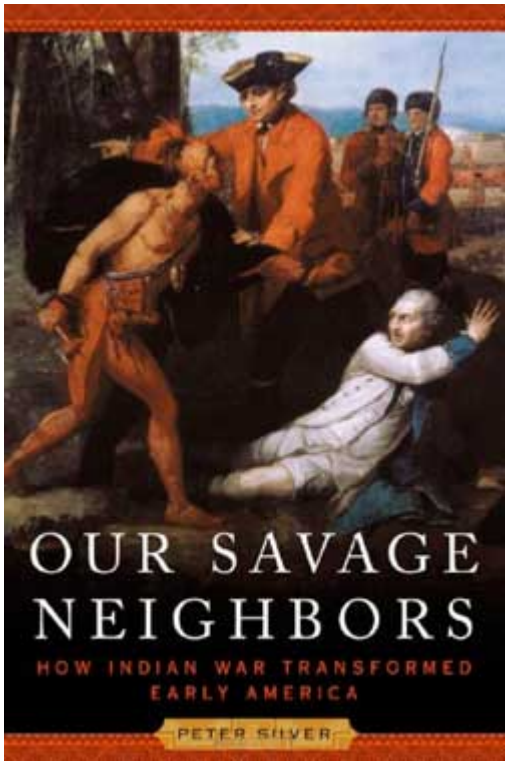
Blood and Bigotry



Peter Silver, Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. 352 pp., cloth, $29.95.

In November 1755, as the Seven Years' War brought hostilities to western Pennsylvania, several hundred German settlers walked some sixty miles to Philadelphia alongside a wagon heaped with the scalped and dismembered bodies of their neighbors. Once in the city, they escorted the display to the governor's house and, according to one observer, threw the body parts at the door of the State House, "cursing the Quakers[‘] Principles" (78). Peter Silver's powerful book details how, beginning in the 1750s, colonists' displays and descriptions of mangled bodies helped to create the increasingly meaningful rhetorical categories of "Indians" and "white people."

European Americans' construction of racial categories is well-worked ground, but Silver's extensive research, trenchant analysis, and elegant prose make the tale clearer and newly chilling. The unprecedented mingling of diverse Europeans in the middle colonies did not at first lead to mutual understanding. Different religious and ethnic groups saw themselves as the "chosen people" in the midst of a disturbing Babel. What began to bind them together was not a belief in European superiority but the opposite—a shared feeling of victimization at the hands of Indians and other enemies. Silver's ability to convey the terror of living in a war zone makes the transition comprehensible. As he explains, Indians fighting against the colonial settlements intended their attacks to be terrifying. They succeeded. The most common response to

wartime violence was moving away, exactly the desired outcome of Indian attackers from the Seven Years' War through the early 1790s. As European settlers stressed their common suffering, they omitted cause and context. A rhetoric that Silver calls the "anti-Indian sublime" appeared in English and German newspapers, near-illiterate petitions, academic essays, and sensationalistic plays and poems. Standard images included babies torn from their mothers' wombs and "clotted gore" smeared on walls and floors, all evidence of Indians' devastation on a "bleeding country" (87-94).

One of Silver's great achievements is never letting the inflated rhetoric blind him to more complicated realities, not only the larger wartime context but also the limits of the rhetoric itself. A growing sense of common victimization did not miraculously do away with existing linguistic and cultural barriers. And, as the 1755 display of bodies in Philadelphia reveals, not all Europeans were included in "the white people." The anti-Indian sublime was as much about lambasting particular non-Indians as dividing whites from Indians. As Silver explains, writers usually defined Indians as "co-bogeymen" (xxii) with the French, with Quakers whose efforts to restore peace seemed to betray the western settlements, and with the British during the Revolution. For failing to serve "white people's" interest, Quakers got some of the worst of the name-calling. The Episcopalian Reverend William Smith in 1755 called Quakers "the bloodiest People in our Land" (198). While Philadelphia's press had once called western settlers worse than savages, by the time of the Revolution, most accounts cast them as much-suffering heroes. Erasing the colonies' own British heritage, the Philadelphia paper *Freeman's Journal* charged in 1781 that "the Britons are the same brutes and savages they were when Julius Cesar invaded them above 1800 years ago" (251). Continuing British savagery was evidenced by the desire for empire and the willingness to ally with Indians.

Yet some Indians were exempted from the category of "Indians." Fear of enemy attacks made most settlers concerned that neighboring Mohegans or Delawares were treated well and thus not angered into violence. When wandering bands of men trying to protect their homes from enemy Indians occasionally failed to distinguish among Indian groups, other Pennsylvanians usually condemned them. Still, the rhetoric of Indian-hating decreased opportunities for peace by making colonial and Indian authorities reluctant to come together to conduct treaties.

As fighting continued after the British lost the Revolution, the rhetoric became more purely anti-Indian. Some writers advocated extermination, either literally killing all Indians or expelling them to the west. However, Silver resists the simplistic determinism so common to analysis of the rise of race. He points out that it was nineteenth-century reformers opposed to anti-Indian sentiments who became some of the strongest proponents of Indian removal (an irony that continued through the federal allotment and termination policies). As Silver makes clear, simply labeling conflict of the past as racism "is lazy, and one of the most interesting things about the whole tangled history of American intergroup relations turns out to be not how much they have stayed

fundamentally the same, but how drastically they have changed" (xxii).

A warning: this book takes a long time to read. It is filled with sentences as beautiful as that one, sentences that this reader had to savor, rereading them for their poetry and their significance. Silver takes us deep into the terror of violent interactions. To give only one example of Silver's astute combination of comedy and tragedy, he judges Hugh Brackenridge's *Death of General Montgomery* "not a good play" and reveals that "Brackenridge's own preface observed that it would have been improved if he had spent more than a few weeks writing it." Yet Silver gives enough of the play's garish imagery, including Montgomery's blood seeping into the snow outside Quebec's walls, to prove that it was "little short of a masterpiece" as political writing (234). Throughout, the book shows how fear led to hatred but never excuses the results.

This care is most evident in the discussion of the infamous systematic killing of pacifist Moravian Indians at the Gnadenhütten mission in 1782. At first, Silver writes with the demoralized air of someone who has spent too much time meditating on a horrific event: "however much one tries to understand the events of those days and to take them apart step by step, something cold and alien—an irreducible emptiness—is likely always to remain at the core of what happened." Yet he picks himself up in the next sentence, recommitted, as throughout the book, to a seldom-flinching "effort at historical sympathy" and goes on to describe both the ghastly details of the slaughter and the frustrations and fear that led to it (267). By this point in the book, Silver's historical sympathy has been so effective that we can almost believe the war-weary settlers who later claimed that the hymns coming from the mouths of unarmed men, women, and children sounded like war songs.

Silver's superb analysis and stunning prose create unsettling implications for other times of war. Lambasting Quakers' efforts at peace and toleration as "collusion with killers" (108) and accusing thoughtful people of being "tasteless" (85) for discussing context when white bodies had been damaged—these attacks on reason are hardly confined to eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. In Silver's skilled hands, they are both historically specific and frighteningly timeless.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.4 (July, 2008).

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