

Opinion: The U.S. government's genocide against Native Americans should be taught in Colorado schools

Senate Bill 123 will include the U.S.'s action against Native Americans in Colorado's mandate for teaching about genocide



EADS, CO – NOVEMBER 14: A controversial monument sits in a memorial setting along The Bluff Trail Interpretive Walk above the site of the Sand Creek Massacre at the National Historic Site on November 14, 2022 near Eads, Colorado. The granite monument is controversial even today because it describes what happened at Sand Creek as a battle rather than a massacre. The monument was placed there in the 1950's. On the morning of November 29, 1864, U.S. Volunteer Cavalry launched a surprise attack on a peaceful encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho along the banks of the Big Sandy Creek in an effort to remove the tribes from the area. Black Kettle, one of several Peace Chiefs in the village, raised an American and white flag of truce above his Tipi to no avail. The attack resulted the death of about 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho, many of whom were horribly mutilated. In 1865, the United State Government accepted responsibility for and condemned the massacre as part of the Treaty of the Little Arkansas, but charges were never brought against those responsible. Although permanently affected by the massacre, the Cheyenne and Arapaho hold strongly to their culture, language and traditions today. Recently, the National Park Service has purchased an additional 3,478 acres of land to expand the Sand Creek Massacre historic site in southeastern Colorado — more than doubling the size of the existing preserve. The site was established to preserve the location of the massacre and the shortgrass prairie land on Colorado's Eastern Plains. (Photo by Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post)

By **PHILLIP WHITEMAN JR.** | Guest Commentary

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Do you know why the Sand Creek Massacre was recognized as such and not just another “battle” in the “Indian Wars” when they really were genocidal campaigns?

It is thanks to Captain Silas Soule who refused to participate in the massacre of peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples on Nov. 29, 1864, and spoke up in the face of these bloodthirsty and dehumanizing acts against our people that he witnessed.

Here is a brief excerpt of how he described it in a letter he penned within two weeks: “The massacre lasted six or eight hours,... it was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized ... Some tried to escape on the Prairie, but most of them were run down by horsemen. They were all scalped,... and all horribly mutilated. One woman was cut open and a child taken out of her, and scalped. White Antelope, War Bonnet and a number of others had ears and privates cut off.”

Soule was one of the first to testify during the Army's investigation in January 1865 against John Chivington, the Methodist Pastor, who led the mob of Colorado volunteers. Within less than 80 days of his testimony, Silas Soule was shot and killed; paying the ultimate price, rather than remaining silent in the face of genocide.

I traveled from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana — which we secured by congressional act following other incidents of genocide against our people — to Denver — also our homeland — to honor him. A plaque was placed at the state Capitol over 150 years later to recognize Soule's bravery.

It is important to recognize that forcing us on small Indian Reservations often in different states, was one of the steps in the dispossession of our vast homelands, at least parts of which were promised to us in treaties.

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In many ways the reservations mark the dispossession, oppression and dependency deliberately created and recognized as indicators of colonialism by the United Nations. Created to restrain our people, they still today represent institutionalism and the statistics speak to the dysfunctional environment deliberately created.

As a traditional Cheyenne Chief, I do not have to be welcomed to Denver and our homelands, I am home. So I also came home, to honor the line of Cheyenne Peace Chiefs I stand in, including my ancestor White Antelope who had been given a peace medal by President Abraham Lincoln and met Chivington only to later be mutilated and massacred. It is clear who the peace-loving kind people were and who was part of the bloodthirsty mob hungry for our land. It is the story of how our peoples, entire tribes were driven from what was to become the state of Colorado by genocide.

As Colorado stands to mark its 150th anniversary in the summer of 2026 there can be no more denying the Genocide Against Native Americans in these very lands; rather we have to use this moment to acknowledge, and teach about incidents of genocide right here.

We can no longer sweep acts of genocide against Native Americans under the legislative rug. There can be no more side-lining or delay tactics as the only right choice is to acknowledge these acts of genocide and their intergenerational effects, so they can be countered; rather than having them form the silent foundation of celebrations of an anniversary built on genocide.

The simple truth and key to properly recognizing this sits before the Colorado legislature right now: Senate Bill 123 on Genocide against Native Americans, recognizes this most heinous crime perpetrated against our peoples. It is a simple amendment to the Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Public Schools Bill passed in 2020 that failed to include any reference to Native Americans, thereby failing to teach all students in Colorado about genocide in these very lands.

As the Cheyenne and Arapaho people we have long waited for this recognition and we know that the Ute people in Colorado were also subject to acts of genocide. I call on all of them and their elected representatives, along with all descendants and intergenerational survivors of genocide to stand together, as our ancestors did, and ensure that their suffering has not been in vain and that our next

I want to commend Sen. Julie Gonzales who attended a meeting with Indigenous descendants of genocide and tribal representatives and committed to making this right, by introducing this simple amendment. She reminds me of Silas Soule who brought out the truth in the face of opposition.

The underlying bill includes the incidents of genocide listed in the International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which range from physical killing, as made out by these massacres with clear genocidal intent, to the forcible transfer of children of the group to another group.

Not only were our Indigenous children forcibly removed, they were forced into institutions, some that were here in Colorado, that physically beat a foreign way of thinking and being into them, just like they beat our languages and indigenous ways of being out of them.

Already legislation has been passed by the Colorado legislature on Native American Boarding schools to recognize these devastating effects and urge teaching about them. Senate Bill 123 is mutually supportive of this and all education initiatives regarding Indigenous people and issues.

I am not aware of any substantive argument that can be brought, especially by Indigenous groups and tribes, against such a simple amendment that recognizes Genocide Against Native Americans. Rather any opposition against such stands to continue denialism of genocide against Native Americans. In Canada, there is currently a legislative initiative underway to declare such denialism a hate crime.

The choice before us is like the choice Silas Soule had to make – remain silent and contribute to the denial of genocide against Native Americans or stand up for the truth!

More than a century and a half later we should all stand together.

Northern Cheyenne traditional Chief Phillip Whiteman Jr., Heoveve'keso (Yellowbird), comes from long lines of chiefs and works with Indigenous peoples across North America. Ancestors from his paternal side survived the Sand Creek Massacre, while many of his ancestors from his maternal side were mutilated and massacred there; and at other genocidal campaigns that followed. He has developed his own teaching model based on ancestral wisdom and his life experience to counter the intergenerational effects of genocide with indigenous teachings. More information can be found at: phillipwhitemanjr.org

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