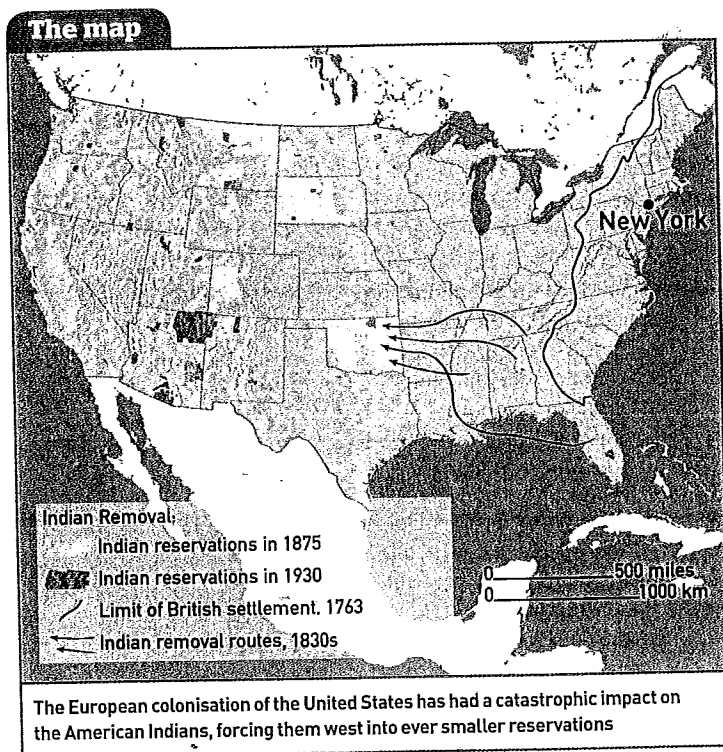


America's dispossessed

Five hundred years after the arrival of white colonists, American Indians are the USA's poorest ethnic minority. And, says **David Keys**, their future could prove bleaker still



ONE HUNDRED and twenty years after the end of the Indian Wars and just 57 years after the US government withdrew recognition from many tribes, the USA's native peoples – the American Indians – once again face testing times.

As the worldwide recession continues to bite deep into America's economic fabric, and with a new, more right-leaning Congress elected last month, many Indians (traditionally mostly Democrats) fear an increasingly bleak financial and political future. Poverty in the Indian community is already more severe than in any other ethnic minority in America.

Constitutionally, historically and politically, American Indians are not like the rest of the ethnic mosaic which defines modern

America. Although they are all American citizens, they hold a form of dual nationality. This is because they are also – and perhaps primarily – citizens of officially sovereign tribal nations, which predate the USA itself.

It's a unique political and constitutional arrangement which means that normal US laws often don't apply to Indian territory and that the federal government deals with Indian tribal governments on a strictly government-to-government basis.

Feeling the pinch

It's also a system that keeps tribal governments financially afloat by allowing them to run casinos and by supplying them with federal subsidies.

Now, however, the recession is likely to reduce federal

government funding and may also ultimately threaten the Indians' casino monopoly. Gambling is banned in most American states, but is permitted in sovereign Indian territory. However, as the United States continues to feel the financial pinch, some states may well seek to launch their own casinos – an act that may boost state economies substantially but could greatly damage Indian ones.

Lack of resources and consequent unemployment have long taken their toll on the American Indian population. Many Indians are moving out of the reservations and into America's big towns and cities, often only to be replaced by whites and other non-Indians over whom the reservation authorities (Indian governments) have no jurisdiction.

So why are most of the American Indian nations so resource-poor?

Between them, the 562 tribes control 87,000 square miles of territory – around three per cent of the contiguous USA. But in most cases, those territories are not their original ones – either because they were deprived of their original lands and resettled elsewhere or because most of their original territories were confiscated, leaving only a tiny remnant under Indian control.

In the great majority of cases, all fertile or resource-rich land was taken from the Indians and allocated to white settlers. The inevitable result was that, at the end of the process, Indians were left with only the less productive areas.

The first major treaty to deprive the Indians of vast areas

Timeline

The woes of the American Indians

- 1492** Europeans arrive in the Americas
- 1783** Treaty of Paris cedes many Indian lands to the USA
- 1830** The Indian Removal Act
- 1860s–1880s** Last Indian wars
- 1886** Supreme Court limits Indian sovereignty
- 1887** Much Indian land privatised
- 1950s** US abolishes some tribal governments
- 1971** Court gives Indian lands immunity from State taxation
- 1975** The Self-Determination Act increases Indian power
- 1979** First Indian gaming enterprise established
- 2000** Gang problems start on reservations
- 2010** Many Indians worried as US electorate swings to the right

of land wasn't between the Indians and the USA at all – but between Washington and London.

In 1783, after the end of the American War of Independence, the British and the newly born USA signed the Treaty of Paris by which Britain ceded more than 400,000 square miles of previously uncolonised Indian lands to the new US government – without even bothering to tell the Indians.

But the Indians remained an impediment to white expansion. Almost immediately, military and

American Indians pictured near a 'liquor store' in South Dakota, 1996. For centuries, the rights of the USA's native peoples were subordinated to the white man's 'right of discovery', leading to high levels of alcoholism, unemployment and poverty



legal pressure was exerted on them to move. By 1823 the US Supreme Court ruled that, though Indians could live on lands within the United States, they could not hold title to them. The Indians' 'right of occupancy' was deemed to be legally subordinate to the white man's 'right of discovery'.

Then, in 1830, the US Congress passed one of the largest pieces of ethnic cleansing legislation in human history: the Indian Removal Act. As a result, more than 100,000 Indians were cajoled, bribed or forced off their land and resettled up to a thousand miles to the west – in less fertile areas, beyond the Mississippi, that the whites were not, at that time, interested in colonising.

And yet, within a few generations, these new Indian 'homelands' were under threat as well. In 1845 a US Democrat and journalist, John O'Sullivan, began to promote the westward expansion of the USA as part of what he called the "manifest destiny" of white people to occupy the continent from coast to coast.

By the late 1860s, the transcontinental railroad was completed and the final military push to destroy Indian power (the Indian Wars) had begun. Partly through military means, the US government gradually took control of most of the new lands the Indians had been resettled on.

Then, as the military campaigns began to slow down, the US government hit upon a new strategy to deprive the Indians of the traditional use of their land, without the need for

Gradually, under the grinding poverty created by the new government-inspired system, most Indians found they had no option but to sell out their privatised plots to whites.

With most communal land abolished and privatised plots patently uneconomic, some 90,000 Indians became landless paupers. Between 1875 and 1930, the Indians lost three-quarters of their land – around 200,000 square miles. It was the final phase of Indian land deprivation in what is now the USA, which had

Some 100,000 Indians were cajoled, bribed or forced off their land and resettled up to a thousand miles west

war: Congress simply abolished Indian communal ownership of many of their remaining lands – and privatised them. Much Indian communal land was split up into thousands of economically non-viable plots, while 'surplus' Indian land was sold to whites.

seen Indian territory reduced from 2.5 million square miles in 1783 to around 85,000 in 1930.

All that remained for the Indians was the poorest, least productive land that whites simply didn't want. Today, the abject poverty in many Indian

reservations – lands still ruled by Indian tribal governments – is a consequence and a reflection of that long process of economic and geographical marginalisation.

Huge potential

But that's not the whole story. Indian nations may not be resource-rich in terms of fertile land and other natural materials but they do have a huge potential resource in their people: the two million Indians of today's USA.

Yet even this human resource has been compromised through terrible historical processes which have created widespread alcoholism and poor health. Alcohol was first introduced to the Indians through a particular aspect of their relationship with the white population: the fur trade.

Eager to drive hard bargains, white fur traders sometimes used alcohol during negotiations. And, once the Indians had tasted it, spirits were often used as a medium of trade. As a result, in some areas, alcohol became a unit of currency for millions

American Indians

4 key players

David Hartley

(1731–1813)

The British MP and diplomat who ceded 400,000 square miles of Indian land to the newly created USA at the Treaty of Paris, 1783, following the American War of Independence.



Andrew Jackson

(1767–1845)

The US president who pushed through the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The act led to 100,000



Indians being forced, cajoled or bribed to move west so that white settlers could have their land.

Sitting Bull

(1831–90)

A holy man and war chief of the Lakota Sioux Indians who inspired the single greatest military victory against the US army: the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. He later fled into exile in Canada for five years but returned to become a performer with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.



Howard Tommie

(Born 1938)

The chief of the Seminole tribe of Florida, who first fought for the Indian sovereign right to run gaming facilities on Indian land. In



1981 the Seminole won a key court case. Now a quarter of all Indian tribes earn substantial sums through gaming.



General Crook (third right) tries to persuade Apache leader Geronimo (centre left) to resign himself to life on the reservations, 1886

of dollars' worth of white/Indian commerce.

Other factors also encouraged alcohol consumption. As the Indians were repeatedly deprived of their lands, forced out of their ancestral homes, defeated in wars, and driven into poverty and dependence, alcohol served to dampen the psychological pain.

What's more, the US Congress's decision to break up Indian communal land in the west into small agricultural holdings

Although around a quarter of the tribes have been extremely successful with casinos and other ventures over recent decades, the vicious circle of low esteem, poverty and unemployment on many other reservations has now been aggravated by drug and gang problems. Many Indian communities remain substantially dependent on decreasing federal government subsidies to maintain basic infrastructure and services.

obstacle to US expansion westwards. And it's for this very reason that the Supreme Court ruled, in 1886, that Indian sovereignty was subordinate to US federal sovereignty, as exercised by Congress. It's that late 19th-century legal ruling which enabled Congress to privatise Indian land in 1887 and even to 'terminate' (abolish) many tribal governments in the 1940s and 1950s.

The big question facing American Indians is this: Could a potentially less sympathetic future government try to use its 'superior' sovereignty to erode Indian sovereignty and weaken tribal governments already struggling with the consequences of the ongoing recession? **II**

Poverty and unemployment have been aggravated by drug and gang problems

fundamentally altered the Indians' economic and social system.

The changes deprived men of their traditional warrior and hunting roles and turned many into reluctant farmers in societies that had traditionally seen agriculture as women's work. These changes almost certainly reduced male self-esteem and further contributed to alcohol consumption.

Historically, high rates of alcoholism have helped retard the development of the skill base within many Indian tribal communities. This has held back economic development and caused additional ill health and poverty. Alcohol-related deaths are now six times the US average.

It is this dependency – born of poor resources, poverty, alcoholism and social problems – that could make many American Indian nations politically vulnerable in the future.

Constitutionally, the status of Indian nations is ambiguous. Historically, the US government made 'international' treaties with the Indians – often, at least partially, so that the tribal nations could, as 'foreign' powers, legally cede land to the US. Treaties – and the concept of Indian national sovereignty they imply – were, in that sense, methods of 'legally' depriving the Indians of their land.

But such Indian nationhood and sovereignty later became an

JOURNEYS

Books

- ▶ **The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America** by James Wilson (Grove, 2000)
- ▶ **Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee** by Dee Brown (1970; Vintage, 2007)
- ▶ **Atlas of the North America Indians** by Carl Waldman (Checkmark, 2009)
- ▶ **They Called it Prairy Light** by Tsiyanina Lomawaima (Nebraska, 1995)
- ▶ **Trial of Tears** by John Ehle (Anchor, 1997)
- ▶ **Social Change and Cultural Continuity Among Native Nations** by D. Champagne (AltaMira, 2006)