Open in app ↗

Medium Search Write

The Polis

Member-only story

History ✓ Politics ✓ Money + Culture + Life +

The Nation of Broken Promises: America Entered into over 370 Treaties with Native Americans and Broke Them All

A Century of Promises Made, Broken, and Buried: The Full Record of U.S. Treaties With Native Nations



William Spivey Follow 6 min read · 1 day ago

640 15 4



The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux was signed on July 23, 1851. Minnesota Historical Society, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

The history of the United States can be told in many ways. Some prefer the triumphant version: a nation forged in liberty, expanding across a continent with the confidence of manifest destiny. Others prefer the legalistic version: a republic built on constitutional principles, negotiating its way through conflict and compromise. But another version sits in the archives, signed by men who knew exactly what they were doing. It is the version written in **more than 370 ratified treaties** between the United States government and Native Nations from **1778 to 1868**, each one promising peace, protection, land boundaries, food, annuities, or coexistence. And it is the version in which **every single treaty was violated**.

This is not hyperbole. It is the official position of the United States government itself, confirmed by the Supreme Court, the Department of the Interior, and the National Archives: **every treaty was broken** — some

immediately, some gradually, some violently, some bureaucratically, but all without exception. And you wonder why Iran doesn't trust us.

This story is not about nostalgia. It is about record-keeping. It is about the paper trail of a nation that negotiated with Native Nations as sovereigns, signed agreements as equals, and then proceeded to violate those agreements through force, fraud, or legislative erasure. It is about the legal architecture of dispossession — the quiet, administrative violence that accompanied the loud, military kind. And it begins in 1778.

I. The First Treaty: Fort Pitt, 1778

The United States was barely two years old when it signed its first treaty with a Native Nation: the **Treaty of Fort Pitt**, negotiated with the Delaware. The treaty promised alliance, protection, and the possibility of a Delaware-led Native state. It was broken almost immediately. Within months, American forces executed Delaware leaders under a flag of truce, seized land, and abandoned the alliance.

II. The Treaty Era: 1778–1868

Between 1778 and 1868, the United States signed **more than 370 ratified treaties** with Native Nations. These treaties covered:

- land boundaries
- trade agreements
- military alliances
- peace settlements
- hunting and fishing rights

- annuities and supplies
- recognition of sovereignty
- protection from settler encroachment

The treaties were negotiated with dozens of nations, including:

- Cherokee
- Choctaw
- Chickasaw
- Creek
- Seminole
- Lakota
- Dakota
- Nakota
- Cheyenne
- Arapaho
- Shawnee
- Potawatomi
- Ojibwe
- Navajo
- Apache
- Comanche

- Kiowa
- Nez Perce
- Ute
- and many more

Each treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate, making it supreme law under Article VI of the Constitution. And each treaty was broken.

III. How Every Treaty Was Violated: The Five Mechanisms

Historians categorize treaty violations into **five major mechanisms** — the recurring patterns through which the United States dismantled its own agreements.

1. Land Seizure After Resource Discovery

This was the most common mechanism. A treaty would establish boundaries, and then gold, timber, grazing land, or railroad routes would be discovered. The United States would then:

- redraw boundaries unilaterally
- pressure Native leaders into new treaties
- declare previous treaties void
- send surveyors, militias, or settlers into protected land

The Black Hills seizure after the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty is the most famous example, but it was far from unique.

2. Forced Removal Despite Treaty Guarantees

Many treaties guaranteed Native Nations the right to remain on their ancestral land. These guarantees were ignored when political pressure mounted. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 accelerated this process, but removals occurred before and after the Act.

The Trail of Tears- Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole- was the most catastrophic example, but removals occurred across the continent.

3. Failure to Provide Promised Supplies, Food, or Annuities

Nearly every treaty included provisions for:

- annual payments
- food deliveries
- livestock
- tools
- medical supplies
- teachers
- blacksmiths

These provisions were routinely delayed, reduced, or never delivered. Corruption in the Indian Office was rampant; contractors stole funds; Congress withheld appropriations. Starvation was not incidental. It was structural.

4. Military Violation of Treaty Territory

Even when boundaries were clear, the U.S. Army frequently entered treaty-protected land to:

- build forts
- conduct patrols
- destroy villages
- arrest leaders
- retaliate for settler complaints

These incursions often provoked conflict, which the United States then used to justify further land seizure.

5. Legislative Nullification

Congress occasionally passed laws that erased treaty provisions. The most sweeping example was the **Dawes Act of 1887**, which broke up communal land holdings guaranteed by treaty and opened "surplus" land to settlers. This was bureaucratic dispossession — quiet, legal, devastating.

IV. The Most Historically Significant Treaty Violations

Below is a starter list of the most consequential treaty violations — the ones that shaped national policy, altered geography, and left scars still visible today.

1. Treaty of Fort Pitt (Delaware), 1778

The first U.S.–Native treaty promised alliance and protection. It was broken immediately when American forces executed Delaware leaders and seized land. The treaty became a template for future betrayals.

2. Treaty of Hopewell (Cherokee), 1785

This treaty established boundaries and promised protection from settler encroachment. The United States ignored encroachment entirely, allowing settlers to flood Cherokee land and forcing new treaties under duress.

3. Treaty of Greenville, 1795

Signed after the Northwest Indian War, it established boundaries in the Great Lakes region. The United States repeatedly violated those boundaries, demanding further land cessions and ignoring treaty protections.

4. Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (Choctaw), 1830

The first removal treaty under Andrew Jackson. It promised safe passage and support for relocation. Instead, thousands died from exposure, starvation, and disease. Fraud and coercion tainted the treaty process.

5. Treaty of New Echota (Cherokee), 1835

Signed by a minority faction, not the Cherokee government. The United States used it to justify the Trail of Tears, forcibly removing 16,000 Cherokee people. The treaty was illegal under Cherokee law.

6. Fort Laramie Treaty (Plains Nations), 1851

Guaranteed territory for Cheyenne, Arapaho, Lakota, and others. The United States failed to stop settler migration along the Oregon Trail and allowed military incursions into treaty land, sparking decades of conflict.

7. Fort Laramie Treaty (Sioux), 1868

Guaranteed the Black Hills “in perpetuity.” When gold was discovered, the United States seized the land, violating the treaty. In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled the seizure illegal — but the land was never returned.

8. Medicine Lodge Treaties (Kiowa, Comanche, Apache), 1867

Promised reservation land and protection. The United States violated hunting rights, failed to deliver supplies, and allowed settlers to invade reservation boundaries, leading to conflict and forced confinement.

9. Treaty of Bosque Redondo (Navajo), 1868

Ended the Long Walk and promised supplies and protection. The United States failed to deliver adequate food and support, leaving the Navajo in poverty for decades.

10. Treaty of Point Elliott (Coast Salish Nations), 1855

Guaranteed fishing rights “at all usual and accustomed places.” Washington Territory ignored these rights for more than a century until the Boldt Decision (1974) reaffirmed treaty protections.

Should you wish to look up a particular treaty by date or by tribe, here’s a link to all 370+ from the National Archives:

American Indian Treaties: Catalog Links | National Archives

V. The End of the Treaty Era

In 1871, Congress passed a law ending treaty-making with Native Nations. The official reason was administrative efficiency. The unofficial reason was

that treaties had become inconvenient. Native Nations remained sovereign, but the United States no longer wanted to negotiate with them as equals.

The treaty era ended, but violations continued—through allotment, termination, relocation, and resource extraction.

VI. Why This Matters Now

Treaties are not relics. They are **living legal documents**. They remain binding under the Constitution. Courts cite them today. They shape land claims, fishing rights, water rights, and sovereignty disputes.

To understand the United States, you must understand its treaties. And to understand its treaties, you must understand that **every one was broken** — not by accident, not by misunderstanding, but by design.

The story of the treaty era is the story of a nation that negotiated in good faith on paper and violated in bad faith on land. It is the story of promises made and promises broken. It is the story of sovereignty recognized and sovereignty erased. It is the story of the United States.

VII. Closing Reflection

The treaties sit in the National Archives, preserved in climate-controlled rooms, protected from dust and decay. The land they describe is not so protected. The promises they contain are not so preserved. The signatures remain; the obligations do not.

This is not a story of guilt. It is a story of record-keeping. It is a story of what the United States said, and what the United States did. It is a story of law, broken by the very government that wrote it.

And it is a story still unfolding — because treaties do not expire. They remain the supreme law of the land, waiting for a nation to honor them.

Needless to say, this is how the United States treated one group of people of color. Every people has a story. You'd better hurry if you want to find it in history books or museums.

History ✓ Politics ✓ Money + Culture + Life +



Published in The Polis

35K followers · Last published just now

Following

Writing on politics, policy, and anything else related.



Written by William Spivey

53K followers · 26K following

Follow

I write about politics, history, education, and race. Follow me at williamfspivey.com and support me at https://ko-fi.com/williamfspivey0680

Responses (15)

Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Deborah Williamson
1 day ago

This is not ONE group of people of color, it is many. These tribes were distinct societies with friendships, rivalries, and commerce of their own. Thank-you much, Dr. Spivey, for bringing this piece of our history to light for those of us less... more

20 Reply

Jamen Djedet Mendes
1 day ago

The history of America is built on a principle of colonial settlement. It was never meant to be a constitutional democracy. Like every other European nation who came to the New World, the British citizens followed the Portuguese, the Spaniards and... more

53 Reply

Pennygame
1 day ago

TYPICAL - and ALWAYS the excuses. 😒

40 Reply

See all responses

More from William Spivey and The Polis



In The Polis by William Spivey · Aug 7

The Empire That Didn't Want to Call Itself an Empire: A Story of the...

"We have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race."

1.4K 17 8



In The Polis by Dr. Leo Croft · Aug 12

KKKaroline Leavitt Just Got Boomeranged

Karoline Leavitt Didn't Resign — She Got FAFO'd, and the Receipts Prove It

5.9K 107 12



In The Polis by Dr. Leo Croft · Aug 2

Max Miller Didn't Deny Abusing His Wife. He Just Told You How...

4.6K 59 11



In The Polis by William Spivey · Aug 4

FIFA boss Gianni Infantino is Finding That Rolling with Donald...

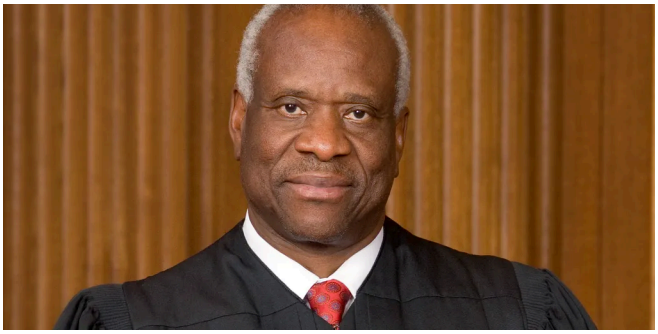
The FIFA President Who Couldn't Stop Sucking Up to Trump

902 12 3

See all from William Spivey

See all from The Polis

Recommended from Medium



Shirley Kher · 4d ago

Clarence Thomas Is No “Uncle Tom.” Barack Obama Might Be.

Clarence Thomas is called an “Uncle Tom” for refusing to obey. Barack Obama built a caree...

770 106 3



In ZORA by Jeffrey Kass · 2d ago

Black People Aren’t Hanging Themselves

The reemergence of lynching is a natural consequence of our national rhetoric

432 12 1



In The Polis by Herbert Dyer, Jr. · Aug 23

Killer-Cop Sean Grayson Dies In Prison

Is this what karmic justice looks like?

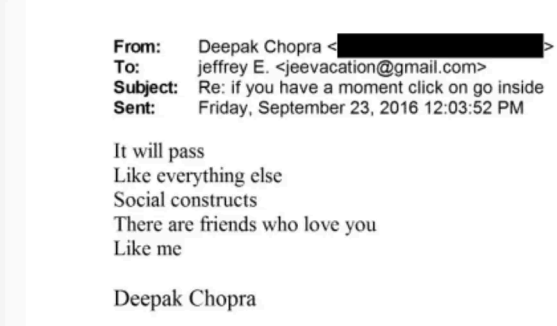


Francis Crescia · Aug 23

Does Prime Minister Carney Understand Trade Reality With th...

Prime Minister Mark Carney was elected by exploiting anti-Trump sentiment with his...

3.4K 40 8



In E³—Entertain Enli... by Patrick Paul... · 6d ago

The Silence Surrounding Deepak Chopra's Epstein Scandal Is an...

By failing to respond, the top leaders are risking complicity in his ethical breach

3.7K 91 14

441 179 2



V Victor Babaniyi · 4d ago

Washington Thinks Canada Is Trapped. Canada Is Building a...

Every tariff accelerates the diversification it's supposed to prevent. The U.S. is subsidizing...

593 11 2

See more recommendations