

## TESTIMONY for H.R. 5444

My name is Steven Brody. Though now retired, I have been a California state licensed psychotherapist for several decades. In 1984 I was chosen by the Hupa Indian nation in Northern California to establish their first tribal mental health program on the reservation. I want to tell you what I saw and heard in that professional capacity, from a deeply personal impact.

I am in proud and deep support of H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. The Indian population is entitled to that process to help facilitate the profound trauma that has been put on their shoulders, for centuries. The Commission can also be a powerful catalyst of healing for the white population.

The Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation is the geographically largest in the state of California, home to the largest number of American Indians in the country. (The U.S. Postal system changed the spelling because of written similarities between 'Hupa' and 'Napa'; Hupa refers to the people, Hoopa is the reservation).

The land of the Hupa is adjacent to, and overlaps with the lands of the Yurok and the Karuk, with Yurok being the numerically largest tribe in the state. The languages of these three tribes are as different as English, Chinese, and Yiddish, yet they have lived as neighbors with overlapping land boundaries for over 5,000 years. Their first contact with whites was merely 150 years ago. Thousands of years of thriving cultures were violently and deliberately destroyed within a short few.

Due to their isolative location, the Hupa were among the very last American Indian people to have contact with whites, mid-1800s, so they are, even today, within a very few generations of pre-contact. (Contrasted with the east coast where first contact was 500 years ago, which may be 25 generations.) Therefore, pre-contact family-life was only a few generations from the family-life that I observed during my life on the reservation. I met with elders that spoke of their great grandfather's lives prior to contact with whites. The significance of this, here, is to highlight the relatively short period of time between west coast tribes' pre-contact life and their contemporary life. For west coast tribes, the sudden and hard impact of that cultural jolt, from the cruel barbarism of overwhelming settler domination, is still fresh.

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I make a note, with special attention, that in the year of 2022, there is no federal Bureau of African-American Affairs; there is no House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Hispanic People; there is no Senate Committee on Jewish Affairs. Only Indians are subjected to these Federal controlling bodies that shape the lives of Indian people. This legislation is intended to provide the oversight of Federal responsibility which has been broken for a long time. This legislation is to heal that break.

To understand the Indian Boarding School phenomenon, one must begin at the beginning. For literally hundreds of years prior to the Indian Boarding Schools, there existed the intent to annihilate Indian culture. For hundreds of years, U.S. policy was enacted with this intent; the Indian Boarding Schools were a means to accomplish the stated and explicit goal of cultural destruction. That sounds hard, and it was hard.

We must understand the context from which the concept of Indian Boarding Schools was conceived. While many of us will want to put a positive spin on it by saying that the plan of “schools” was to assimilate Indians into mainstream so as to have a better chance of success -- we must not forget that such was genocidal, by U.N. standards and declarations.

Over a period of 500 years, a context of dominant, overpowering destruction has been progressively and generationally established in the lives of all Indian people, like no other population in U.S. history, and few in world history. The same force that stole the children from reservations, in doing so also cast an anxious pall of fear-of-extinction over the whole reservation. And like a social contagion, it spread until there was nowhere it wasn't.

The chronic harsh treatment of Indian children in Boarding Schools reflects an intimate disrespect and incipient assault by profound ignorance about Indian people. Most of the attention in this Hearing process is on the Boarding Schools and their treatment of Indian children. But it is critical to understand the context in which the concept of Indian Boarding Schools even came to exist as a thing. I will try to address this context, because unless it is clearly focused and squarely attacked, nothing will change.

Another way of saying it is that U.S. Assimilation Policy (aka the Dawes Act) was simply the next and last effort by the U.S. to exterminate Indian culture and force them to adopt alien concepts, beliefs, religions and values, while stealing their land; otherwise, kill them all; and that is not hyperbole or metaphor. It is also not the exception. Rather, it is the family history of all Indian people – it is the common Indian narrative. And when you understand this, you will understand the pall that permeates American Indian reservations.

Beyond a cursory paragraph in a high school text, few Americans have any knowledge or understanding of the trauma of Indian people, at the hands of our ancestors. Fewer still will understand the magnitude of trauma they suffered, for hundreds of years. I want to share two examples from my clinical psychotherapy with the Hupa of Northern California. The names are made-up, the cases are not.

~~~“Joey”~~~

“Joey” was a 10-year-old boy brought in by his mom because of anger problems. He was clearly an Indian in all the physical stereotypes – straight from central casting. He clearly didn’t want to talk, so I set-up a 2’x2’ sand-tray with lots of figures. He set up “battle” scenes between good guys and bad guys – Army men and Indians. He was the director of the action between the two sides; I was only observing.

After a couple of minutes of the Indians being mostly slaughtered by the Army, I asked 10-year-old Joey how he felt about the Army killing him and his people. I was stunned at both his reply and the ferocity in which he spoke: “The Indians are the bad guys, they’re no good, they need to be shot by the Army people. I’m an Army man not a damn Injun.” As he spoke his anger filled the room and he could not contain it, and turned over the sand-tray. Clinically, this is called internalized oppression. It is not uncommon, and without intervention with compassionate understanding, it does not bode well, for him and for anyone in his environment.

~~~“George”~~~

“George” was a senior Hupa man, whose life was deeply informed by a traditional Indian way-of-life. For as long as anyone knew, his family fished the Trinity River at a designated area. His family was rooted in that designated area, for literally thousands of years. Not hundreds of years.

In various tribal activities and ceremonies, it was the responsibility of George’s family to fish his family area and provide salmon for everyone. For more generations than anyone could remember, his family was a proud provider to the tribe. Then the US government said George could no longer fish. Carrying a thousand years of family responsibility, he just ignored them and did what he was supposed to do.

He was physically restrained to prevent his going to fish. It was also the only time that anyone could remember that his family failed to provide; they had never been stopped by the Government, and George felt the weight of that. Personally, I cannot imagine the weight of a thousand years of ancestral responsibility.

It was within George’s memory that this kind of defiance could have resulted in just being shot by the Government, not just restrained. Indians were often killed by the Government for just this kind of resolve about maintaining tradition. George said he would prefer the treatment that his ancestors received; so he had to be monitored for suicide.

It was no surprise that George felt depressed. His depression was a perfectly appropriate reaction to the profound disaster of his not being able to provide a family tradition that was rooted in hundreds if not thousands of years. White people cannot even conceive of such a thing.

## **CONCLUSION**

Please consider

Focus: American Indians.

Historical beliefs and implicit assumption: Indians are incompetent to act.

Historical intent: extermination of Indian culture.

Historical policy: forced removal of Indian children.

Historical implementation: forced placement in Indian Boarding Schools, or forced into adoptive white homes.

Historical practical: to be culturally disemboweled as an Indian people.

Historic outcome: staggering degree of harm to the integrity of the person and the tribe.

Contemporary rectification: H.R. 5444.

## **SUMMARY**

The Indian people have a large task ahead of them; their promotion of this legislation is tremendously courage. They will have to face their raw multi-generational family pain when the Commission is created and testimony solicited. White America will also have to face the legacy left in the wake of our family history. We will both be made more whole in the effort. We must be the generation that begins to make right what our ancestors did so wrong.

Passage of H.R. 5444 will allow healing to begin, healing for the Indian people, and healing for us. It has been a long time coming. We must now, finally, do what is right.

## **THANK YOU**

It is with great honor and service that I thank the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States. Thank you.