



Wounded Spirits, Ailing Hearts

PTSD and the Legacy of War Among
American Indian & Alaska Native American Veterans

1. Native Americans and Military Service

American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans have a proud history of service in the United States military. Unfortunately, the stereotype that American Indians are members of a martial race is at least as old as the U.S. itself. For example, Colonel James Smith, held captive by an unnamed Indian tribe between 1755 and 1759, wrote an account of American Indian modes of warfare that was accurate enough to popularize the idea that Indians were uniquely brave and adept warriors. Later, Secretary of the Interior Ickes furthered these ideas in his writings for a national magazine, saying that, "the rigors of combat hold no terror for American Indians and, better than all else, they have an enthusiasm for fighting." Thus, by the end of World War II, the stereotype of the American Indian as a martial race, with special propensities and desire for warfare, was firmly and pervasively entrenched in the American mind.

From the American Indian perspective, war is viewed as a major disruption of the natural order of life and of the universe. Native American peoples conceptualize no separation between mind, body, spirit, and "religion," while the western society world-view (that of the U.S. majority) embraces a reductionistic/separatist conceptualization of a mind, body, and spirit. Thus, a more holistic paradigm of self, spirit, and nature is embraced by American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. Warriors are viewed as people who are placed not only in physical danger, but also in spiritual danger by their participation in war. All tribes see the warrior as sacrificing self (purposefully exposing oneself to trauma or even death) on behalf of the people; it is a role and an undertaking worthy of the highest respect. Thus, only the most serious reasons legitimize war.



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