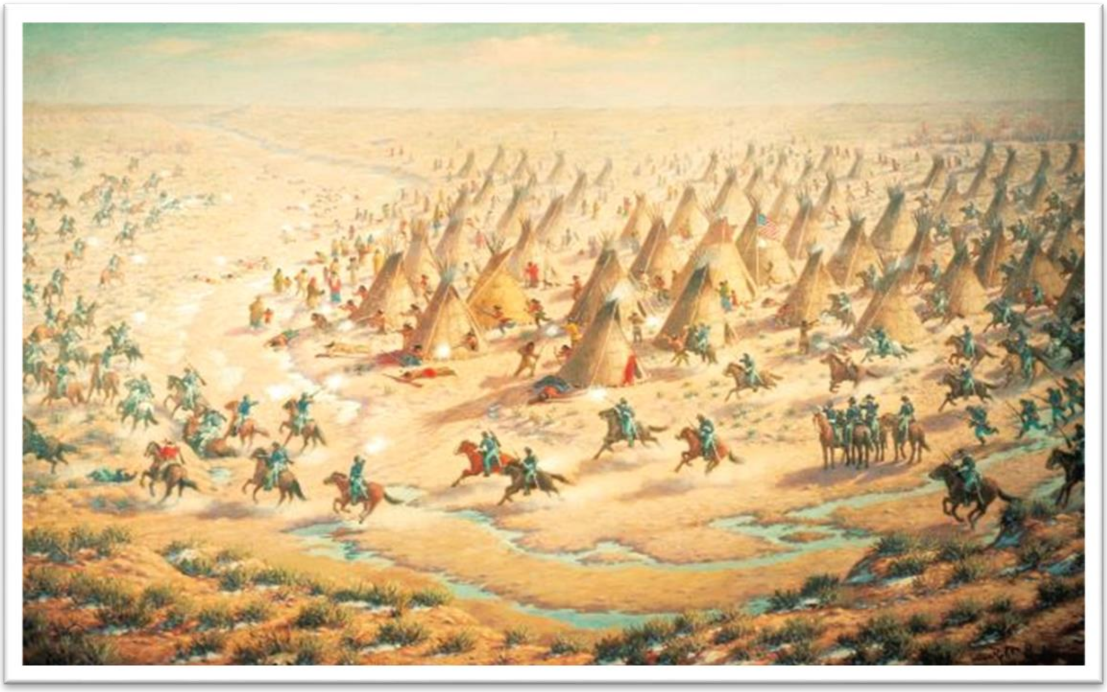

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There have so far been more mass shootings in the U.S. in 2019 than days of the year. According to the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), there were 381 mass shootings as of November 29, the 333rd day of the year. While the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) doesn’t have a formal definition for *mass shooting,* the GVA defines it as any incident in which four or more people are shot or killed at one time, not counting the shooter.

These acts of carnage and bloodshed have traumatized so many, leaving us second-guessing about whether it’s safe to venture out into open public spaces.

But while school administrators, psychologists, and politicians have their own theories for what’s behind the violence, there’s also one crucial detail that’s regularly left out of the conversation: The fact that the United States has a long, bloody history of mass shootings.

The truth of the matter is this country was founded on colonial violence — built on the backs of black slaves and the bodies of millions of slain Native peoples.

David Hogg, a survivor of the February 2018 Parkland mass shooting and one of the cofounders of March for Our Lives, acknowledged this reality during a recent interview with

MSNBC host Chris Hayes. “If we want to talk about mass shootings, we have to recognize the massive number of Indigenous mass shootings that were committed by the United States government,” he said.

The history of America is one of brutal mass slaughter, dating from the genocide of this land’s original peoples to the shootings we see in shopping malls and schools today.

November 29 is the anniversary of the Sand Creek Massacre. On that day in 1864, U.S. Colonel John Chivington led around 700 soldiers to a village of Cheyenne under cover of night. Chivington ambushed them knowing that their chief, Black Kettle, had been invited to camp with his people at Sand Creek by a local fort commander, and that only a handful of warriors would be present. There were a few soldiers who had honor: U.S. Captain Silas Soule and Lieutenant Joseph Cramer refused to participate in the act of genocide and ordered their men to stand down. In a letter to his mother, Soule wrote that some 300 Cheyenne were massacred that day, and that “most of them were women and children.” Soule’s account in a separate letter to an army major reveals just how grisly the attack was. “Hundreds of women and children were coming towards us, and getting on their knees for mercy,” he wrote, only to be shot and “have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized.” Cheyenne men, women, and children were shot, chased down, and hacked to pieces. Unborn babies were ripped from their mothers’ wombs. Soldiers cut out women’s genitals as trophies, and paraded through the streets of Denver, Colorado, displaying human body parts carved from the mutilated dead. Soule was later assassinated, likely by associates of Chivington.

There was more darkness ahead for the Cheyenne people and Black Kettle. Four years later, on November 27, 1868, George Armstrong Custer attacked Black Kettle’s village along the banks of the Washita River, even though the villagers were flying a white flag of peace. The people were still sleeping when Custer commanded his men to charge. Dozens were shot and killed within minutes. More than 100 Cheyenne were slaughtered, including Black Kettle himself. Custer also ordered the killing of everything of value to the Indians, including 800 horses and mules. Historians say Custer committed the atrocity to help seal his reputation as an Indian fighter. His vile exploits eventually caught up with him at a place my ancestors call Greasy Grass, along the Little Big Horn River, where he and his men were rubbed out by Lakota and their allies.

What is believed to be the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history took place on December 29, 1890 on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, which was originally called Prisoner of War (POW) Camp #344. On that day, the Seventh Cavalry surrounded Lakota with Hotchkiss guns at Wounded Knee and murdered what some scholars estimate as upwards of 300 people. It wasn’t enough to shoot those they’d trapped. They pursued women and children for miles to kill them. The Wounded Knee Massacre occurred just 14 days after the assassination of Chief Sitting Bull, a Hunkpapa Lakota leader and Holyman. At the time, Lakota were a part of the Ghost Dance movement, and non-Natives were terrified of our spiritual power. Some elders think Wounded Knee was revenge for Little Big Horn. Those killed at Wounded Knee (half of whom were women and children) were thrown into a mass grave. The soldiers who murdered them and posed with their naked, frozen corpses were awarded Medals of Honor for carrying out the massacre.

These bloodbaths were not isolated incidences. Others are:

Gnadenhutten Massacre (March 8, 1782). Colonial militia in Ohio slaughtered 96 Christian Lenape at the Moravian missionary village. Thirty-nine were children.

Bear River Massacre (January 29, 1863). At least 270 Shoshone men, women, and children were killed by the U.S. Army in Idaho when soldiers overran their village, raping and murdering women and children and burning down lodges.

Whitestone Hill Massacre (September 3, 1863). Between 300 and 400 Dakota and Lakota Sioux men, women, and children were murdered, wounded, or captured in what is now North Dakota by U.S. Army forces under the command of Brigadier General Alfred Sully, an enthusiastic enforcer of the "scorched earth" policy of Native removal.

Baker Massacre (January 1870). About 200 Piegan Blackfeet were killed under the direction of Major Eugene Baker, who was reportedly drunk at the time. He attacked the wrong group of Natives.

And so on.

White supremacy has been a key component of American violence. Besides Indigenous people, blacks have also been massacred on U.S. soil. When *Watchmen* premiered on HBO, some viewers learned about the Tulsa Race Riotfor the first time, when from May 31 to June 1, 1921, between 50 to 300 black residents of Tulsa, Oklahoma's Greenwood neighborhood, a prosperous community known as the "Black Wall Street," were murdered by a white mob. About 150 black men were killed in the 1873 massacre in Colfax, Louisiana, over tensions about a gubernatorial election. When African Americans migrated from the south to work in northern factories, a white male driver in East St. Louis fired into Black homes in a 1917 shooting spree, killing dozens. In the January 1923 Rosewood Massacre, as many as 150 residents of a primarily Black Florida town were slaughtered.

America's glorification and acceptance of gun violence often wears a white hood. This problem is systemic, and while new gun control regulations will help, we will not solve it unless we address these ugly roots.

Some believe that President Trump's administration and his army of sycophants are responsible for this recent explosion of mass shootings. There's no denying that many of the shooters are Trump supporters and his rallies are known for stoking hatred and vitriol. Trump is a fan of President Andrew Jackson, the man who bucked a U.S. Supreme Court ruling to remove the Cherokee people from their homelands and caused the Trail of Tears, where thousands of them died of starvation, disease, and exposure to the elements. Trump even used the Wounded Knee Massacre as a punch line this year while attacking Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren.

But this didn't start with Trump.

Though we have a long way to go in educating the American public about this country's true history and its violent foundations, we are making some headway in beginning to acknowledge the Indigenous blood on America's hands.

This past summer, the Remove the Stain Act was introduced by several members of the House of Representatives, including Deb Haaland, one of the first Native women elected to Congress. If passed, the act would rescind the medals of honor awarded to the soldiers who carried out the Wounded Knee Massacre.

A few weeks ago, Bradley Upton, great-great grandson of James Forsyth, one of the men who perpetrated the Wounded Knee Massacre, traveled to the Cheyenne River Reservation, where many of the descendants of Wounded Knee's victims and survivors now live, to ask them for forgiveness. Events like these bring healing and require courage and humility. By acting upon these truths, a revolution of thought can take hold. We can change the system from one of conquest and death to sustainability and life.