

"CHIEF SEATTLE'S SPEECH": A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION

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ABSTRACT: *"Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech" and numerous other contemporary sources extol the virtues of traditional Native American spirituality and behavior in relation to the natural environment. As a result, they have provided inspiration for many individuals and organizations associated with both the environmental and New Age movements. However, these various sources are inauthentic and project a naïve and ethnographically incorrect view of Native American societies. This paper examines both the spuriousness of "Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech" and the inaccuracy of the image it projects.*

KEY WORDS: *Chief Seattle, ecology, Native American*

During the past several decades, numerous romantic and unrealistic beliefs about Native Americans have become uncritically accepted as fact by large segments of the American and European public (see Kaiser, 1987; Powers, 1990; Porterfield, 1990). The two most prominent of these beliefs are (1) that Native Americans lived uniformly in "balance" with nature and possessed a unique relationship with nature distinct from that of other human populations; and (2) that all American Indians possess a deep respect for and spiritual awareness of nature that has been lost by

those who live in urban industrial societies, with its emphasis on the exploitation of nature for commercial and material gain. Innumerable publications promote these two themes (cf. Neihardt, 1932; Brown, 1953; Waters, 1963; Lane Deer and Erdoes, 1972; Storm, 1972; Deloria, 1973; Highwater, 1981; Jeffers, 1991). One source, however, stands out in terms of its popularity, its inspirational message, and its widespread acceptance for illustrating Native American spiritual values in relation to the natural environment. This is "Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech" (see Kaiser, 1987; Adams, 1994; Low, 1995). While the speech attributed to Seattle is widely believed to have been given by him, it is, in fact, pseudo-historical. Indeed, its very popularity and uncritical acceptance, even within academic circles, underscores the lack of critical thinking which exists among contemporary Euroamerican populations with regard to Native American ecology. In the following paper, I will evaluate the historicity of Chief Seattle as portrayed in the speech attributed to him. I will show that not only is the speech a complete fabrication, but that its widespread acceptance by the general public contains inherently racist implications.

CHIEF SEATTLE'S 1854 SPEECH

How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy

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them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people....

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: Our God is also your God. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. (Gore, 1992:159)

The above quote is taken from Vice President Al Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. The quote is part of a 1200-word speech attributed to Chief Seattle, a nineteenth century Suquamish Indian of the American Northwest. The speech has been

widely used not only to illustrate Seattle's poetic appreciation of nature and his deeply spiritual understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things, but also to emphasize the ancient wisdom contained within Native American cultures generally—a wisdom which many view as lost in the highly technical and materially oriented urban industrial societies of the late 20th century. However, a fundamental problem with the above quote and with the larger speech from which it is taken, is that it was not made by Chief Seattle.

The current version of Chief Seattle's speech represents but the latest rendition of a changing and evolving work of fiction. The original published text of this speech was written by Dr. Henry A. Smith and published in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887 (Kaiser, 1987:503). Smith claimed that the text which he published was a direct copy of a speech given by Chief Seattle in 1854 during treaty negotiations with Isaac Williams, Washington State's first Territorial Governor. Progressively modified versions of Seattle's speech were subsequently published by Clarence Bagley (1931), John Rich (1932) and William Arrowsmith (1969).

The most far reaching revision of Seattle's speech was created in 1991 by Ted Perry, a Texas scriptwriter. Perry composed a significantly modified and substantially enlarged version of the previously evolving Seattle speech to accompany a program on ecology produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission.¹

Perry's script departed sharply from all previous versions of Seattle's speech (Kaiser, 1987) and soon spawned its own offspring, including an abbreviated version of his script

which was distributed at the 1974 Spokane Expo and an anonymous booklet titled *The Decidedly Unforked Message of Chief Seattle* (Adams, 1994:52). A subsequent anonymous revision of the Spokane text surfaced in 1989 titled "This Earth is Precious" and was followed by a poetic adaptation of the original Perry script that was published in the *Midwest Quarterly* the following year under the title, "Chief Seattle Reflects on the Future of America, 1855" (Low, 1995:410). Then in 1991 another progeny of Perry's script provided the text for a children's book titled *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* illustrated by Susan Jeffers. While Jeffers took credit for the illustrations which she produced in the book, she attributed the text itself to Seattle. Significantly, Jeffers' book sold over 250,000 copies at \$15 per book and was number five on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for nonfiction in 1992. That same year, The Nature Company advertised a small book in its Christmas Catalogue titled *Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech*, which sold for \$10.95 (see Low, 1995:407).

Chief Seattle's speech—or, more accurately, varied embellishments of Ted Perry's fictional script—quickly gained broad acceptance throughout the industrial world. In one form or another, various versions of "Chief Seattle's Speech" have served an incalculable variety of public uses. The "speech" provided the basis for a multi-media teaching aid produced by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London, as well as a prayer used by the Woman's Day World of Prayer (Kaiser, 1987:498). Portions of Perry's script have also been published in *Passages* (Northwest Airlines

in-flight magazine), *Environmental Action*, Sierra Club editorials, Canada's "Green Plan," and NASA's "Mission to Planet Earth" (Kaiser, 1987:498-500; Adams, 1994:52). Joseph Campbell even incorporated the Spokane text in his book, *The Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers (1988) and subsequently read from the text in his video series, *Transformation of Myth through Time*. And, as indicated above, the Vice President of the United States included an excerpt of Seattle's mythical speech in his book calling for increased global ecological awareness (Gore 1992). Far too many additional adaptations of Seattle's "speech" exist to be listed here, including the ubiquitous applications of Seattle's purported words on t-shirts and other items sold at innumerable folk festivals, art galleries and New Age spiritual gatherings. Finally, excerpts from Seattle's "speech" have even found their way into scholarly publications about American Indians (c.f., Thornton, 1987:225), as well as in at least two environmental science textbooks (c.f., Collard 1989; Dobson 1995).

IMPROBABILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH SEATTLE'S "SPEECH"

A critical consideration of excerpts taken from the full "modern text" of Chief Seattle's speech (i.e., the collection of texts derived from Perry's script) clearly demonstrate its inauthenticity. It is, for example, impossible for Seattle to have made the statement, "I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairies left by the white man who shot them from a passing train," which is contained within the "modern text." To begin with, it would have been

impossible for any single person to have witnessed one individual shoot anywhere near one thousand buffalo from a passing train, given the speed of a train combined with the time that would have been needed for an individual to reload and fire a rifle that many times. There also were no buffalo at the Puget Sound where Seattle lived, which is over a thousand miles from the Great Plains, and there is no evidence which even suggests that Seattle ever traveled to the Great Plains. Furthermore, the transcontinental railroad was not completed until 1869, and the Euroamerican bison slaughter did not commence until the 1870's. Since Seattle gave his speech in 1854, a full 15 years before the railroad was completed and nearly 20 years before whites began to slaughter the buffalo in large numbers, he could not possibly have commented on it in his speech. Finally, and most importantly, Seattle died in 1866 (Kaiser, 1987:502). It would, therefore, have been impossible for him to have witnessed an event which occurred some 10 years or more after his death.

The modern version of Seattle's speech also contains the quote, "What is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a whippoorwill?" However, since the whippoorwill, like the buffalo, is also not native to the Northwest, it also could not have been observed by him. Similarly, the modern text contains a reference by Seattle to the white man's urban pollution. However, Seattle's speech was made as part of the negotiations for the initial purchase of Indian land. He, therefore, could not have commented on developments that were to follow the very land transfer he was

negotiating.

It is clear, then, that all modern versions of Chief Seattle's speech are completely inauthentic. Indeed, given the fictional nature of Perry's script and the fact that all modern versions of Seattle's speech are derived from his original script, all of the latter are, by definition, inauthentic. There are also numerous problems associated with the original Smith text, which raise serious doubts regarding its authenticity as well. Smith's text was first published in 1887, a full 33 years after Chief Seattle gave his original speech. This separation in time alone raises serious questions regarding the latter's accuracy and reliability.

Furthermore, since Seattle spoke no English his speech was given in Lushotseed (a Salish dialect), his native tongue, and was then translated into Chinook Jargon. Chinook Jargon was a regional trading language containing an admixture of French, English and local Indian words. It contained approximately 300 words and has been described as "barely suitable for bartering (Adams, 1994:53)." Given its verbal limitations, it is highly unlikely that Chinook Jargon could express the abstract conceptual images contained in Smith's version of Seattle's speech, including such statements as "Yonder sky that had wept tears of compassion upon our fathers for centuries untold. . ." (Kaiser, 1987:503).

In addition, the scene set by Smith in his version of the speech was too melodramatic to represent an objective historical account. Smith wrote that "Chief Seattle arose with all the dignity of a senator who carries the responsibility of a great nation on his

shoulders." (ibid.) Indeed, Kaiser (ibid.:506) notes significant differences between the original Smith text and two short treaty speeches attributed to Seattle in the National Archives and concludes that "the selection of the material and the formulation of the text is (sic.) possibly as much Dr. Smith's as Seattle's."

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHIEF SEATTLE

As a result of changes in the content of the speech attributed to him, the past 150 years have witnessed the transformation of Chief Seattle from first a Suquamish Indian to a late Victorian version, and then to a modern environmentalist version of the "noble savage." Through time and textual revision, Seattle has been completely removed from the nineteenth century sociopolitical context in which he existed and has, instead, been fashioned into an evolving politically correct version of the white man's Indian. However, since Seattle presented his speech during preliminary negotiations with Isaac Williams, the new territorial governor, it is in this specific sociopolitical context that the speech must be understood.

Seattle's original speech was made as part of an argument for the right of the Suquamish and Duamish peoples to continue to visit their traditional burial grounds following the sale of land to white settlers. The specific land being purchased by whites was sacred to the Suquamish and Duamish because their ancestors were buried there. It was this specific land that was sacred, not land as an abstract concept. It is whites who have created the notion that all land is sacred to the Indian.

The very fact that Seattle was chosen by the U.S. Government to represent his people in treaty negotiations raises questions: why was he and not someone else who was chosen? The Northwest peoples were organized into a variety of clans and possessed no centralized political organization or leadership (Kehoe, 1992:429-479). However, as in any colonial situation where a colonial government encounters land occupied by tribal-based societies, the United States Government needed friendly leaders to serve as representatives for the various peoples of the region. Chief Seattle was one of the local leaders chosen for that purpose. Seattle was likely selected because of his demonstrated allegiance to whites. He had, in fact, been converted to Roman Catholicism around 1830 (Kaiser, 1987:503) and was positively disposed towards white settlement. He never fought a war against whites and even sided with them during one Indian uprising which he blamed on Indian youth (Adams, 1994:52-53). He was, significantly, the first Indian to sign the 1855 treaty. Two statements in the original treaty speeches stored in the National Archives attest to Seattle's positive disposition towards whites:

"Now by this we put away all bad feelings, if we ever had any. We are friends of the Americans," and

"I look upon you as my father. I and the rest regard you as such. All of the Indians have the same good feelings towards you." (Adams, 1994:52-53)

Seattle was not merely a pawn of the U.S. Government in this situation. He needed the whites to protect and advance his political interests as well. Seattle was commercially

allied with Dr. David Maynard in the curing and packing of salmon (Adams, 1994:53) and needed whites to help him in his conflict with other native leaders for control over fishing rights that were essential to his newly developing commercial venture. Seattle refers to the U.S. Army as a "bristling wall of strength" which will assure that "ancient enemies will no longer frighten his people" in one of the original treaty speeches preserved in the National Archives, which suggests one possible motive for his signing the treaty (Adams, 1994:53). He was likely using whites to advance his political and economic interests, just as they were using him to advance theirs. This type of political maneuvering between the colonizer and the colonized is quite typical of colonial situations.

IMPLIED RACISM

There is an implied racism in the generally accepted attribution of a unique ecological and spiritual awareness to Native Americans. If we define racism as *distinguishing one segment of the human species as distinct from all others and attributing to that segment certain intellectual and moral characters not shared by the rest of humanity*, then the romantic portrayal of Native Americans as "spiritual ecologists" or "sainted elders" (as clearly illustrated not only by the popular portrayal of Chief Seattle, but also in the plethora of books and articles published about Native Americans) is as racist as traditional white stereotypes of blacks or Nazi promotion of Aryan purity. Native American stereotypes, like all racist stereotypes, rob American Indians of their humanity: that is, of their individual and cultural

diversity and their adaptability. As Kehoe (1992:591) remarks, "better Sainted Elders than brutish savages, but neither mythic projection reflects the reality of the one-and-one-half million Native Americans who grew up as Indians."

The robbing Native Americans of their humanity and diversity is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in Susan Jeffers' book, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*. Jeffers states on the original jacket cover of her book that she "consulted with Native Americans, especially with members of the Lakota Sioux Nation" in the writing and illustrating of her book, even though Chief Seattle was not a Sioux. Jeffers' illustrations are all of the Lakota. The cultural context of her book is, thus, entirely Plains Indian, the "classic" American Indian of Hollywood and the environmental movement. Not one illustration is of the Suquamish or Duamish peoples of the Northwest, the cultural context of Chief Seattle. When confronted by a reporter for the *New York Times* regarding the inauthenticity of the text which accompanied the illustrations in her book and which she attributed to Chief Seattle, Jeffers replied, "I don't know what he said. But I do know that the Native American people lived this philosophy, and that's what's important." (Bordewich 1996:133)

Thus, Jeffers and others who uncritically accept "Chief Seattle's Speech" and the many other romantic portrayals of Native Americans removed from the reality of the kinds of human-environment interactions characteristic of all other human populations (and, in fact, amply documented for the Indian populations themselves) and who fail to distinguish between one Indian group and another, communicate,

however unintentionally, the notion that all Indians are the same; that for whatever purposes, one Indian is as good as another. Powers (1990:149) labels this fabrication by whites of Native American beliefs to serve white interests as "Literary Imperialism."

CONCLUSION

Over the past century, Chief Seattle has emerged for many whites as the premiere icon of Native American values. Unfortunately, however, the Chief Seattle known to most people is fictional, a fabrication by whites and for whites. This is not new. Throughout American history, whites have fabricated Indians into images which served their interests. During the nineteenth century when the Euroamerican population of the United States grew rapidly and placed whites in direct competition for land with Native Americans, Indians were popularly viewed as savages who needed to be tamed, settled and civilized, or eliminated if necessary. Similarly, during the early twentieth century, Indians were viewed as children incapable of handling their own affairs who needed to be administered by whites. And it was white-run government agencies that negotiated contracts with industrial corporations doing business on Indian land. This paternalistic administration served white interests and frequently hindered Native economic development, as shown by the many reservations which have developed subsequent to the termination of federal administration (see Bordewich, 1996).

More recently, with the growth of large countercultural, environmental, New Age and Indian rights movements, Native Americans have

become the harbingers of a "traditional wisdom" for those challenging institutionalized authority. It is in this context that Chief Seattle has emerged as the modern icon for Native American environmental wisdom and spiritual values. However, as with past Indian stereotypes serving white interests, Chief Seattle represents yet another white fiction. Indeed, each new version of Seattle's speech has been created by non-Indians. Moreover, no Native peoples have translated Seattle's speech into their own language (Low, 1995:416). If issues related to the environment are to be dealt with in a meaningful and rational manner, then those who propose strategies of environmental action need to demonstrate a better ability to distinguish truth from fiction than they have shown in their acceptance and promotion of the Chief Seattle myth.

NOTES

1. The Baptists took credit for the speech away from Perry and gave it instead to Seattle by eliminating the "written by" portion of the credits in the film. This caused Perry, who has expressed concern regarding the subsequent embellishments of his script and their presentation as authentic, to break with the Baptist Commission.

2. Ironically, it was likely at an earlier Earth Day celebration, at which an earlier version of Seattle's "speech" was read, that Perry obtained the inspiration for his script.

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