

Native American Boarding School Policy: Patriotic Pageantry and Militarized regimen in Indian Schools During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This study examines how anti-Catholic sentiment and nativist views during the nineteenth century influenced Progressive policymakers during the Native American boarding school era to impose a militarized and patriotic system of education onto Native children. In an attempt to prove their loyalty to the United States, Catholic church leaders adopted the federal government's model of educating Native Children. This system unintentionally hurt the Native population because Catholic Priests and Nuns shifted their philosophy of respecting Native values to imposing Anglo-American patriotic values onto Native children. The federal government's role in the boarding school era often overshadows the role of religious denominations, specifically the influence of Catholic Indian schools. The point of this study is to examine and recognize how the social environment in the U.S. during the nineteenth century influenced Native American policy and gives anyone interested in the boarding school era a more nuanced understanding as to why Progressives sought to assimilate Native children into the American mainstream.

INTRODUCTION

Native American boarding school policy began in 1819 with the passing of the Indian Civilization Fund Act which proposed to “encourage activities of benevolent societies in providing schools for the Indians... and authorized an annual ‘civilization fund’ to stimulate and promote this work.”¹ For most of the nineteenth century, the federal government funded Christian missionaries to educate and assimilate Native children into Euro-American mainstream culture. Indian mission schools were located near or on Indian reservations which allowed Native children to be close to their parents and Native traditions. Mission schools attempted to assimilate Native people through Christianity but Catholic instruction was not forced upon them. Instead, Priests and Nuns practiced a more relaxed attitude towards Native Americans and respected the diversity of Native tribes, and values. Catholic church representatives created a middle ground in their assimilation philosophy by allowing interaction between Native children and Native adults at the mission schools, tolerated a bilingual school experience, and allowed

Natives to blend Catholic beliefs with Native spirituality.² During the boarding school era, government-operated Indian schools were located many miles away from Indian Reservations or on the opposite side of the country and had no regard for tribal diversity or traditions. Parents were not allowed on school grounds and Native children spend many years away from their families. In 1869 President Ulysses S. Grant instituted a policy of placing Native Americans on reservations in collaboration with Christian institutions, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to establish churches and schools. In 1871 the federal government passed the Indian Appropriations Act, which ended the practice of treating Indian tribes as sovereign nations, and forced all Indians to be treated as individuals and legally designated “wards” of the federal government. The U.S. government established the first federal Indian industrial school in 1879 with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, shifting the traditional contract school and day school system to boarding schools. By the late 1890’s such schools were relatively common. In 1900, however, the federal government withdrew funding for religious Indian schools. The growth of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Board of Indian Commissioners, and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions led to competing ideas on religious instruction, how the schools should be run, and in 1912 argued bitterly over Nuns wearing religious garb in government schools.³ Catholic church leaders responded by defending the rights of Native parents to send their children to Catholic schools or any school they choose.

The historiography of the Native American boarding school era has focused on Native policies, cultural assimilation, missionary work, survivor stories, and stories of resistance. This paper examines the social environment of the U.S during the nineteenth century and offers a socio-cultural perspective that emphasizes the reasoning behind federal policymakers’ decisions in operating Indian schools, as well as the reasoning behind Catholic leaders’ decision to adopt

the federal government's education model. To illustrate the social anxieties during the nineteenth century, I examine anti-Catholic propaganda depicted in the popular publication *Harper's Weekly* and anti-Catholic publications produced by Protestant clergymen. Secondly, I examine the position of Republican policymakers regarding religious Indian schools by analyzing the Blaine Amendment and President Grant's views on Indian education. Lastly, I analyze photographs of Native children taken at government-run schools, and Catholic mission schools to show the vast similarities between government-operated Indian, and Catholic schools. This paper argues that anti-Catholic sentiment and nativist views influenced federal government policymakers to create a uniform model of education that imposed a patriotic, and Anglo-American culture onto Native American children. Church rivalry and anti-Catholic sentiment unintentionally hurt Native American people because it influenced federal government Indian policy to further push allegiance to the U.S. government and forced patriotic values onto the Native population.

Historiography

Scholarly studies of churches and Indian schools began in the 1960s when the theme of Native American boarding schools became a popular field of study. Although many historians and Native American activists have examined federal Indian policy, the assimilation program, and Native American survivor stories, few works have looked at how anti-Catholic sentiment influenced federal Indian policy.⁴ Historian, Francis Paul Prucha, in his 1979 book *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912*, argues that Indians were treated like pawns by the Protestant and the Catholic churches in the struggle for control of Indian education.⁵ Native parents remained in the periphery of Indian school policy while federal government officials and Catholic church leaders competed for government funds and control of the Indian school system.

Prucha's work shows that Republican policymakers favored Protestant values over Catholic values by supporting government Indian schools rather than mission schools. In *Catholic and Federal Indian Education in the Late 19th Century: Opposed Colonial Models*, historians Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. and Gary N. McCloskey argue that the withdrawal of support for Indian education in the case of Catholic schools represented more than an expression of anti-Catholicism, it was also an attempt by the federal government to eliminate any alternatives to their program of Americanizing the Native American population through education.⁶ Federal policymakers viewed the Catholic approach as a challenge to their assimilation philosophy because Catholic church leaders did not force assimilation onto Native Americans and adopted a pluralistic approach that sought a middle ground to coexist with Native Americans. The scholarship connects how federal government policymakers responded to the cultural battles between the Protestant, and the Catholic church, and how competing cultural ideologies shaped Indian school policy.

Anti-Catholic propaganda

Anti-Catholicism in the United States is deeply rooted in the anti-Catholic attitudes brought by Protestant immigrants to the colonies during the seventeenth century. Many Protestant clergymen, Evangelical Christian intellectuals, and publications fueled anti-Catholic propaganda in a variety of forms during the nineteenth century resulting in numerous popular representations of anti-Catholic sentiment. Thomas Nast's political cartoons offered several examples of such popular representations. In "Tied to His Mother's Apron-Strings" published in 1872 by *Harpers Weekly*, Nast depicted Uncle Sam offering to free an American Catholic priest from the Pope's plan to rule both the U.S. and the church.⁷ Nast represented the common belief that the problem with Catholics was their allegiance to a foreign power.⁸ In "Tilden's 'Wolf at

the Door, Gaunt and Hungry.’ Don’t let him in,” Nast depicted a wolf with a papal collar trying to force its way into a schoolroom as the children block the door.⁹ Through such representations, Nast presented a view that Catholicism was a threat to the public school system. Protestant church leaders, Protestant policymakers, and anti-Catholics feared that Catholic instruction in public schools would erode the social fabric of the nation. Catholic immigrants were generalized as having a higher chance of being arrested, committing murder, and becoming alcoholics. Native Americans were also generalized as alcoholics and during the nineteenth century, and the federal government enacted laws to limit the sale of alcohol to Natives. Progressive policymakers and Protestant leaders felt that the future of the nation was at stake and parochial schools would taint children’s morals.¹⁰ During this time, concern over who should administer education was a national issue because religiously-based programs presented fundamental problems given the separation of church and state.¹¹ By the 1880’s, the debate over who should educate the Native American population intensified as Republican policymakers increasingly supported federally run Indian schools and the withdrawal of government funds to sectarian schools.

The later decades of the nineteenth century saw another wave of anti-Catholic sentiment from Protestant clergymen who viewed the increase of Catholic immigrants to the U.S. as a danger to American freedoms. Reverend Daniel Dorchester’s 1888, *Romanism Versus the Public School System* asserted that “the parochial school system, means the instilling of the most ultra-medieval dogmas of Rome.”¹² Dorchester, a Methodist Episcopal minister, viewed Catholicism as a backward, pagan religion because of its medieval roots. Protestant clergymen believed Catholicism did not uphold the same morals and values that the Protestant church did because papal absolute authority left no chance for reform. The Catholic church’s long history of

corruption and papal abuse of power fueled the Protestant assertion that parochial schools would not produce honest members of society. By the 1880s and 1890's Protestant church leaders overwhelmingly supported defunding parochial schools and promoted the federal government's position of imposing education on the Native population with superior authority.¹³ Protestant church leaders supported federally funded public schools for Native Americans and advocated that it was the responsibility of the republic to educate their citizens. The height of Protestant produced anti-Catholic propaganda came in 1895 with the publication of Reverend John Lincoln Brandt's work, *America or Rome, Christ or the Pope*.¹⁴ Reverend Brandt reasserted Protestant fears that the Catholic church was a danger to American institutions, stating that "Protestantism is loyal to the constitution of the United States, Romanism is loyal to the Roman hierarchy."¹⁵ Protestants feared that parochial schools would increase obedience to the pope and would influence little regard for the government. By the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Catholic propaganda had reached its peak as many off-reservation Indian schools were operating throughout the country.

Federal Government Indian Policy

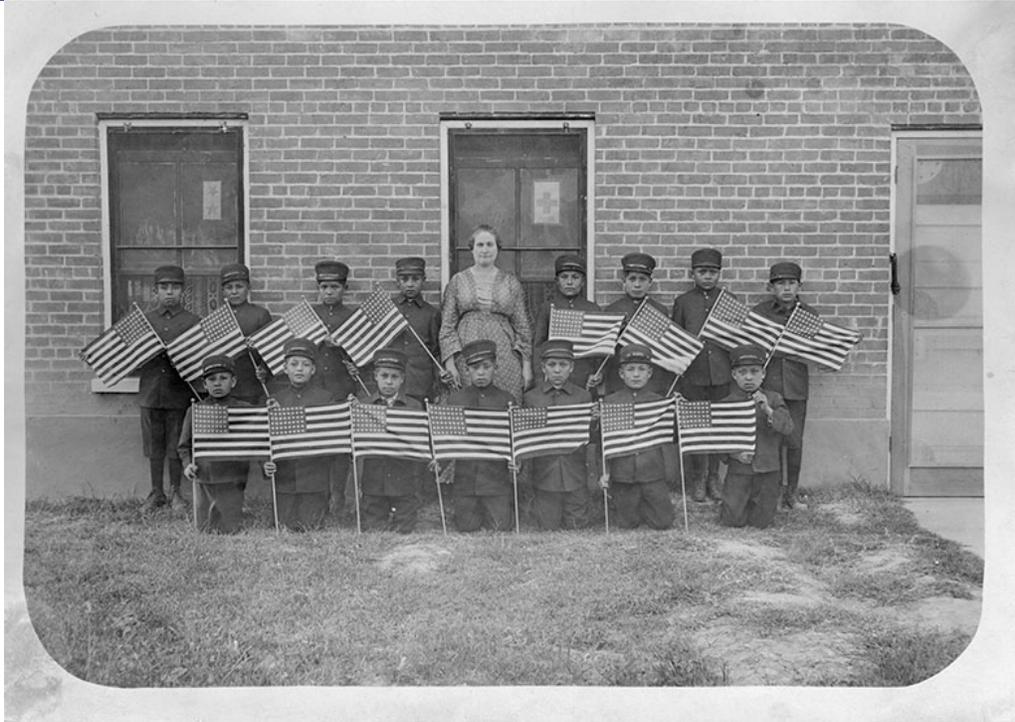
Anti-Catholic propaganda during the nineteenth century influenced federal government policymakers to intervene in how much influence these two religious denominations would have in the assimilation and education program. Seeing Catholicism as a threat to their traditional Protestant nation, Republicans reacted by taking the position that educating the Nation was the responsibility of the republic.¹⁶ In 1875, President Grant supported the Blaine Amendment, which prohibited government funds from going to fund parochial schools. Although the amendment failed to pass in the senate, many states adopted the ban of public funds to sectarian private schools.¹⁷ In a speech given in Des Moines, President Grant stated that the next national

crisis would not be defined by the division between Northern and Southern states but between “patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition and ignorance on the other.”¹⁸ Grant’s remarks reveal the underlying assumption that the separation between church and state would re-enforce republican values which was a central characteristic of the Euro-American identity. Grant’s remarks also illustrate the bigotry during the Progressive era towards Catholic private schools as Protestant prayer was a common practice in public schools during the nineteenth century.

By the 1890s federal policymakers began taking a stronger stance on imposing Anglo-American culture on the Native population. The 1892 Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, stated “An Indian is one, who owes allegiance, primarily to the United States.”¹⁹ The federal government oversaw Indian land rights, Indian tribal funds, and by the latter part of the nineteenth-century, Indian education. Congressional representatives took the position of forcing Natives into the American mainstream with the Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, which declared that the federal government would no longer recognize Native tribes as sovereign. Second, the federal government declared Native peoples wards of the state. The Indian Appropriations Act became law at a time when anti-Catholic sentiment promoted nativist views. Protestants viewed Catholicism as anti-American and the goal of Republican policymakers was to assimilate Native people, who were dependent upon the federal government for protection of their rights, into Anglo-American culture.²⁰ Protestant clergymen and Republican policymakers believed that only Protestant morals, Euro-American customs, and a strong sense of loyalty to the government could civilize the Native population.

Government and Catholic Indian Schools

The boarding school era highlights a time when Americans were debating how the influx of undesirable immigrants and unassimilated groups would transform the nation. Government-operated Indian schools began to use performances, military-style uniforms, and patriotic pageantry to transform Indian children into mirrors and messengers of Anglo-American civilization.²¹ School plays and patriotic pageantry varied from school to school but the underlying policy was that the federal government was responsible for assimilating the Native population and safeguarding the cultural identity of the nation. The first federal government-operated school was Carlisle Indian Industrial School established by army officer Richard Henry Pratt in 1879. Carlisle became the unitary model for government-run Indian schools where military-style uniforms and military-style drills were part of the school's regimen. Many photographs of Native American children posing in military-style uniforms and holding American flags were taken between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century. Photographs like this one taken at Albuquerque Indian were used to promote government-operated Indian schools as successful in their assimilation program.²²



“Boys with flags,” 1900, Albuquerque Indian School.



“Band and Student Body in Uniform on Parade Grounds,” 1900, Phoenix Indian School.

Progressive era policymakers viewed military-style Indian schools as the ideal model to outperform other Indian school systems.²³ Specifically Catholic Indian schools. The schools used patriotic pageantry to show the American public the success of the schools and to overshadow the Catholic Indian school system. Patriotic pageantry also included patriotic plays, which were used by school officials to replace tribal stories with American stories. Through patriotic pageantry, Progressive policymakers sought to educate Natives about the nation's unique history and to inspire Natives with examples of the past that would point the way towards a modern future.²⁴ The photograph below taken at Sherman Industrial school shows students performing a play about revolutionary war hero George Washington.²⁵ Reformers used the boarding school system to reinforce American values and their actions illustrate the great lengths they went to preserve what they saw as the social fabric of the nation.



“Patriotic Pageant at Sherman Institute” Riverside, California.

Anti-Catholic sentiment and the federal takeover of Indian schools caused Catholic church leaders to profess a strong adherence to the nation and sometimes outdid themselves in patriotic fervor.²⁶ Catholic church feelings of inferiority unintentionally influenced their educational philosophy and, in an attempt to show their “Americanness,” also incorporated patriotic pageantry into their Indian schools’ regimen. In the early 1880s, and 1890s Catholic Indian schools were not militarily structured like the federal Indian schools but to put their patriotism on display, and prove their loyalty, and “Americanness” Catholic church leaders followed the model of the federal government, adding allegiance to the American flag, drill exercises, patriotic plays, and the use of Euro-Anglo style dress to the curriculum of their Indian school system. The photograph below taken between 1910-1920 at St. Francis Mission school in South Dakota shows Catholic iconography in the background and is intended to show Catholic allegiance to the U.S. while demonstrating their progress in teaching respect for civil government to Native children.²⁷



“Girl students with American flags,” 1910-1920, South Dakota, St. Francis Mission.

What set Catholic Indian schools apart from Government-run schools before the boarding school era was their approach towards educating Native children. The Catholic churches did not force education or assimilation onto Native children instead they allowed Native children to practice some aspects of their culture and allowed Natives to accept their own American culture and Christianity.²⁸ Nuns were particularly accepting of Native children to speak their Native language, allowed Natives to incorporate Native spirituality into Catholicism, and were more respectful of Naive values. Catholic church personnel and Native relations date back to the sixteenth century when the French and Spanish founded colonies in the Americas. Native American people were more accepting of Catholicism because they could relate religious iconography and Catholic ritual ceremonies to their traditions. Although Catholic church personnel was more accepting of Native culture than Protestants, and Progressive policymakers, the boarding school era forced Catholic Indian schools to impose patriotic values onto Native children and unintentionally suppressed Native culture. The photograph below taken in 1935 at Holy Rosary Mission school shows Native American boys playing the roles of George Washington, Nathan Hale, and American revolutionary soldiers.²⁹



“Holy Rosary Mission School Play About Nathan Hale and George Washington,” 1935, South Dakota, Holy Rosary Mission.

Catholic church leaders also used patriotic pageantry to demonstrate the success of their schools and reassure the American public that they can be trusted with promoting national unity and civic patriotism.

The Photograph below taken at St. Francis Mission school shows Native boys in military-style band and drill uniform.³⁰



“Boy’s Musical Band in Uniform,” Montana, St. Francis Mission.

In addition to patriotic plays, and patriotic pageantry Catholic and government school officials incorporated patriotic songs into the school’s curriculum. Patriotic educational programs that developed during the Progressive era grew out of fears that non-English-speaking immigrants would erode the national identity. Progressive policymakers not only acted on the fate of the nation’s indigenous population they also thought about the fate of the nation itself.³¹ Civilizing Native peoples meant that tribal identity would be a part of the nation’s prehistory, and stories of George Washington and the revolutionary war would embody not only the national identity but the actual history of the nation. Progressives, Protestants, and the American public viewed Native Americans as backward who had no government, religion, or formal education.³² Progressives believed that the boarding school system could quicken the process of cultural evolution for Native Americans within a generation.³³ The assimilation program represents a unique era for the U.S. because Progressives viewed civilizing the Native population as progress for the nation. Native Americans could only be a part of the American identity by letting go of

their cultural traditions, spirituality, and tribal affiliations. The boarding school system hyper-imposed a militarized and patriotic curriculum to educate Native children which was not implemented in regular public schools. Common schools were teaching American children patriotic values and how to be good citizens during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but at Indian schools Native children were being forced to pledge allegiance to a government that took their ancestral land away.

Conclusion

Boarding school policy during the latter part of the nineteenth century was influenced by anti-Catholic and nativist views produced by the influx of Catholic immigrants from Europe. Protestants and Progressive policymakers feared that Catholics would alter the character of the U.S. In an attempt to reduce Catholic influence over the federal government's wards (Native Americans) the federal government reduced funds to parochial schools and established their own federally operated Indian schools. The federal government implemented a more sophisticated system of education by incorporating a patriotic and militarized regimen into its curriculum and structure. In an attempt to prove their "Americanness" Catholic church leaders adopted the federal government's boarding school model. By the mid-twentieth century, the boarding school system began to slowly fade out as support for the schools began to decline with the publication of *The Problem of Indian Administration* report in 1928.³⁴ The survey exposed the horrible conditions at Indian schools and concluded that the federal government was not protecting Native American children. Examining the social anxieties of the nineteenth century provides a social-cultural lens from which to view Native American boarding school policy, and allows us to better understand how Progressive policymakers were influenced to impose a hyper-patriotic, and militarized model to assimilate Native children. It is difficult to assess the fate and

experiences of Native American children had the Catholic church never adopted the federal government's education model. What we can say for certain is that the boarding school system was a failure. As a result of a federal government takeover of Indian education, many Native children lost their lives, devastated the family structure of Native families for generations which are still felt today, and caused Native youth to question their identity when they returned home. The boarding school era did however inspire survivors of Indian boarding schools to use what they learned and during the 1960s inspired the Pan Indian movement. The military-style environment and patriotic values taught at the schools were intended to exterminate tribal affiliation, and make Native people adhere to the laws imposed by the federal government, and impose American cultural values onto the Native population.

Today, people of Native ancestral descent feel "American" but also have a yearning to know more about their ancestors and to reconnect with a tribe or culture they have lost. Studying the Native American Boarding School era from a socio-cultural perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding as to why Progressive policymakers imposed patriotic values, and a military-style regimen to assimilate Native children into the American mainstream. The use of photographs to promote the success of Native American boarding schools is one example of how the federal government and the Catholic church propagandized Native Americans and has motivated me to further examine other ways Native Americans have been used as a tool or theme to promote certain ideals. Most of the scholarly work on the Native American Boarding school era focuses on policy, assimilation, mission work, cultural genocide, and survivor stories. This study concludes that the Catholic church, in an attempt to promote themselves as "patriotic", and "American" hurt the Native population by abandoning their educational philosophy of respecting Native American values and instead adopted the federal government's policy of imposing

patriotic values onto Native children by forcing allegiance to the U.S. through a patriotic and militarized educational model.



“Women in Costume by tipi and American Flag,” 1935, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, North Dakota, Spirit Lake Indian Reservation.

Notes

- ¹Thomas L. McKenney, 1819, Washington D.C, U.S. 15th Congress.
- ²Carrol James, "Self-Direction, Activity, and Syncretism: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools on the Northern Great Plains in Contact," *Journal of U.S. Catholic Historian* (1998): 81
- ³Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1882-1912*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, (1979): xi
- ⁴Denise Lajimodiere, *Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors (Contemporary Voices of Indigenous Peoples)* Fargo: North Dakota State University Press (2019), David Adams Wallace, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1929* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas (1995)
- ⁵Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1882-1912* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1979)
- ⁶Eugene F. Provenzo and Gary N. McCloskey, "Catholic and Federal Indian Education in the Late 19th Century: Opposed Colonial Models" *Journal of American Indian Education* 21 (1981)
- ⁷Thomas Nast, "Tied to His Mother's Apron-Strings," *Harper's Weekly* (1872): 788
- ⁸Patrick Shank, "Thomas Nast Anti-Catholic Cartoons" (blog), February 12, 2018, <http://chrc-phila.org/thomas-nast-anti-catholic-cartoons/>
- ⁹Thomas Nast, "Tilden's 'Wolf at the Door, Gaunt and Hungry.' Don't let him in," *Harper's Weekly* (1876): 756-757
- ¹⁰Daniel Dorchester, *Romanism Versus the Public School System* New York: Philips & Hunt (1888): 157
- ¹¹Eugene F. Provenzo and Gary N. McCloskey, "Catholic and Federal Indian Education in the Late 19th Century: Opposed Colonial Models," *Journal of American Indian Education* (1981): 10
- ¹²Daniel Dorchester, *Romanism Versus the Public School System* New York: Philips & Hunt (1888): 318
- ¹³Francis Paul Prucha, "Education for the Indian" in *Americanizing the American Indians*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1973): 212
- ¹⁴John Lincoln Brandt, *America or Rome, Christ or the Pope* Toledo: The Royal Publishing Company (1895)
- ¹⁵John Lincoln Brandt, *America or Rome, Christ or the Pope* Toledo: The Royal Publishing Company (1895): 258
- ¹⁶Eugene F. Provenzo and Gary N. McCloskey, "Catholic and Federal Indian Education in the Late 19th Century: Opposed Colonial Models," *Journal of American Indian Education* (1981): 11
- ¹⁷Steven K. Green, "The Insignificance of the Blaine Amendment." *Brigham Young University Law Review* (2008): 296
- ¹⁸J A Swisher, "Grant's Dem Moines Speech," *The Palimpsest* 6 (1925): 412
- ¹⁹*Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (Washington, DC: 1892): 33
- ²⁰*Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (Washington, DC: 1892): 33
- ²¹John R. Gram, "Acting Out Assimilation: Playing Indian and Becoming American in the Federal Indian Boarding Schools," *American Indian Quarterly* (2016): 256
- ²²"Boys with flags at Albuquerque Indian School," 1900, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C, Albuquerque Indian School.
- ²³Superintendent Harwood Hall, Phenix Industrial School, Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1897.
- ²⁴Rachelle, Saltzman, "American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Traditional in the Early Twentieth Century," *The Journal of American Folklore* (1993): 101
- ²⁵"Patriotic Pageant at Sherman Institute," Sherman High School Museum, Riverside, California
- ²⁶Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1882-1912* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1979): x
- ²⁷Girl students with American flags," 1910-1920, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, South Dakota, St. Francis Mission.
- ²⁸Eugene F. Provenzo and Gary N. McCloskey, "Catholic and Federal Indian Education in the Late 19th Century: Opposed Colonial Models," *Journal of American Indian Education* (1981): 11
- ²⁹"Holy Rosary Mission School Play About Nathan Hale and George Washington," 1935, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, South Dakota, Holy Rosary Mission.
- ³⁰"Boy's Musical Band in Uniform," Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Montana, St. Francis Mission.
- ³¹John R. Gram, "Acting Out Assimilation: Playing Indian and Becoming American in the Federal Indian Boarding Schools," *American Indian Quarterly* (2016): 254

³²Donald A. Grinde, "Taking the Indian out of the Indian: U.S. Policies of Ethnocide Through Education," *Wicazo Sa Review* (2004): 27

³³David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* Kansas: University Press of Kansas (1995): 19

³⁴"The Problem of Indian Administration," February 21, 1928, Washington D.C, The Institute for Government Research.

- “Band and Student Body in Uniform on Parade Grounds,” 1900, Phoenix Indian School.
- “Boys with flags at Albuquerque Indian School,” 1900, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C, Albuquerque Indian School.
- “Boy’s Musical Band in Uniform,” Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Montana, St. Francis Mission.
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- “Holy Rosary Mission School Play About Nathan Hale and George Washington,” 1935, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, South Dakota, Holy Rosary Mission.
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