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The Diné Against Spanish and American Expansion: A Southwestern Story of Ingenuity and Adaptation

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THE DINÉ AGAINST SPANISH AND AMERICAN EXPANSION: A SOUTHWESTERN STORY OF INGENUITY AND ADAPTATION

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Abstract: Through a concise historical narration of the exposure of the Diné to the arrival of the Spanish, the latter's attempts to undermine Navajo sovereignty, and finally the American expansion into Dinétah, I argue that the Diné showed great attachment to their traditional land and way of life, pushing them to resort to ingenuous strategies in order to retain what was being stolen from them, until the Navajo eventually came out as the main Indigenous player in the Southwest. I begin with an account of the early encounters with the Spanish, comparing Diné lifestyle before and after the arrival of the European settlers. Then, the notion of Navajo sovereignty is discussed: after replacing the concept in the particular Diné context, I show how, in different areas, the Navajo were successful or not at remaining sovereign. Finally, I analyze the impact of American expansion on the Navajo.

“It is difficult to imagine anything in the natural order that could have wrought the crushing changes experienced by the native peoples following the arrival of the Europeans in the Southwest. Within just a few generations, the universe as the Indians had known it ceased to exist. And Native Americans have been unable to return to their former glory and lifeways.”²

—Laurance D. Linford—

Introduction

With a population of nearly 400,000, the Navajo, or Diné, is the largest Indigenous Nation in the United States.³ The current territory is expansive, extending through parts of Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah. However, as a result of the arrival of the Spanish and, later, of American-led politics of expansion and expropriation,⁴ this land only accounts for about half of the traditional homeland, Dinétah.⁵

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² Linford, *Navajo Places*, 4.

³ Romero, ‘Navajo Nation Becomes Largest Tribe in U.S. After Pandemic Enrollment Surge’.

⁴ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 102.

⁵ Linford, *Navajo Places*, 1.

The arrival of European powers and the subsequent expansion of the United States into the Southwest remodeled every aspect of Native American life, yet the Diné emerged more favorably than many of their neighbors amidst this long power struggle. This essay attempts to explain why and how the Navajo managed to overcome numerous colonial enemies to eventually arise as the largest Indian American nation in the United States. Through a concise historical narration of the exposure of the Diné to the arrival of the Spanish, the latter's attempts to undermine Navajo sovereignty, and, finally, the American expansion into Dinétah, this essay demonstrates how the Diné's strong attachment to their traditional land and way of life pushed them to resort to ingenious strategies in order to retain what was being stolen from them, such that the Navajo eventually emerged as the main Indigenous player in the Southwest.

I begin with an account of the early encounters with the Spanish, comparing Diné lifestyle before and after the arrival of the European settlers. I next discuss the notion of Navajo sovereignty. After placing the concept of sovereignty in the particular Diné context, I show how, in different areas, the Navajo were successful or unsuccessful at retaining sovereignty. Finally, I analyze the impact of American expansion on the Navajo.

The Navajo Nation Before and After the Arrival of European Settlers

General Background

Archaeological and traditional accounts differ significantly on the origins of the Diné. Discrepancies were observed between modern Navajo architecture and prehistoric remnants of the area that do not apply to other tribes and nations currently living in the same region: archeologists thus deduced that they immigrated later than their Pueblo counterparts. Furthermore, linguistic anthropologists have pointed out that the Diné language contains roots found in the Athabaskan family, contrary to all surrounding Pueblo groups. From those two observations, it was concluded that the Navajo immigrated from the North some 10,000 years

ago, in what is believed to be a slow and irregular descent into the Southwest.⁶ Traditional oral accounts of the coming about of the Navajo, however, provide a substantially different explanation. The Diné are believed to have passed through three different worlds, namely the Black, Blue, and Yellow worlds, until finally reaching their current territory, the White world.⁷ An important implication of this traditional account is that the Navajo believe that they have been present in the Southwest for as long—if not longer—as other tribes:⁸ they consequently derived a strong feeling of legitimacy over the land. Later, Western attempts to expand into the Southwest would naturally not be welcomed by a nation that valued its territorial ownership to such an extent.

The Navajo Before the Arrival of the Spaniards

The Navajo emigrated to the Southwest as a nomadic nation, a rather mobile group of hunter-gatherers. Once their long immigrational journey was complete, they adopted a sedentary lifestyle, borrowing significantly from the neighboring Pueblos. Over time, waves of Puebloan and Apachean immigrants brought new ideas and resources to the Diné, such as novel ceremonial practices, more efficient farming techniques, and additional livestock. The Navajo quickly grew to become a nation characterized by its diversity, ensuring successful cultural, economic, and agricultural developments.⁹

Although quite accepting of the influence of other groups, the Diné must not be mistaken as a malleable group. Very attached to their ownership of the land, they often denied Puebloan villages their right of possession over the territory. This somewhat vertical relationship could eventually lead to resentment, and until the Europeans stepped foot in the

⁶ Linford, *Navajo Places*, 3.

⁷ Bruchac and Caduto, 'Four Worlds: The Dine Story of Creation'.

⁸ Linford, *Navajo Places*, 4.

⁹ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 44.

Southwest, Navajo and Puebloans maintained tense relations all the while recognizing each other as mutually beneficial trade partners.¹⁰

The Changes Brought to the Diné by the Arrival of the Spanish.

The arrival of the Europeans was characterized by scattered exploration missions. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca arrived first in the area in 1528, followed a decade later by the exploration of Fray Marcos de Niza and that of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, who established the first contacts between the Navajo and the Spanish.¹¹

An important influence the Europeans had on the Diné is of a technological nature. The latter adopted the European style of herding sheep and goats, causing not only a substantial increase in agricultural efficiency, but also the emergence of new trade patterns with Puebloan nations. For instance, Diné women would spin and weave the additional wool into clothing items, blankets, and forms of artistic expressions, oftentimes with a commercial intention.¹² Moreover, the introduction of sheepherding brought an identity change, characterized by a sense of security. Exposed to an uncertain environment, the Navajo always lived in fear of a future famine. Their newly acquired farming skills, as historians Iverson and Roessel note, “provided the base for social cooperation and mutual interdependence. They began to have greater confidence not only in today, but in tomorrow as well.”¹³

The violent nature of Spanish expansion also greatly impacted the Diné way of life; facing such brutality, the relations between the Navajos and neighboring nations and villages changed. The Spanish conquistadors were eager to establish dominance over the land,¹⁴ an objective greatly incompatible with the aforementioned feeling of Navajo ownership of the

¹⁰ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 44.

¹¹ Linford, *Navajo Places*, 4.

¹² Hope, ‘The Past, Present, and Future of the Navajo Nation’.

¹³ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 44.

¹⁴ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 45.

territory. The technological innovations brought by the Europeans were not enough to forestall tensions, and the conflict lasted for several centuries.¹⁵ Archaeological records found that bison bones and other bison-related objects were less present in the Southwest during the seventeenth century than before the Spaniards' arrival.¹⁶ This decrease was notably caused by the forced surrender of Indigenous agricultural surplus imposed by the *encomenderos* and missionaries: the Navajos, facing a food shortage, increased the frequency of their raids in Pueblo settlements.¹⁷ Puebloans began to resent the Spaniards, who had failed to implement the protection they had promised.¹⁸ The Diné and the Pueblo, beyond their own grievances and rivalries, thus developed a common enemy: the Spanish occupier. More than the collection of resources, the Spanish also coerced Southwestern Indigenous Nations into forced labor. According to Iverson and Roessel, "The Navajos suffered more from Spanish slavery than any other Native group."¹⁹ Indeed, New Mexican Church records testify to the existence of an extensive system of captivity: more than 12,000 Diné were eventually registered as prisoners of a Spanish family.²⁰ Arguably, the combination of the surrendering of agricultural resources and the Spanish-made system of forced labor brought about enormous amounts of resentment towards the colonizers, among the Navajos as well as in neighboring tribes. Eventually, the different Native groups had no choice but to gather against a common enemy, leading to the creation of a new system of alliances between Navajo, Apache, and Pueblo Native Americans. In 1680, this newly enhanced cohesiveness enabled the Native groups to successfully overthrow the Spanish.^{21,22} It appears that Navajo relations with their Indigenous neighbors

¹⁵ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 43.

¹⁶ Reséndez, *The Other Slavery*, 163.

¹⁷ Bowden, 'Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680', 226.

¹⁸ Bowden, 'Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680', 226.

¹⁹ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 47.

²⁰ 'Baptismal Books and Burial Books', qtd in Brugge, *Navajos in the Catholic Church Records of New Mexico 1694-1875*, 167–69.

²¹ Iverson and Roessel, *Diné*, 48.

²² Reséndez, *The Other Slavery*, 165.

were substantially reimagined: for example, the vertical but cordial relationship between Navajos and Puebloans changed with the arrival of the Europeans, to then revolve around alliances forged through the resentment of a common enemy.

In Linford's words, crushing changes were brought to the Navajos by the Spanish: although they greatly benefited from the European technological innovations, the horrendously violent nature of the Spanish expansion into the Southwest completely changed the relational structure between the Navajo, the Apache, and the Pueblo.

How the Diné Dealt with Matters of Territorial, Political, and Cultural & Personal Sovereignty Against the Spanish Colonial System *General Background*

The very concept of sovereignty was first borrowed from theology by European political philosophers in the aftermath of the Reformation in order to qualify the king as the ruler of the State.²³ The term has since taken a plethora of different meanings depending on the context in which it is applied: in present-day liberal democracies for instance, sovereignty entails a delegation of power from the people to a fairly and freely chosen leader.²⁴ In a non-Western context however, sovereignty might be difficult to measure and observe as it is only reflective of European logics of power and governance. The Diné, for example, did not possess a power structure like that of European States until recently, thus making it difficult to assess questions of Navajo sovereignty. Consequently, this essay aims at expanding the common conception of sovereignty to topics more relevant to the Diné, namely, territorial, political, and cultural & individual sovereignty. How, in each of those three sovereign domains, were the Navajos able to retain to their sovereignty against European colonizers? This section demonstrates that the Diné were rather successful at holding on to their land as well as to the

²³ Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 16-17.

majority of their political institutions, but that they suffered great losses in terms of cultural and personal sovereignty.

Territorial Sovereignty

Evaluating the extent to which the Diné were able to hold onto their territory is a challenge. Perhaps most difficult is establishing a reliable proxy upon which to measure the losses and gains of territory, that is, finding a defined area that will serve as a comparative point for later historical developments to determine how Navajo territorial autonomy evolved. Referring to traditional Diné verbal maps can prove useful in doing so. Stories told by Navajos relate the pursuit of a monster, Tsé Naaghái (Traveling Rock), throughout Dinétah. This story is particularly relevant from a geographical standpoint, as the characters involved cross the entire Dinétah in search for Tsé Naaghái. Thus, the landmarks described by the storytellers will reflect the borders of what the Diné consider to be their traditional territorial delineation. Indeed, many landmarks of the Southwest are mentioned in the story of the pursuit of Tsé Naaghái: “He again began his journey [...] on the farther [south] side of Cotton Wood Pass [Béesh Łichíí’ Bigiizh]”,²⁵ and “To the top of “fish flows out” [Łóó’ Háálíní] sunray glided with him, to the place called “dark mountain” [Dził Dahzhinii, black mountain up above].”²⁶ By closely analyzing each landmark mentioned in the story, historians Klara Kelley and Harris Francis manage to draw out a West-to-East line, starting at the Southern rim of the Grand Canyon, passing through the Grassy Plateau of Coal Mine Mesa, the Canyon de Chelly, the Chuska Mountains, the Chaco Plateau, and ending at the Continental Divide.²⁷ Because it is most representative of traditional Navajo conceptions of territorial sovereignty, those verbal maps should be used as reference points to determine territorial fluctuations. Furthermore, it is

²⁵ Haile, ‘Appendix 2 in Tales of an Endishodi’.

²⁶ Haile, ‘Appendix 2 in Tales of an Endishodi’.

²⁷ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*, 70.

important to note that Dinétah does not represent a unified territory; rather, it is made of a very sparse Navajo population punctuated with Puebloan settlements. Thus, territorial expansions and losses can occur within Dinétah, contingent on the identity of the people invading the Navajo or being invaded by the Navajo.

On the one hand, Spanish colonization paved the way for the territorial expansion of the Navajo territory, providing the Natives with both the motive and opportunity to do so. As mentioned earlier, the Diné became a pastoral people when introduced to new techniques of sheep-breeding. Inevitably, the need for more grazing land arose, constituting a motive for expansion.²⁸ While many Puebloan peoples were intensely exposed to Spanish attacks and to the pressure of crop failures and diseases such as small pox, the Diné remained relatively safe from those harms. Surrounded by weakened neighbors, the Diné had an opening to expand their territorial influence.²⁹ Consequently, the Diné increased their territorial influence, leading the Canyon de Chelly to become the center of Navaho civilization by the end of the eighteenth century.³⁰

On the other hand, Dinétah became subject to harsher Spanish invasions in the 19th century. As soon as 1805, the Spanish launched a series of military operations conducted by a Sonoran named Antonio Narbona, eventually reaching Canyon de Chelly.³¹ This event alone represents a clear loss of territorial sovereignty: the newly established heartland of Dinétah had been violated. Yet, the Spanish attempted to go even further and tried to take over the entire Navajo territory—they were able to side with the Cañoncito, a Navajo group. In 1819 they reached the agreement that in exchange for protection, Dinétah would be conceded to the Spaniards. The Spanish were rapidly disillusioned, however. The terms they had agreed upon were only consented by the Cañoncito, while other Navajo groups immediately ostracized them

²⁸ Denetdale, *The Long Walk*, 20.

²⁹ Iverson, *Diné*, 74.

³⁰ Iverson, *Diné*, 75.

³¹ Iverson, *Diné*, 75.

and even regarded them as the enemy, thus refusing categorically to relinquish fully their territorial sovereignty.³² Therefore, it appears that the Navajo retained an important control over their homeland, albeit subject to frequent Spanish invasions and territorial takeovers.

Political Sovereignty

Due to their decentralized nature, Navajo political institutions were often considered unorthodox by Europeans. Governance as imagined by the Diné was not based on coercion and the centralization of authority, but rather on a loose version of democracy³³ that emphasized the role of the individual and their personal freedom.³⁴ Thus, this section does not focus on the extent to which Navajo governmental structures held their control over the individuals: rather, it assesses the Diné's ability to hold onto their traditional political apparatus against the Spanish invasion.

Diné governance was characterized by two emblematic institutions, both operating at their own level: the Naachid and the Naatani. The Naachid intervened at the national scale: when, every two to four years, 12 Peace Chiefs and 12 War Chiefs would meet. The institution eventually declined starting in the mid-1700s. In part because of Spanish missions, the People moved towards southerly and westerly directions of Dinétah and lost some of its former unity: five loose tribal subdivisions took shape, namely San Mateo, Chuska, Cebolleta, Canyon de Chelly, and Ojo del Oso. Overtime, the Naachid lost its gathering power, with the last meeting being reported in the 1850s.³⁵ The second institution, the Naatani, operated on a local level. They were constituted of Headmen and Headwomen whose purpose was to direct the “natural communities,” local Diné settlements made of 10 to 40 families.³⁶ Despite the Spanish

³² Iverson, *Diné*, 76-77.

³³ Democracy is meant here in a purely etymological sense: the power of the people.

³⁴ Young, *A Political History of the Navajo Tribe*, 31.

³⁵ Young, *A Political History of the Navajo Tribe*, 18.

³⁶ Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 69.

intrusions, the decentralized nature of the Naatani ensured that it remained the main Navajo governing structure.³⁷

Moreover, Spanish attempts to replace Diné political institutions were relatively unsuccessful. Following the emergence of the five new Navajo groups mentioned earlier, the Spaniards wished to appoint a governor general to rule over the entire Indigenous nation. Don Carlos and El Pinto successively assumed that role, and although the latter was more successful than his predecessor, both were unable to get rid of the Naatani system and to establish a centralized, Spanish-led governance in Dinétah.³⁸ In terms of political sovereignty, it appears that the Diné managed to hold onto some of their institutions in spite of the Spanish invasion.

Personal and Cultural Sovereignty

Historical accounts of tribal sovereignty have emphasized the intangible spiritual and cultural force of Indigenous nations as a key component.³⁹ Thus, this essay considers that a cultural or spiritual deviation brought by European colonies—such as conversions to Christianity—represents a decline of Native sovereignty, this time in cultural and personal terms. Records from the Mexican Church bring forth the systemic conversion—whether forced or voluntary—of Navajos to Catholicism by Spanish missionaries. For instance, those records show that within Spanish households holding six or more Indigenous captives, 62% were Navajos, all of whom converted into Christianity.⁴⁰

Furthermore, it has been mentioned that the Navajo institutions greatly emphasized the role of the individual in decision-making: therefore, any large-scale infringement of the Navajo individual translates into an infringement of Diné sovereignty. The system of conversions to

³⁷ Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 72.

³⁸ Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*.

³⁹ Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 16-17.

⁴⁰ 'Baptismal Books and Burial Books', qtd in Brugge, *Navajos in the Catholic Church Records of New Mexico 1694-1875*, 167-69.

Christianity mentioned above notably operated through the holding captive of Navajos: arguably, enough individuals were captured that it reflected a major infringement on Navajo sovereignty. By the 1860s, the Spanish practice of holding Native Americans captive was so entrenched that among the estimated 14,000 Diné living in the Navajo homeland, 12,000 are considered prisoners.⁴¹ With regards to personal and cultural sovereignty, the Diné were exposed to a systemic alienation that did not allow them to successfully hold onto their autonomy.

Although subject to significant Spanish interventionism against their territorial integrity as well as against their political institutions, it appears that the Diné were successful at retaining their sovereignty in those regards. In terms of personal and cultural sovereignty however, the Navajo were exposed to an intense Spanish-made process of alienation, leading the Native American nation to lose a great deal of agency.

The Diné Against American Expansionism: the National Era and its Toll on Navajo Sovereignty

General Background

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed between Mexico and the United States, thereby putting an end to the Mexican-American War. The Americans were now in control of the Southwestern territory, which brought great change to local Indigenous Nations.⁴² The Diné, who had successfully retained their political institutions and territory against the Spaniards, this time lost their sovereignty to the Americans and experienced a complete redefinition of their ways of life. At the same time, a more comprehensive look shows evidence that some Diné retained significant agency over their territory, to the point that the

⁴¹ 'Baptismal Books and Burial Books', 107.

⁴² DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 11.

current Navajo territory has been influenced by Diné decision-making, rather than by the U.S. colonial administration.

The Road to the Long Walk: First Exposures to American Expansionism

Shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a rivalry emerged between the Diné and the Americans. Although the defeat of Mexico indirectly served the Navajos' interests by neutralizing the New Mexicans, whom the Indians had been in quarrel with for decades, the Americans quickly became a new invader from the West rather than an ally against a common enemy.⁴³ Recognizing the firepower superiority of the U.S. troops, the Diné signed several treaties to guarantee peace between the two groups.⁴⁴ Those treaties, however, proved rather inefficient: only one, the Treaty of Ojo Del Oso, was ratified by the U.S. Senate, and none of those agreements were accepted and enforced by the Indigenous Nation as a whole—in large part due the decentralized organization of the Navajo. Raids and warlike activities against New Mexicans thus carried on: being an element the Americans insisted upon in several treaties, they eventually resorted to military operations against the Diné, whom they now considered enemies.⁴⁵ In 1849, Colonel John Washington walked into Navajo territory and captured and scalped Narbona, a very prominent Diné leader, in spite of his peaceful intentions.⁴⁶ Later, the Americans built Fort Defiance in Dinétah as provided under the Treaty of Ojo Del Oso, which resulted in an increase in tensions until war broke out in 1858.⁴⁷

Although the Diné suffered a great deal more from this war than the Americans, the latter remained unable to contain and control the Indigenous group. Explaining in a letter to Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas the necessity of taming the Navajo, Officer Carleton observes that

⁴³ Denetdale, *The Long Walk*, 26.

⁴⁴ Denetdale, *The Long Walk*.

⁴⁵ Denetdale, *The Long Walk*, 25.

⁴⁶ Denetdale, *The Long Walk*, 31.

⁴⁷ 'Treaty of Ojo Del Oso'.

the strategy adopted up until this point was ineffective: military officers concluded that a forced relocation of the Diné was the best course of action.⁴⁸ Accordingly, they drafted a plan for removal, marking the beginning of the “Long Walk” to Fort Sumner.⁴⁹ The reputedly impenetrable Canyon de Chelly was thus broken into as the American military proceeded to force the Nation out of their homeland.⁵⁰ When the Diné arrived at Fort Sumner, they quickly learned that the living conditions were extremely poor and inadequate to their agricultural and nutritional habits. They were provided with small government rations and relied on the few sheep they managed to bring along, but they could not feed themselves properly and often resorted to crows, coyotes, skunks, and dead animals.⁵¹ After four years of imprisonment, conditions did not seem to improve as the US government, still struggling with economic recovery following the Civil War, could not provide the necessary resources.⁵² Thus the treaty of 1868 was signed, allowing the Diné back into Dinétah, establishing durable peace between Navajos and Americans, defining the borders of the reservation, providing help with the building of basic infrastructure, and launching an educational program according to the American model.⁵³ A notable aspect of the agreement is the redrawing of the Navajo territory: as shown on fig. 1, only section A was given to the Diné, representing a very small part of the original Dinétah, considered so sacred and valuable by its residents.

At first glance, it thus appears that the Navajo, who had been rather successful in preserving their sovereignty against the Spanish colonizers, were unable to resist the American invader, and consequently lost an exceedingly large part of their sacred territory.

⁴⁸ Carleton, ‘Letter to Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas’, September 1862, qtd in Kelly, *Selected Correspondence of Kit Carson’s Expedition against the Navajo*, 10–11.

⁴⁹ Carson, ‘The War of the Rebellion’, 73.

⁵⁰ Carson, ‘The War of the Rebellion’, 71; Hopkins, ‘Kit Carson and the Navajo Expedition’.

⁵¹ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*, 16.

⁵² Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*, 17.

⁵³ ‘Fort Sumner Treaty’.

The Post-Fort Sumner Redefining of Navajo life

As discussed earlier,⁵⁴ the Diné had been successful at maintaining their political and territorial sovereignty against the Spanish colonial power. After the Long Walk however, scholars have claimed that the Navajos were tamed for the first time,⁵⁵ losing both land and political power. Not only did their territory greatly decrease, but their way of life completely changed following the events of Fort Sumner: for instance, they now privileged peaceful and agricultural activities and never raided again.⁵⁶ From a political standpoint, they became intensely exposed to the U.S. colonial administration and, in historians Kelley and Francis's words, "[the Americans] channeled US colonizer culture into the Diné world."⁵⁷ This cultural transfer included the incorporation of different agricultural techniques, the establishment of new trade outposts, and a great geographic reorganization.⁵⁸ While these shifts marked a decrease in the Navajo's ability to hold on to their territorial and political sovereignty, this reorganization was also characterized by an important period of revitalization.⁵⁹ To the demographic expansion that quickly followed the homecoming of the Diné, the American government responded with a two-fold strategy:⁶⁰ progressive extensions of the reservation,⁶¹ and contributions to the rapid growth of livestock. As seen on fig.1, the Diné reservation gradually grew bigger, until it almost tripled compared to the original treaty provision.⁶² Regarding the United States' contribution to the rapid growth of livestock, they notably provided the Diné with loans and federal bequests, which led to strongly established trade relations with neighboring Indian and non-Indian populations.⁶³ Trading posts started

⁵⁴ Cf. Essay 2.

⁵⁵ Hopkins, 'Kit Carson and the Navajo Expedition', 61.

⁵⁶ Hopkins, 'Kit Carson and the Navajo Expedition.'

⁵⁷ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*, 18-19.

⁵⁸ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*.

⁵⁹ Iverson, *Diné*, 106-42.

⁶⁰ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*.

⁶¹ Iverson, *The Navajo Nation*, 14-16.

⁶² Each letter corresponds to an executive order increasing the Navajo reservation.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

appearing, and weaving techniques changed following the introduction of new sheep breeds: in 1883, 1.3 million pounds of Navajo wool was bought.⁶⁴ Therefore, while the aftermath of the Long Walk was not marked by a decline of the Navajo society per se, it remains that the nation lost its territorial and political autonomy and that the profound transformations it underwent were caused by the American colonial strategy rather than by internal decision-making.

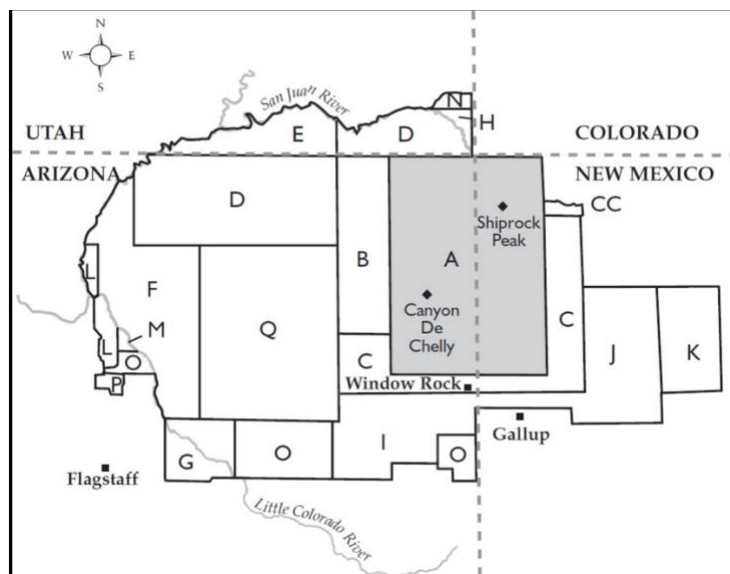


Figure 1: Boundaries of the Navajo Nation (In Iverson, *Diné*).

Our understanding of the Navajos' loss of sovereignty, however, requires more nuance. Firstly, individuals within the Indigenous Nation retained a great deal of agency: many of them decided not to comply with the 1868 Treaty, returning to their original home instead even when that meant establishing residence outside of the official reservation.⁶⁵ Moreover, most of the scholarship has focused on the Diné leadership and treaty negotiations, but because the Navajo were characterized by their decentralized nature, those accounts fall short of telling a story representative of all the Diné. Historian Robert McPherson makes the claim that numerous

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Kelley and Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland*, 18.

Navajos showed an attitude of resistance towards the American expansionists, particularly on the Northern frontier. Creating an alliance with the Paiutes and the Utes, they were able to repel the Mormons and the gentile settlers through aggressive—but not warlike—actions such as the grazing of large herds of sheep on public lands. McPherson insists that if today the Diné own the largest Indigenous reservation in the United States, it is because some Navajos, detached from a leadership engaged in treaty negotiations, were able to make it happen through strategic decision-making and coercive but measured actions. In other words, “the Navajos continued to prove that they were pawns to no one.”⁶⁶

While the American expansion in the Southwest brought crushing change to the Navajo and greatly reduced their territorial and political sovereignty, it would be unrepresentative to claim that the Navajo became a tamed group docile to the U.S government. Rather, this essay shows that if Navajo leaders did surrender to the United States, the Diné as a whole did not: through their own actions, they were able to exert influence over their territory and to finally shape what is today the Navajo Nation Reservation.

Conclusion

The Navajo suffered greatly from the Spanish colonies and the American expansionists, at whose hands it lost territory, political agency, and even personal autonomy. Despite those substantial costs, the Diné were never subdued: they resisted Spanish colonization through alliances and technological adaptations, held on to their territorial and political sovereignty, and managed to progressively extend their shrunk territory even at their darkest hour in the Long Walk.

Today’s Navajo nation is organized according to a Western model of governance, divided into the three executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and disposes of its own

⁶⁶ McPherson, *The Northern Navajo Frontier, 1860-1900*.

college as well as of a branch of public service.⁶⁷ Evidently, the modern Diné have a very strong hold on their sovereign independence: as this essay has attempted to highlight, this is the result of the Navajo's long-lasting ability to resist invaders and adapt to new challenges that allowed them to be "pawns to no one."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ 'Yá'át'ééh'.

⁶⁸ McPherson, *The Northern Navajo Frontier, 1860-1900*.

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