

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 1998

**Review of *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* By Fergus M. Bordewich**

Tom Holm  
*University of Arizona*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Holm, Tom, "Review of *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* By Fergus M. Bordewich" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2000.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2000>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century.* By Fergus M. Bordewich. New York: Doubleday, 1996. Notes, bibliography, index. 400 pp. \$27.50 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

Fergus M. Bordewich's foray into Native American politics and identity is disturbing on a number of different levels. It is, on the one hand, a remarkably accurate look at Native American political dilemmas, frustrations, and achievements. On the other, it is a flawed survey of what it means to be Native American in the United States. It lacks a clear critical framework and races willy-nilly from one group to another, judging achievements on the basis of economic success or how the tribes fit into the hierarchal apparatus that runs the nation.

Bordewich is at his finest when dealing with the American obsession with race. He writes elegantly about race, the invention of the "Indian" as the anathema of western culture, and how European invaders and Americans used imagery to justify genocide. Race was, and is, simply a social construction used to deny human rights. The color of one's skin and the texture of one's hair are simply false and useless indicators of intelligence, cultural worth, or political reliability.

Unfortunately Bordewich fails to convince after he gets to his main theme. The book is essentially an argument for dropping any "special" rights that Indians have managed to hang on to over the last five centuries. Bordewich writes that Indians are no longer Indians anymore and should, therefore, be treated as other Americans. In a revival of the modernization theory of colonialism, Bordewich argues that:

(1) Indians are out-marrying at rates which will eventually destroy any kind of racial or tribal identity; (2) many Indian groups are neither racially nor culturally homogenous; (3) most Indians have more or less adopted the general economic views, political attitudes, and social constructions of the American majority; (4) Indian tribal governments, with few exceptions, are corrupt, do not have the democratic safeguards of institutional checks and balances, and have not provided sufficiently for the basic civil rights of tribal members that are enjoyed by other Americans; (5) Indians are frightening other Americans by dredging up certain dubious rights, such as tribal sovereignty, to deny these Americans, mostly whites, their rights of property and political representation; (6) Indian traditionalists are not really environmentalists as they are often portrayed, but the dupes of the tree-hugging, no-growth radicals standing in the path of scientific knowledge and progress; and (7) most Indians, just like other Americans, are immigrants and conquerors themselves. Given all of these factors, he contends, Indian assimilation has been accomplished and the attempt to maintain separate governments and tribal sovereignty is an exercise in futility. In short, modernization is an absolute fact, as immutable, to Bordewich, as the rhythm of the ocean tides.

It is Bordewich's apparently uncritical acceptance of most of these ideas that is particularly disturbing. The Lumbees, according to Bordewich, have few members who display the racial characteristics of Indians, are Christians, and are not native to the soil of Robeson County, North Carolina. They are thus a marginal group. Bordewich also maintains that scholars have established the Apaches as nomadic newcomers to southern Arizona who therefore have no real claim to Mt. Graham. Similarly, Bordewich holds that the Lakotas came storming out of Minnesota to lay waste to the Great Plains and have only a transient claim to the Black Hills. The Lakotas, in fact, seem to be Bordewich's special whipping boys. They bottled up the Mandan when they were

suffering the horrors of a smallpox epidemic; they made genocidal war on the Crows, Pawnees, Omahas, and others; they have scared the bejesus out of the whites on Sioux reservations. He seems to forget that whites brought smallpox in the first place and did not vaccinate the Mandans even though they had the wherewithal to do so. In addition, most Plains warfare was ritualized to the point that genocide was actually antithetical to Lakota goals in battle. As to the whites on the reservations, they came as a result of their own government's Indian policies.

The main point is that all of Bordewich's factors and arguments make little difference in the scheme of things in Indian country. The United States, as a nation-state, entered into a political relationship with American Indians conducted through tribal governments. Put in the crudest possible terms, Indians retained a number of privileges in exchange for land and natural resources. Bordewich simply wants to end that relationship in the belief that history is somehow nullified by forgetting, and forgiving, what really happened.

TOM HOLM  
American Indian Studies Program  
University of Arizona