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A NEWSLETTER FROM DAVID CORN

Donald Trump and the United States of Amnesia

BY DAVID CORN MARCH 26, 2024

The Watch, Read, and Listen List

Bad River. We all know that Native Americans have been totally screwed ever since European migrants arrived in the United States. The theft of land, conquest, the Indian wars, forced relocation, reservations—it all amounted to genocide. And the United States has never fully come to terms with this original sin of America (slavery, of course, is the other). *Bad River*, a new and gripping documentary about one tribe’s battle against a Canadian energy company in northern Wisconsin, brilliantly conveys both the tragic history of the First Nations and the current consequences of centuries of oppression.

On one level, the film, directed by Mary Mazzio, is a straightforward David-versus-Goliath tale. It chronicles the fight of the Bad River Band, an Ojibwe (or Chippewa) community based in upper Wisconsin along the Bad River, to regain control of its own land. In the early 1950s, a Canadian firm now known as Enbridge built a pipeline through its territory. In 2013, the easements expired, and the tribe, fearing the old pipeline (increasingly exposed by erosion) would rupture and poison not only the Bad River but Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake in the world, refused to renew them. It sued the company to shut down the pipeline and remove it from tribal lands. The company went to court to keep the pipeline operating. (Enbridge also owns Line 3, which in 1991 ruptured on wetlands in Minnesota and caused the largest inland oil spill in US history.) The legal fight is still [pending](#) in federal court.

Yet the movie—narrated by model Quannah ChasingHorse and actor Edward Norton—is not just a courtroom drama. It is a beautiful examination of the Bad River tribe and its relationship to the river, which for centuries has been the heart of the band’s commercial life and spiritual existence. The documentary also traces the long narrative of exploitation that crushed Native Americans and that led to the pipeline cutting through Ojibwe land. Much of this story is familiar, much is not, and it’s all horrible—such as the kidnapping of Indigenous children who were shipped off to boarding schools to be “civilized.” I had not realized that in the 1950s Congress voted to terminate federal recognition of the sovereign status of tribes across the country—essentially vacating long-established treaties. The film also includes a compact history of the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Bad River Ojibwe had been through many ordeals before they entered this titanic struggle against a transnational corporation that in court argued that the demands of commerce outweighed both environmental concerns and the tribe’s sovereignty. What’s most inspiring is the sense of stewardship that animates the tribe’s battle. Its people truly believe the [Seventh Generation Principle](#). As one of its members says, “My little tribe is protecting water for the planet.” It sounds dramatic, but this tribe is indeed fighting for its own survival and much more. In one poignant scene, representatives for the Bad River Band appear at a state legislature committee to oppose an open pit mine. A legislator asks, “You don’t trust the government?” An elder, Eldred Corbine, replies, “If you were an Indian, would you trust the government?” The legislator has not much to say.

[Bad River](#) opened this month in theaters around the country and drew sold-out crowds in states near the Bad River. If it’s not playing at a theater near you, look for it on a streaming service soon.

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