

THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS  
CARRIES ON U.S. TRADITION OF OPPRESSING  
NATIVE AMERICANS

Like most whites I grew up learning in school the first Europeans in America, the so-called "Pilgrims", landed at Plymouth Rock and lived in harmony with the native indigenous people. We cut out hand turkeys from scrap paper and learned about the wonderful meal Europeans shared with Native Americans on the first Thanksgiving Day. We colored pretty pictures of Natives and Europeans sitting at long tables full of food as Native and European children played in the background.

Every year it was the same story, with a little more detail, from kindergarden to high school. Every year I sat down with my family and had a Thanksgiving meal with my white family.

Like the vast majority of white Americans we didn't treat Thanksgiving as some important historical day of note or even discuss what Thanksgiving Day meant. It just happen to be a day which had been ingrained in our conscious. A day families were suppose to come together to celebrate our thanks for whatever we happen to be thankful for.

I doubt anyone who sat at that table knew the slightest historical truth about Thanksgiving or even cared. We were there to hang out with our family and eat grandma's good cooking. It was much like Christmas. I wasn't even a christian and my family didn't even go to church, but we celebrated it none-the-less. Like Christmas, Thanksgiving was programmed into our consciousness.

Looking back that is strange considering I grew

up not only with many Native American friends but near a Native American Reservation, where I spent many summer days with those Native friends, swimming, camping and generally running feral like most teens with a dollar and a car.

No one ever talked or mentioned anything about Thanksgiving or race. Beyond the occasional joke cast my way about scalping the whiteman if he doesn't drive faster; I would have believed all Natives seen Thanksgiving in the same way. A shared holiday.

It wasn't until later in life I learned that almost everything I had learned in school about American history was not only an outright falsehood but a blatant lie. Thanksgiving was just one day among many that was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

For example, I learned the first Europeans were not those so-called Pilgrims, rather, both the Irish and Norse had touched the shores nearly a thousand years before the so-called Pilgrims. Nor did the Pilgrims call themselves Pilgrims.

I also learned the so-called Pilgrims did not land at Plymouth Rock but, rather, landed in Cape Cod. Where one of the first things they did was not have a nice meal with the Native Americans but was to rob the Native Wampanoas graves at Corn Hill and steal as much indigenous peoples winter provisions of corn and beans as they were able to carry. Which started the first American tradition: Stealing from Native Americans.

In 1637 the so-called Pilgrims from the Massachusetts Bay colony went to Mystic, Connecticut to participate in the massacre of over 700 Native

Pegquot men, women and children. To celebrate the safe return of the so-called Pilgrims to Massachusetts Bay Colony, Governor Winthrop declared the first official "Day of Thanksgiving". And so started an American holiday.

For the last 400<sup>+</sup> years since, the Native American people were subject to genocide, theft of their lands, never-ending repression, forced religious conversion, rape, murder, and every other possible crime against humanity imaginable. Every year millions of families, of every race, sit down for Thanksgiving and observe a day in which 700 Native Pegquot were slaughtered. It would be like sitting down to celebrate the Holocaust or An Gorta Mór, the Great Hunger (Famine) of Ireland.

Even in the last 100 years Native Americans were marched off to "Indian Schools" to be converted to Christianity. They were beaten if they tried to speak their Native languages and their hair, a part of Native American religious beliefs, was cut short to make them look like "good Christians", and be accepted in white society.

History hasn't changed much over the last 400 years. While Natives aren't being marched off to Reservations (they're already penned in), gunned down whole sale, or sent off to "Indian Schools" to be converted, they continue to face cultural and religious genocide on U.S. tax dollars.

You would think Native Reservations would be the one place indigenous people could exercise self determination without interference from the government or corporations looking to exploit their

been regularly pushing oil pipelines near and through Native land without consulting the tribes or considering the impact it will have on the health of the people. Corporations, with the governments support, have put profit over people, as is a long U.S. tradition, with projects like the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAP), over Native objections.

These actions dont stop at the prison gates. Within many state prisons the government has continued to maintain its "Indian School" mentality. In southern states, particularly those in the "Bible-belt", like Alabama and Florida maintain policies and practices that prisoners must be clean shaven and have short hair. No religious exemption is allowed.

While these southern states often have a plethora of excuses they give to justify their policies, from safety and security to hygiene, their excuses hold no water in reality. Most Western states have allowed prisoners to grow long hair and beards regardless of religious or secular reasons for decades without incident, as has the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The real reason for the practice can be found in the words of Florida Department of Corrections prison guards in the states intake centers for prisoners. As prisoners are sat in rows to await a forced shaving they are told: "We'll have y'all lookin' like good christians in no time."

For Native Americans long hair has deep religious

connections and is not suppose to be cut except under very limited circumstances and under ritual conditions only.

This is not the only Native practice and tradition Florida prohibits. A wide variety of Native religious rites are prohibited, including one of the most sacred: sweatlodge. Prison officials assert if Natives are allowed sweatlodge they'll have sex in the sacred ground... which says a lot about prison officials view of sacred Native rites. Not only is it exaggerated it is racist and disrespectful.

What the RPOC does do, however, is maintain and continue the long tradition of Thanksgiving.