"Kill the Indian. Save the Child" -- One Hundred Years of Indian Boarding Schools and the Systematic Assault on Indigenous Cultures and Language in the United States.

The relentless pressure on the indigenous peoples of North America has been exerted in different phases: invasion; genocide; removal; warfare; isolation. As the Indian Wars wound down in the west of the United States (Posey War, 1923), a new model to resolve the Indian problem spread across North America.

By 1900, indigenous populations in the United States had been reduced from a high estimate of 30 million to less than 250,000. A program to eliminate the last vestiges of native savagery, culture and language had already been inaugurated in the East -- "Kill the Indian. Save the Child".

The "Civilization Fund Act of 1819" was a Federal law that intended to "Americanize" Native children. It led to the creation of the Indian boarding schools, which were part of a national program to "civilize" Native children, by teaching them to serve white Americans, to imprison young minds with the self-image of inferiority, obedience, passivity and uniformity. The training mission sought to make household servants and low-skilled workers for absorption into basic employment in the non-Indian world. This policy of forced assimilation was the way the US government decided to deal once and for all with the "Indian problem".

This program was modeled after the Carlisle Indian School, established in 1879, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. For the next 100 years, some 500, ostensibly benign, schools were operated across the United States, most often run by religious organizations which competed vigorously for the opportunity to inculcate their orthodoxies in these captive children.

The Native American boarding schools were created by the United States government under the War Department and then later within the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs with the participation of religious institutions for the purpose of erasing the identity of the first citizens of the United States as Native Americans.

For generations, Native children were the prey of a deliberate program aimed at the annihilation of their cultures, languages, and self-identity. As a result of this systematic cultural genocide, today Natives and their communities rank at the bottom of almost every socio-economic assessment of well-being: education, family income, incarceration rates, alcohol addiction, suicide, and longevity.

Captain Richard Henry Pratt, who had been the jailer of Geronimo’s band of Apaches in Fort Marion Prison in Florida, opened up the Carlisle Indian School. Pratt believed Native adults were hopelessly savage, but children could be saved by assimilating them into mainstream society. The goal of this military-styled boarding school was the elimination of native cultures and languages.
Parceled out by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in an atmosphere of frenzied sectarian competition, the government handed over the operation of the schools to religious organizations. In the 1880's, the government paid $3,000 a year to Christian churches to operate the schools. In some parts of the country, schools remained open until the 1980's. The BIA directly ran about 29 of the schools. Christian churches ran over 500.

Children as young as three years old were taken by force from their families. Parents quickly learned these schools were not good for their children, but if they failed to comply with this mandatory school policy they were criminalized. Some parents hid their children, moved into the cities, or denied their Native heritage -- all in an effort to keep their families intact. But over 180,000 Indian children passed through the boarding school program.

The US policy took complete control over Indian families and their children. The BIA Indian agents, missionaries, social workers and various government officials used threats, deceit, and force to take away Indian children. Parents felt anger, bitterness, resentment and helplessness in the face of this onslaught against their families. Some Native men were sentenced to as many as twenty years in Alcatraz prison for refusing to permit the churches to seize their children.

The children fared poorly in the schools. Oftentimes, children did not see their families again for many years – some for over a decade. When the children did return home, they were strangers to their families.

The children of the boarding schools spent their formative years away from their families. Their hair was cut. They were dressed like white children. They spoke only English. Raised in an institution without love or affection, the children were crippled emotionally. They suffered physical and sexual abuse. They were inculcated in the lesson that ‘might makes right’ and that battering by adults (beating and spanking) were norms of Euro-American society. This was inimical to native culture.

The living conditions at many boarding schools were inhumane: children were underfed, living in crowded, cold and drafty buildings with exposure to diseases such as TB and influenza. With little immunity to childhood diseases of Euro-Americans such as chicken pox and measles, death was a constant presence. The schools did not keep accurate records of the many children who died within their custody, including pregnant girls and children beaten to death. Their burials are unmarked. The cause and number of child deaths is unknown.

On a deep psychological level, the survivors suffered long-lasting damage as a result of the abuse at the schools. The boarding schools inflicted on the native population of America and its helpless children over a hundred years of trauma. The boarding school legacy is a Native population afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combined with many forms of emotional disorders, mental illnesses, and long-term grief.

After leaving the schools, these young people were still not white, so they were not accepted into mainstream society, nor did they get a sense of belonging back in their tribal communities. Many of the boarding school survivors felt they did not belong anywhere. This sense of not

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belonging has led to many long term issues within Native communities, leaving behind internalized oppression, self-hatred, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, suicide, mental illness, PTSD, depression, domestic violence, incest, sexual dysfunction as well as physical problems such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

Since much of the trauma was not dealt with at the time it occurred, it has been passed on in families and tribes from one generation to the next. Huge numbers of Native peoples suffer from an inter-generational trauma as a result of the unresolved grief and pain.

Russia, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia implemented the "boarding school" model to deal with their own indigenous peoples.

The United States has failed to take responsibility for what its public policies have done to Native children and families. The government policies brutalized Native children, psychologically, physically, spiritually and emotionally.

Governments that systematically used a boarding school program to diminish their indigenous populations need to systematically redress the damage their public policies have caused:

- Fund intensive language programs for the revitalization of Native languages threatened with extinction;
- Make Native curriculum a part of state education programs, by writing back in Native contributions to American society;
- Make funding available to treat serious mental health problems and inter-generational trauma, and provide counseling for families who are still suffering;
- Fully disclose what happened in the boarding schools including naming the crimes and the perpetrators, and exposing all aspects of the failed policy.
- Investigate the missing and contradictory school records to reconcile the death and burial ground records, and excavate the grave sites as necessary.

The National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) observed its 50th anniversary in 2011, and enters its second half century of work by pursuing the rights and freedoms of Indigenous peoples under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The NIYC is accredited as a non-governmental organization by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. This submission was prepared for the Board of Directors, President, Cecelia Belone, 318 Elm Street, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA 87120, by Dr. Kay McGowan bettiekaymcgowan@gmail.com

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