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The Failures and Consequences of Propaganda at Carlisle Indian School

The 1893 Chicago World Fair brought thousands of spectators from across the world to see the newest inventions, innovations, and creations. Alongside the zipper and first Ferris Wheel, there was one particularly notable display: an exhibit from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. At this exhibit, viewers could see students dressed in bright red and orange feather headdresses in a makeshift hut representing an Indian Reservation— though the colors and architecture demonstrated that of no specific nation. As one walked further down the hall, they would see female students posed at a sewing machine, demonstrating their new skills in couture. Next to the female students would be a display of male students, dressed in traditional United States military uniforms, positioned as if they were working the printing press. Amidst all the eye-catching dioramas were artifacts from American Indian reservations, images of the Carlisle School, and an enormous American flag hanging above the exhibit. The administration brought the students, images, and artifacts to the fair to prove to the world the overwhelming success of the assimilation efforts occurring at the Carlisle Indian School.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was founded in 1879 by General Richard H. Pratt. The school manipulated and took Indigenous children from tribes across the country to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. There, the school began a forceful assimilation process that aimed to eradicate any remaining piece of their Indian identity, such as names, language, and cultural practices. The school was designed to control the presence of indigenous nations in The United States without having to spend the money and resources continuously fighting in battles with them. In addition

to the abuse the school forced them to endure, Pratt and his administration often used the students as propaganda to bring revenue into the school by circulating postcards or “Before and After” photos of the “savage Indian” turned “civilized white citizen”, demonstrating the morbid successfulness of assimilation at Carlisle. They even used the school sanctioned band and football team consistently to bring attention to the school¹.

However, one of the most elaborate propaganda efforts was Pratt’s exhibit at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. Pratt brought hundreds of students to Chicago with him to perform in exhibits portraying the ‘development’ of American Indians in the United States. Drawing from newspaper articles, letter of Pratt’s correspondence with the Department of Indian Affairs, and the Carlisle School’s annual school reports, this paper will explore the extent to which Pratt’s promises of his exhibit’s success were accurate. Pratt’s exhibit was an elaborate, expensive, and ultimately insufficient attempt to bring renown and revenue into the school. The exhibit failed to obtain the interest of audiences and did not lead to an increase in donations to the school. Instead of achieving revenue and renown, it instead provoked a public curiosity of a fetishized and incomprehensive version of Native American culture, potentially leading to more bias against indigenous individuals across the country.

The Chicago World Fair attracted audiences from around the world, and Pratt was determined to take advantage of the crowd to build the reputation of his school and gather respect for the group of Indigenous children he was attempting to assimilate into American culture. Pratt writes in a letter to the director of the World Fair that, if granted an exhibit, he would “make known [the] better qualities and capacities of the Indian which, if rightly used may and will bring about great changes in his favor²”. The exhibition was compiled of photographs comparing Carlisle to various reservations, constructed adaptations of generalized “Indian” tools,

homes, and weapons, and, most strikingly, dioramas of American Indian life before Carlisle and during their time at Carlisle depicted by actual students³. Pratt argued that the exhibit would be insufficient if it only displayed pictures and artifacts, writing to the Office of Indian Affairs, “The results of Indian education and the capabilities of the race should be presented, not only by specimens but by living examples⁴”. Pratt’s decision to include students in his diorama-like exhibit was his, arguably futile, attempt to enhance his exhibit, hopefully grabbing the attention of audiences more sufficiently. The students brought Pratt’s exhibit to life, but Pratt’s decision to use them as artifacts themselves deeply dehumanized them in front of thousands of onlookers.

What greatly impacted how the Carlisle exhibit was perceived by the public was the Chicago World Fair’s long association with colonialism. Also known as the Columbian Exhibition, the fair celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World. Many of the exhibits also reflected the ideals of the Age of Imperialism, which was at its height during the late 1800s. Pratt’s received much praise by the press for his exhibit’s relationship with colonialism and imperialism; the New York Mail and Express, for instance, felt that the “300 Indian boys and 50 Indians girls, the descendants of those first Americans who were here before Columbus discovered the West Indies, are in themselves an unmatched proof of our progress, and show that what Columbus hoped... is now in a fair way of accomplishment⁵”. Pratt’s exploitation of Indigenous children to prove a point about his school being a vessel of Columbus’s intentions for American Indians in the New World not only perpetuated the horrors being executed at the Carlisle School, but also led the public to respect and encourage the cultural-genocide-by-forced-assimilation that the Indian Schools were propagating. During this celebration dedicated to Columbus, the school was marketing themselves as an incarnation of his values, using the romanticization of settler colonialism to their advantage. Pratt wanted to

convey the idea that the Carlisle Indian Industrial School's existence exemplified Columbus's wishes— namely Carlisle's active eradication of indigeneity— and greatly benefited of the United States resulted from those wishes.

During the planning stages of Carlisle's World Fair exhibit, Pratt developed his ideas of how best to demonstrate the indispensable nature of Carlisle Indian School's role in the surveillance and control over American Indian nations; most notably, he began to outline how he would use students to present his message. In a planning letter to the Office of Indian Affairs, he provided an in-depth diagram of what he hoped the exhibit would look like. The main part of the exhibit was organized so that at one end of the hallway, students themselves would model what "authentic" Indian reservation life looked like. They would wear oversimplified "tribal" clothes that were far from realistic, not reflecting any nation's traditional clothing. There were artifacts (likely stolen) from Indian reservations on display, model wagons built for the exhibits that sentimentalized Western expansion, and a recreation of a Navajo Hogan, complete with furnishings, taxidermized animals, and live depiction of a family on display (a demonstration of the very families that Carlisle Indian School ripped apart). This exhibit, riddled with generalized and incomplete pictures of the American Indian experience before and during their time at Carlisle, dehumanized and banalized Indian children from all over the Americas to one singular entity. It completely disregarded the prominent cultural diversity across indigenous nations. On the other sides of the hallway, however, were the dioramas of Indian life *after* they had been brought to Carlisle. Here, Pratt displayed children at work in print shops, at school desks, or with sewing machines, demonstrating the perceived *indispensable* skills that they gained while away from their unsuitable homes on reservations.⁶ The skillful layout of the exhibit explicitly aimed to show audiences the Indian's progress from reservation to civilization that Pratt and the

Carlisle school were claiming to accomplish. The exhibit's installation at Chicago in 1893 left Pratt hopeful for the renown he believed he would achieve for his school.

The exhibit was successful, from a certain perspective, at drawing more positive attention to the school. The Department of Liberal Arts, the administrative group in charge of organizing the World Fair, awarded the Carlisle Indian School a diploma for "excellence of methods, objects, and results" following their exhibit at the World Fair⁷. The award describes the Indian School as "the best plan for the industrial, intellectual, patriotic, social, moral, and spiritual training of the Indian to take his place as a member of civilized society⁸". The presence of this award, especially the way Pratt boasts of it in his annual report, provides evidence of how the exhibit impacted the perspectives of the intellectuals and members of the public who were present at the fair in 1893. The way Pratt describes it, without a doubt, the exhibits elicited support from the public and renewed momentum for Indian Education efforts across the country. Pratt writes in his reports unswervingly that undeniably, the public was fascinated and intrigued by the effects of Indian surveillance through education.

Beginning my research, I believed that what Pratt wrote in his annual reports was the complete truth. It made sense to me that this exhibition would attract the attention of most of the fair goers, as it displayed a process of assimilation that would provide comfort to white Americans who viewed indigeneity as a threat. However, author Robert Trewnert in the *American Indian Quarterly* provides a new perspective on how accurate Pratt's accounts of the exhibition's success were. Trewnert writes that "had [the reports] been accurate, it would have signified a considerable achievement". He immediately notes that this was not the case. In stark contrast, he describes how the exhibit "attracted scant attention" by the public⁹. This claim directly contradicts Pratt's claims about how inspiring his exhibit was. Even if many newspapers

reported on the triumph of the exhibit, these accounts could be disconnected from the public's genuine and general perception. Trennert further challenged my assumptions of public perception and fascination of American Indians by explaining that "Buffalo Bill" shows, which performed exaggerated caricatures of Native Americans in battle with white men moving West, performed next to the exhibit, and greatly inhibited the interest in Indian education since the public could view the more entertaining alternative of slap humor at the Indian's expense. He writes that "the wild west shows... were a great success, enjoyed by a public obviously more interested in the Indians of Old¹⁰". Not only did Pratt fail to gather interest for the project of Indian education, his efforts to show the American Indians as civilized and respectable citizens due to his school were also overpowered by "Buffalo Bill" shows perpetuating the stereotypes of savagery and inanity that the Carlisle administration was trying to eradicate. Pratt's inability to generate more public interest than Buffalo Bill performances hurt the school's reputation and failed to gain American Indians any respect and perception of humanity from the public. The school wasted \$25,000¹¹ of government funding only for the exhibit to be counterproductive to the bolstering of the school's reputation. Of course, Pratt would do anything he can to cover his mistakes, even if it meant exaggerating his minute victories while at the fair to salvage his and the school's dignity. This fabrication did not come without a cost, and it became apparent in the following years just how unproductive the exhibit was in bringing in outside monetary support to the school.

One of the primary motives behind bringing Carlisle students to Chicago for the exhibition was to push the government to allocate more money to the school and persuade more individuals to make donations to the school. To advertise his goals, Pratt brings attention to many articles in his annual reports, all urging that more funding be allocated to the school,

especially after their pristine performance at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. He does this with the hope that readers will be encouraged, and perhaps persuaded, by the press to rally in support of such an impactful project. He includes a quote from *The Boston Advertiser* which reports in support of the school and its funding writing, “Certainly their appearance justified the wish that the work of Indian education were more extended than it now is¹²”. *The New York Evangelist* urges more funding from the government writing in an article, “It is a great pity— we almost said outrage— that our representatives in Congress do not at once come to the help of this school and supply it with everything actually necessary for its success. Their constituents, so far as intelligent and worthy, would heartily approve such action¹³”. In that same article, Pratt himself is quoted as directly pleading the government for money writing, “I am tired and out of patience with the course pursued. There is hope that appropriations for the year will be made.¹⁴” This alludes to the fact that the money being allocated to the school from the government was less than what Pratt expected and wished for, leaving one to wonder where the constituents’ “heart[y] approv[al]” of such allocations went, and if they were even present in the first place.

In reference to non-government donations, a declining trend in outside donations to the school proves that despite their efforts, the Chicago World Fair did not elicit any spike in donations to the school. In 1890, three years before the Columbian Exhibition, the school received around \$5,200¹⁵ from outside individual donors. The following year, they received only around \$4,400¹⁶ outside government grants. The next year on record, the year following the World Fair, they only made just about \$2,000¹⁷. Pratt expected the money allocated to their school from the public and the government to skyrocket after what Pratt recorded in his reports as a successful exhibition. However, the statistics show the opposite, and demonstrate how drastically the exhibit failed in bringing extra revenue into the Carlisle Indian School and its

assimilation project. The evidence of how much money Carlisle gained in a result of its Chicago exhibit does not match the claims of its unmatched success. It is important to think about how the Indian School's longevity would've been affected if Pratt hadn't manipulated his audience and misrepresented the lack of funds and supports coming into the school from the public. Pratt made the conscious decision to spend the money to bring his students to Chicago to raise money for the school and he fell flat. Nevertheless, the indigenous children who were put on undignified display for the public's viewing and dehumanized in front of thousands each day were exploited and exposed for days on end. They endured being Pratt's exhibition flagship, all without raising the money that could've made their experience at Carlisle Indian School the slightest fragment more humane.

Although the World Fair exhibits did not generate more interest in Indian assimilation and education or have the monetary effects that Pratt had hoped, the consequences that it had on the students cannot be ignored. The physical and mental toll that the demoralizing act of performing for an audience that fetishizes their existence must have had on the students at Carlisle is immense. The exhibit placed them in very vulnerable positions as it explicitly urged audiences to view the Indigenous students as a problem that needed to be fixed. By focusing on the "progress" of American Indian civilization efforts, the exhibit acted to erase genuine indigeneity from the public's eye, replacing them with the extremely generalized representations of "Indian life" that Pratt staged his students to portray in diorama form. In addition to neglecting the variation within Indigenous nations, the exhibit also left out crucial pieces of the picture of life at Carlisle, such as the abuse the students faced while there. The exhibit accomplished this all while presenting American Indian children to the public to be scrutinized by viewers as something to be controlled instead of respected.

Regardless of its failure to bring revenue into the school, the Chicago World Fair exhibit in 1893 gave the American and international audience a fetishized and censored version of what was happening at Carlisle, leaving out many details that would help the public understand sincere indigeneity and how variable it can be. In addition, it failed to provoke any sympathy for the students enduring the horrors of cultural genocide, instead making those students act as vessels to perpetuate such a genocide in exhibits such as these. In addition to propagating these harmful ideals through his exhibit, Pratt refused to be transparent with his administration about the factual outcome of Carlisle's efforts in Chicago, unable to come to terms with the overall failure of his exhibit to provoke any concrete support for Carlisle despite the funding that the Department of Indian Affairs allocated to it. If Pratt had conveyed the whole story of his time at the Chicago World Fair, instead of just praises for the success of the exhibition in his annual reports, would it have taken until WWI to close the school and others like it?

Pratt's vision for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School's exhibit at the 1893 Chicago World Fair ultimately failed to accomplish all that Pratt promised of it. Despite this, Pratt continued to embellish the outcome of the exhibit to the public, while neglecting the harmful effects it must have had on the American Indian children forced to perform in it. The ills that occurred at Carlisle, specifically within propaganda efforts such as the exhibition in Chicago, cannot be undone. But, by examining the lies that the school projected onto the public, we can continue to enhance our perceptions of the school, and perhaps further center Indigenous voices — especially those descended from Carlisle students — more completely and authentically. I would encourage further research to examine the other ways Pratt attempted to gain money for the school, and specifically how these insufficient efforts affected the students and the presence of American Indian nations across the country.

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- ¹ For more information on the Carlisle Indian Industrial School's purpose, methods, and the experience of students, see "Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories, Memories, and Reclamations" edited by Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Susan D. Rose
- ² Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 29 September 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Pratt Outline's Exhibit for World' Columbian Exhibition: RG 75, Entry 91, box 666, 1890-#30384 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/pratt-outlines-exhibit-worlds-columbian-exposition>
- ³ Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle, PA to The Office of Indian Affairs, 15 October 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Proposed Expenses and Diagram for Exhibit at World's Columbian Exhibition: RG 75, Entry 91, box 670, 1890-#32025 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/proposed-expenses-and-diagram-exhibit-worlds-columbian-exposition>
- ⁴ Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 29 September 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Pratt Outline's Exhibit for World' Columbian Exhibition: RG 75, Entry 91, box 666, 1890-#30384 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/pratt-outlines-exhibit-worlds-columbian-exposition> :
- ⁵ Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to The Office of Indian Affairs, 31 August 1893. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Annual Report of the Carlisle Indian School, 1892-1893: RG 75, Entry 91, box 1016, 1893-#32674 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/annual-report-carlisle-indian-school-1892-1893>
- ⁶ Pratt to The Office of Indian Affairs, 15 October 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Proposed Expenses and Diagram for Exhibit at World's Columbian Exhibition: RG 75, Entry 91, box 670, 1890-#32025 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/proposed-expenses-and-diagram-exhibit-worlds-columbian-exposition>
- ⁷ Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to The Office of Indian Affairs, 25 August 1894. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Annual Report of the Carlisle Indian School, 1894: RG 75, Entry 91, box 1116, 1894-#32854 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/annual-report-carlisle-indian-school-1894>
- ⁸ Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to The Office of Indian Affairs, 25 August 1894. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Annual Report of the Carlisle Indian School, 1894: RG 75, Entry 91, box 1116, 1894-#32854 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/annual-report-carlisle-indian-school-1894>
- ⁹ Trennert, Robert A., Jr, "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs, 1893-1904, *American Indian Quarterly*, 11, no. 3 (1987) <https://dickinson.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/1184042>
- ¹⁰ Trennert, Robert A., Jr, "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs, 1893-1904, *American Indian Quarterly*, 11, no. 3 (1987) <https://dickinson.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/1184042>
- ¹¹ Trennert, Robert A., Jr, "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs, 1893-1904, *American Indian Quarterly*, 11, no. 3 (1987) <https://dickinson.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/1184042>
- ¹² Pratt, Richard H., Carlisle PA, to The Office of Indian Affairs, 31 August 1893. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Annual Report of the Carlisle Indian School, 1892-1893: RG 75, Entry 91, box 1016, 1893-#32674 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/documents/annual-report-carlisle-indian-school-1892-1893>
- ¹³ "The Indian School at Carlisle", *The New York Evangelist*, May 3, 1887. pg .4: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/125336694?pq-origsite=primo&parentSessionId=0Lqcx5z6XJTgBOzY9rxoFvSmQnXWeJXWV2safKoOo%2Fo%3D>
- ¹⁴ "The Indian School at Carlisle", *The New York Evangelist*, May 3, 1887. pg .4: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/125336694?pq-origsite=primo&parentSessionId=0Lqcx5z6XJTgBOzY9rxoFvSmQnXWeJXWV2safKoOo%2Fo%3D>
- ¹⁵ Carlisle Barracks Agency, 1890, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. School Statistics Accompanying Annual Report 1890. RG 75, Entry 91, box 652, 1890-#25859 <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/docs-documents/NARARG7591b065225859.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Carlisle Barracks Agency, 1890, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. School Statistics Accompanying Annual Report 1890. RG 75, Entry 91, box 776, 1891-#33182 https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/docs-documents/NARA_RG75_91_b0776_33182.pdf
- ¹⁷ Carlisle Barracks Agency, 1894, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. School Statistics Accompanying Annual Report 1894: RG 75, Entry 91, box 1116, 1894-#33044 https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/docs-documents/NARA_RG75_91_b1116_33044.pdf Carlisle PA