



Statement on US President Joe Biden’s Apology for Native American Boarding Schools and Its Implications for the World At Large

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As Americans sit down to celebrate Thanksgiving this week, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security reflects upon the larger history of this holiday. We commend US President Joe Biden’s recent [formal apology](#) to Native American communities for the traumatic boarding schools that were part of official US policy for over 150 years. “The federal government has never, never formally apologized for what happened, until today,” Biden said in a speech on October 26 at the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona. “I formally apologize as President of the United States of America for what we did. I formally apologize.”

Due to the efforts of people like [Secretary Deb Haaland](#), the first Native American to lead the US Interior Department, America’s atrocities against Indigenous communities have received renewed attention from the US government. She and others, such as Angelique Albert, CEO of Native Forward Scholars Fund, remind us that further resources must be devoted to addressing the ongoing violence, injustice, and trauma caused by the boarding school system specifically and the US’s genocidal policies towards Native Americans more broadly. As Albert [noted](#) at the Gila River event, “Indian boarding school policies are not a horror of the past — these institutions operated through 1969, and many Native people who were subjected to these cruel policies are still living today.”

Residential schools for Native Americans were a cruel part of the long-term process of settler colonialism throughout North America and Australia. There were over 400 such schools in the United States and the last one only ceased operations in 1969. During the decades of operation of these schools, girls and boys of all ages were forcibly removed from their homes, prevented from communicating with loved ones, and systematically abused. Often run by Christians, these ‘schools’ sought to strip Indigenous children of their identity, culture, language, and religion. Children who spoke in their native tongue were violently beaten, leadership and staff committed routine

sexualized violence against students, and hundreds of young people were murdered. This was all done in an attempt to 'kill the Indian and save the man' — a clear case of genocide as identity destruction. Besides the undeniable human rights violations that occurred in these schools, millions more Native Americans were murdered throughout US history, both directly through mass killing and indirectly through policies that knowingly put Native lives and futures at risk, such as the forced sterilization of Native women and girls.

As is so often the case, settler colonialism in North America was linked to genocidal efforts to erase Indigenous populations and claim the land. Importantly, while eruptions of direct settler violence are often sporadic and alone do not necessarily constitute a case of genocide, the vast majority of individual settlers in settler colonial societies possess abiding assumptions that are genocidal in nature, in that they frame indigenous populations as cosmic enemies and imagine a future that is free from their presence. Perpetrators believe not only in a social or racial hierarchy but also that they are destined by God or by Nature to occupy the land (i.e., the ideology of Manifest Destiny in the USA).

Settler colonialism also involves a long-term process of taking land through war as well as through agreements that are either ignored or broken by perpetrators. Settler daily life, and much of what they do, is therefore dependent upon an overall social pattern of genocide: an intent, explicit or implicit, to destroy a particular group and its culture in whole or in part. For this reason, settler colonial genocides are often the result of state-society consensus, which both creates powerful myths that render the genocide normative (and justify it as necessary) and tenacious denial strategies that ensure long-term impunity for perpetrating groups and their descendants.

For Native Americans, residential boarding schools were an integral and particularly painful part of the genocidal process targeting them. These schools denied and prevented Indigenous children of their identity. Cultural objects were shattered. Languages were criminalized. Connections with family and community were severed. Widespread sexualized violence occurred, destroying biological and spiritual resources.

While [reactions to the President's apology have been mixed](#), the Lemkin Institute believes this is an important and necessary step towards the transformation of US society and institutions away from a genocidal past and present. [Reparations have been given to Native communities in the US for several decades](#), yet simply giving money away for past trauma can be seen as hollow, as an attempt to 'buy off' a survivor population that continues to suffer the long-term consequences without requiring any changes from the perpetrating society and its institutions. A formal apology is one step

in the right direction — a possible starting point for a transformative nation-wide reckoning with the past.

Yet more work is needed, including language revitalization efforts, repatriation of remains back to communities, fulfillment of treaty promises, and the establishment of — as well as a serious commitment to — a nationwide truth and reconciliation commission. We call on the US — and all other states in the world that have participated in and benefited from America's 'original sin' — to engage in an official transformative justice process.

The Lemkin Institute further reminds the world-at-large that genocides do not end until clear and deliberate measures are taken to address harms and reorient systems towards the protection and celebration of life rather than the dehumanization and destruction of it. Whereas settler colonialism has historically been connected to the past 500 years of European expansionism and Europe's quest for global domination, forced assimilation, forced removals, and forced displacement know no geographical or historical bounds. Apartheid, military occupation, cultural destruction, policies of forced assimilation, and the destruction or denial of identity continue across the globe.

Tactics typically seen in settler colonialism are not part of the distant past. Today we see patterns of child transfer, "reeducation," and the erasure of language and identity being committed by Russia against Ukrainian children, by China against Uyghurs, Turkic Muslims, and Tibetans, and across Europe and the United Kingdom against Roma and Sinti. We also see the ongoing forced displacement of ancient communities. This is why we are committed to speaking up for Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh; for Karakalpaks in Karakalpakstan; for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank; for Rohingya in Myanmar; for Yanomami in Brazil; for San in Botswana; for Maasai in Tanzania; for Indigenous populations in Australia; for Yazidi in Iraq; for Māori in New Zealand; for Sámi in Sápmi; for Assyrians in Iraq and Syria; for Amazigh in North Africa, for Maya in Guatemala; for Chechens in Chechnya; and for all other historical communities facing genocide today.

We agree with President Biden that America's policies against Indigenous populations constitute "one of the most horrific chapters in American history," and we hope that future presidents will call this crime what it is — genocide — and commit themselves to educate the country about its brutal past so that it might start moving forward in a more positive, less exploitative and violent, direction.

We implore President Biden and all world leaders to think of the horrific chapters being written today against so many other indigenous populations, especially in

Israel-Palestine, where US weapons are being used to decimate the Palestinian people. We cannot condemn one instance of genocide while actively supporting or ignoring others. The USA can and must do better.