

Bridging Histories: Lessons for the US Department of Defense from New Zealand Defence Force's Integration of Indigenous Cultures

Shane McNeil*

The relationship between Indigenous Peoples and national defence institutions is complex and often contentious, shaped by historical conflicts, systemic marginalization, and evolving cultural identities. In the United States (US), the Department of Defense (DoD) has a fraught history with Indigenous Nations, marked by centuries of warfare, broken treaties, and persistent struggles for recognition and respect.¹ Similarly, in New Zealand, colonial and post-colonial military forces engaged in prolonged conflict with the Māori Peoples, the Indigenous population of the country.² Although both nations

* The author of this paper is an employee of the US Department of Defense working on defense policy and counterintelligence. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Department of Defense or the US government. The author has no financial or personal interests that could influence or bias the content of this paper. The author has followed ethical standards and guidelines for academic research and writing.

¹ Donald Mitchell and David Rubenson, "Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense" (RAND Corporation, 1 January 1996), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR630.html.

² Angela Middleton, "Missionization, Māori, and Colonial Warfare in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand," in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, ed. James Symonds and Vesa-Pekka Herva (Oxford University Press), accessed 7 January 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199562350.013.32>.

share a legacy of violence against Indigenous Peoples, the paths they have taken toward reconciliation and integration within their armed forces have diverged significantly.

The warrior ethos of Indigenous Peoples in both the US and New Zealand predates colonization and continues to shape their cultural identities and their relationships with contemporary military institutions. These warrior traditions, rooted in values such as community defence, tactical adaptability, and intergenerational leadership, offer rich insights for modern defence organizations.³ While the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) has made significant strides in acknowledging and integrating Māori culture and history into its organizational and ceremonial practices,⁴ the US DoD has been comparatively slower and less deliberate in recognizing the contributions and identities of Native American Nations within its military culture.

This article explores what the US DoD can learn from the NZDF's approach to Indigenous integration. Using a comparative historical and policy analysis methodology, it examines how each nation engaged militarily with Indigenous Peoples and how those relationships evolved. It also investigates current practices, policy frameworks, and institutional attitudes toward Indigenous cultures in the armed forces of both countries. The ultimate goal is to assess whether the US DoD can benefit from a more inclusive and culturally responsive defence culture—one that acknowledges Indigenous warrior traditions and fosters stronger ties with Indigenous communities. In doing so, the article contributes to broader conversations about equity, diversity, and cultural competency in national security institutions.

Historical Context

Analyzing the comparative historical context of military engagements with Indigenous peoples in the United States and New Zealand sets the stage for understanding the complex relationship between defence forces and native cultures. In the US, centuries of conflict, marked by warfare and broken treaties, have shaped the

³ Jan Hare and Michelle Pidgeon, "The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling," *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 34, no. 2 (21 July 2011): pp. 93–111.

⁴ Grazia Scoppio, "Embracing Indigenous Culture in Military Organizations: The Experience of Māori in the New Zealand Military," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (1 February 2019), <https://jmss.org/article/view/62816>.

interactions between the DoD and Native American tribes.⁵ Conversely, in New Zealand, the colonial and post-colonial military dealings with the Māori, framed by the Treaty of Waitangi, have evolved into a narrative of reconciliation and integration.⁶ This section delves into the historical military campaigns against Indigenous populations in both nations, exploring the legacy of these conflicts and their enduring impact on contemporary military policies and Indigenous relations. Through this historical lens, we can better comprehend the foundational issues that influence current efforts to integrate Indigenous warrior traditions and cultures into the military ethos of both countries.

US Military Campaigns Against Native Americans

The interactions between the US military and Native American tribes have a tumultuous history, deeply rooted in the westward expansion of the United States and the ensuing conflicts over land and sovereignty. Early encounters during the colonial period set a precedent for conflict, but it was the formation of the United States and its territorial ambitions that intensified military actions against Indigenous peoples. These military campaigns were not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy to assert control over the continent, often resulting in devastating consequences for Native American communities.

As the US pushed westward, it encountered diverse and organized resistance from Native American tribes, each with distinct cultures, warfare strategies, and territorial claims. The military's role evolved from supporting settler encroachments to leading formal campaigns aimed at subduing and relocating Indigenous populations. This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the depth and complexity of the US military's involvement in shaping the nation's landscape and the fates of its original inhabitants.

⁵ Mitchell and Rubenson, "Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense."

⁶ Richard Synyer Hill, *State Authority, Indigenous Autonomy: Crown-Maori Relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa 1900 - 1950* (Wellington: Victoria Univ. Press, 2004); Claudia Orange, "Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the Treaty of Waitangi," Government, TeAra - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-tiriti-o-waitangi-the-treaty-of-waitangi/print>.

Southeast and the Trail of Tears

In one of the most widely known offences against native tribes, the enforced removal of the Cherokee, known as the Trail of Tears, stands out as a stark example of military involvement in the displacement of Native Americans. Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the US government, with military backing, forcibly relocated the Cherokee and other tribes from their ancestral lands to designated territories west of the Mississippi River. The journey was marked by severe hardships, disease, and death, with over 4,000 Cherokee perishing. The military's role in enforcing this relocation policy exemplified the harsh realities of US expansionist policies, setting a precedent for future engagements with Indigenous peoples.⁷

The Trail of Tears was not an isolated event but part of a broader pattern of forced removals affecting multiple tribes, including the Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw.⁸ These removals were driven by the desire to open up lands for white settlers and were often justified by a paternalistic belief in the need to "civilize" Native Americans. The long-term impacts of these policies were devastating, leading to significant loss of life, culture, and autonomy for the affected tribes.

The Plains Wars

The Plains Wars encompassed a series of conflicts between the US military and various tribes, including the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. These wars were characterized by the clash of nomadic lifestyles and US military strategies, with the latter often underestimating the Indigenous warriors' capabilities and knowledge of the terrain. Notably, the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, where the combined forces of the Lakota

⁷ Russell Thornton, "Cherokee Population Losses during the Trail of Tears: A New Perspective and a New Estimate," *Ethnohistory* 31, no. 4 (1984): pp. 289–300, <https://doi.org/10.2307/482714>; Harvey Young, "Remembering Genocide within Our Borders: Trail of Tears and US Museum Culture," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 206–24, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294554_12.

⁸ Beverly (Smith) Turtle, "Reclaiming Social Justice and Human Rights: The 1830 Indian Removal Act and the Ethnic Cleansing of Native American Tribes," *Journal of Health and Human Experience*, 1 January 2021, https://www.academia.edu/80604738/Reclaiming_social_justice_and_human_rights_The1830_Indian_Removal_Act_and_the_ethnic_cleansing_of_Native_American_tribes.

Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes defeated the 7th Cavalry Regiment led by General Custer, became emblematic of Native American resistance.⁹

These conflicts were driven by the US government's desire to control the Great Plains and its resources, leading to a series of treaties that were frequently broken or ignored. The Plains Wars also highlighted the resilience and tactical ingenuity of Native American tribes, who used guerrilla tactics and intimate knowledge of the land to their advantage. Despite their efforts, the overwhelming military and logistical power of the US Army eventually led to the subjugation and displacement of many tribes.

The Southwest and the Navajo Long Walk

In the Southwest, the Navajo and Apache tribes faced brutal military campaigns. The Navajo Long Walk, a forced relocation of the Navajo people to Bosque Redondo between 1863 and 1866, resulted in substantial suffering and loss of life. The US military's scorched earth campaigns aimed to subdue the Apache and Navajo tribes, destroying their homes, crops, and livestock, and forcing a surrender through attrition and deprivation.¹⁰

The conditions at Bosque Redondo were dire, with inadequate food, shelter, and sanitation leading to high mortality rates among the Navajo. This period of forced relocation and internment had long-lasting effects on the Navajo people, contributing to a deep mistrust of the US government and a strong desire to return to their ancestral lands. The eventual return of the Navajo to their homeland in 1868 marked a significant, though bittersweet, victory for the tribe.

⁹ Robert Wooster, "Plains Wars | Definition, History, & Legacy," Britannica, 20 December 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Plains-Wars>.

¹⁰ National Museum of the American Indian, "The Long Walk | The Navajo Treaties," Native Knowledge 360, 2024, <http://nmai.si.edu/nk360/navajo/long-walk/long-walk.cshtml>; Rohan Laljani, "The Navajo Long Walk: A Cultural History of Genocide," *Janus: The Undergraduate History Journal*, 2020, https://www.umdjanus.com/_files/ugd/15371a_c9dcbe155321470daba4e3125e8129ef.pdf#page=21.

The Northwest

The military campaigns in the Northwest, such as the Nez Perce War in 1877, highlight the relentless pursuit of Indigenous peoples by the US Army. Chief Joseph's strategic retreats and battles against overwhelming odds epitomized the military's determination to control Native American movements and land use. The capture of Chief Joseph and his band, after a gruelling chase and fighting, symbolized the broader struggle and ultimate subjugation of Native American tribes in the region.¹¹

The Nez Perce War was marked by a series of battles and skirmishes as the Nez Perce attempted to flee to Canada to seek asylum with the Lakota led by Sitting Bull. Despite their tactical successes and the respect they garnered from their adversaries, the Nez Perce were ultimately forced to surrender just 40 miles from the Canadian border. This conflict underscored the determination of Native American tribes to resist displacement and maintain their way of life, even in the face of overwhelming odds.¹²

Strategies and Tactics Used by the US Military

The US military employed various strategies and tactics in its campaigns against Native Americans. These included establishing forts and outposts to secure territory and supply lines, conducting scorched earth operations to destroy resources essential for Indigenous survival, and executing forced marches and relocations. Conversely, Native American tribes often employed guerrilla tactics, leveraging their intimate knowledge of the terrain and conducting strategic alliances and raids. This dichotomy in warfare approaches underscored the asymmetrical nature of the conflicts, with each side adapting to the other's tactics over time.

The immediate effects of these military campaigns on Native American tribes were devastating. Loss of life, displacement, and the erosion of cultural and economic foundations were common outcomes. The long-term impacts were equally significant, leading to systemic issues like poverty, loss of language and culture, and ongoing legal

¹¹ R. Ignatius Burns, "Coeur d'Alene Diplomacy in the Nez Perce War of 1877," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 63, no. 1 (1952): pp. 37–60.

¹² Elliott West, "Preface," in *The Last Indian War*, by Elliott West (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009), xvii–xxv, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195136753.002.0005>.

and political battles over treaty rights and land sovereignty. These campaigns fundamentally altered the fabric of Native American societies and set the stage for their future relations with the US government and military.

The memory of these military campaigns and their aftermath has been preserved in various forms, such as the Wounded Knee Massacre Memorial,¹³ the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site,¹⁴ and educational exhibits at the National Museum of the American Indian, including the “Nation to Nation” series and the Native American Veterans Memorial.¹⁵ Initiatives like the Smithsonian’s Native Knowledge 360° program also support curriculum-based engagement with Indigenous history, such as the Navajo Long Walk.¹⁶ The role of the US military in these events is often a subject of reflection and reevaluation, contributing to a broader understanding of American history and its implications for contemporary military and Indigenous relations.

Today, the historical conflicts between the US military and Native Americans continue to influence their relationships. Efforts toward reconciliation and acknowledgment have been made, such as military tributes to Native American veterans,¹⁷ collaborations on cultural preservation projects,¹⁸ and initiatives to integrate Native American history and perspectives into military education and training

¹³ Nick Estes, “Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance,” Harvard Kennedy School: Diversity, Inclusion, & Belonging, 2019, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/library-research-services/collections/diversity-inclusion-belonging/our-history>.

¹⁴ U.S. National Park Service, “Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site,” Government, U.S. National Park Service, 21 November 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/sand/index.htm>.

¹⁵ Smithsonian, “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations,” National Museum of the American Indian, 21 September 2014, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=934>.

¹⁶ Smithsonian.

¹⁷ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Tribal Government Relations - U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs,” 16 June 2022, <https://department.va.gov/administrations-and-offices/tribal-government-relations/>; Smithsonian, “National Native American Veterans Memorial,” National Museum of the American Indian, 11 November 2020, <https://americanindian.si.edu/visit/washington/nnavm>.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Native American Affairs,” Government, DoD Environment, Safety & Occupational Health Network and Information Exchange, 6 February 2025, <https://www.denix.osd.mil/na/>; Mitchell and Rubenson, “Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense.”

programs.¹⁹ These efforts, while still evolving, signify a growing recognition of the past and a tentative step towards a more inclusive and respectful partnership.

New Zealand's Colonial Military History with the Māori

In comparison to the US, New Zealand's colonial military history with the Māori began in the early 19th century, marked by the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. This treaty, intended to establish a framework for British settlement and Māori rights, led to significant misunderstanding and conflict. The New Zealand Wars, spanning from the 1840s to the 1870s, were a series of armed conflicts primarily over land and sovereignty, where both the colonial forces and Māori warriors demonstrated significant military prowess and tactical innovation.²⁰

Unlike the numerous fragmented engagements in the US, the New Zealand Wars were more concentrated in time and space, allowing for a distinct narrative of conflict and reconciliation to emerge in the nation's collective memory. The aftermath of these wars led to a protracted peace process, involving significant land confiscations but also gradual recognition of Māori rights and integration of Māori culture into the national identity, a process that continues to evolve in contemporary New Zealand society.²¹

The exploration of these historical contexts sets the stage for understanding the current military practices of the US and New Zealand and their engagement with Indigenous cultures. As we delve further into the NZDF's approach and the US DoD's current stance, we can begin to unravel the complexities and potential benefits of integrating Indigenous warrior cultures into modern military organizations.

¹⁹ Smithsonian, "Native Knowledge 360°," National Museum of the American Indian, 2025, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>; Institute for Veterans & Military Families, "Native Americans in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life" (Syracuse University, November 2021), <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IVMF-Native-Americans-in-the-Military-from-Service-to-Civilian-Life-Nov2021.pdf>.

²⁰ Christopher Burns, Maia Hataraka, and Alison Jones, "Te Tiriti o Waitangi: The Treaty of Waitangi, Principles and Other Representations," *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 59, no. 1 (1 June 2024): pp. 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-024-00312-y>.

²¹ James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2015).

The NZDF Approach: Acknowledgment and Integration

The NZDF have actively pursued a strategy of acknowledging and integrating Māori culture into its organizational fabric.²² This effort is rooted in a broader national recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi's principles and the importance of partnership with Māori as the Indigenous people of New Zealand. In the NZDF, this has translated into several key initiatives and practices that reflect Māori cultural values and traditions.

One of the most visible aspects of this integration is the incorporation of Māori ceremonial practices, such as the pōwhiri (a formal Māori welcome ceremony), haka (a traditional war dance), and karakia (prayers or incantations), into military events and ceremonies.²³ These practices are not merely symbolic but serve to foster a sense of identity and belonging among Māori personnel and to bridge the cultural gap between Māori and non-Māori within the force.

While the NZDF does not run recruitment programs exclusively targeting Māori, it has made deliberate efforts to incorporate Māori culture and identity into its organizational ethos, which has positively influenced Māori participation and retention.²⁴ These efforts include the integration of tikanga Māori (Māori customs) into training, promotion of te reo Māori, and visibility of Māori leadership. As a result, Māori are significantly overrepresented in the NZDF relative to their share of the national population.²⁵ These initiatives are supported by educational and career development

²² Scoppio, "Embracing Indigenous Culture in Military Organizations."

²³ Tamahou Anthony Donald Ripia, "He Korowai: The Integration of Māori Cultural Practices and Knowledge within the New Zealand Defence Force: A Case Study of Te Taua Moana, the Royal New Zealand Navy" (Master's Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2019), <https://openrepositorystage.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/3aeac6ef-a1d6-4715-828a-abcaad634396/content>.

²⁴ Jayde Lavoie and Jill Barclay, "Improving the Canadian Armed Forces' Recruitment and Retention of Indigenous People: Best Practices from the New Zealand Defence Force," Policy Brief (North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 8 September 2020).

²⁵ Tamahou Anthony Donald Ripia, "He Korowai: The Integration of Māori Cultural Practices and Knowledge within the New Zealand Defence Force: A Case Study of Te Taua Moana, the Royal New Zealand Navy"; Scoppio, "Embracing Indigenous Culture in Military Organizations."

programs that respect and incorporate Māori culture and values, aiming to create a more inclusive and diverse military environment.²⁶

The NZDF's approach also extends to operational aspects, with the integration of Māori cultural concepts into its strategic and tactical frameworks. Concepts like whanaungatanga (relationship building), manaakitanga (hospitality and kindness), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship) have been adapted to enhance the NZDF's operational effectiveness, particularly in peacekeeping missions where cultural understanding and community engagement are critical.²⁷

The US DoD's Current Stance

In comparison, the US DoD's engagement with Native American cultures has been more fragmented and less systematic, particularly given the current political environment in the US. While there are notable examples of recognition and inclusion, such as the code talkers of World War II, these instances are often treated as exceptional rather than integral to the broader military culture and history.

Native American service members and veterans are respected within the military community, but the broader cultural and historical context of Indigenous warrior traditions is seldom integrated into the DoD's policies or practices. Initiatives to include Native American perspectives in the military are primarily driven by individual branches or units rather than a unified department-wide strategy.²⁸

There is also a notable lack of formal programs or policies aimed at integrating Native American culture and history into the US military's operational or ceremonial practices. While some bases and units have made efforts to engage with local Indigenous

²⁶ According to Ripia (2019), Māori representation in the NZDF has remained consistently high—around 16–18% of the total force—despite Māori comprising approximately 15% of the national population. This is attributed less to targeted recruitment than to a defense culture that visibly values Māori identity and contributions.

²⁷ Tamahou Anthony Donald Ripia, "He Korowai: The Integration of Māori Cultural Practices and Knowledge within the New Zealand Defence Force: A Case Study of Te Taua Moana, the Royal New Zealand Navy."

²⁸ Institute for Veterans & Military Families, "Native Americans in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life."

communities and recognize Native American heritage, these actions are not consistently supported or replicated across the defence establishment.

The contrast between the NZDF's proactive approach to cultural integration and the DoD's more ad hoc engagement with Native American traditions highlights a significant gap in policy and practice. This discrepancy not only affects the internal culture of the military organizations but also influences their relationships with Indigenous communities and the public's perception of their commitment to diversity and inclusion. As we consider the potential benefits of adopting Indigenous warrior ideologies in the US DoD, it becomes clear that a more strategic and respectful approach could yield substantial advantages for military effectiveness, community relations, and cultural competency.

Potential Benefits of Indigenous Integration into the US DoD

The integration of Indigenous warrior ideologies and identities into the US DoD offers a range of potential benefits, many of which are illustrated by the experience of the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). These include enhanced cultural competency, strengthened relationships with Indigenous communities, and operational benefits derived from Indigenous knowledge systems. However, it is critical to recognize that the contexts of New Zealand and the United States differ significantly in ways that affect the feasibility and implementation of such integration.

One of the key distinctions lies in the structure of Indigenous populations. In New Zealand, Māori represent a single Indigenous Nation with a shared language (te reo Māori), common cultural protocols, and a collective identity. This unified cultural base has facilitated the integration of Māori practices into national institutions, including the NZDF. Furthermore, the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) provides a foundational legal and cultural framework for bicultural policies and partnerships, enabling the NZDF to formalize Māori cultural inclusion as a part of its organizational identity.²⁹

²⁹ Burns, "Coeur d'Alene Diplomacy in the Nez Perce War of 1877"; Middleton, "Missionization, Māori, and Colonial Warfare in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand."

In contrast, the United States is home to 574 federally recognized Indigenous Nations, each with distinct histories, governance systems, languages, and cultural practices. This diversity presents a significant challenge to implementing a unified or centrally organized framework for Indigenous cultural integration within the DoD. Unlike New Zealand, the US lacks a singular treaty framework or policy mechanism that formally enshrines a government-to-government bicultural relationship in defence policy. This absence complicates efforts to systematically include Indigenous values and traditions within military culture.

Further, there is currently no political mandate or cohesive policy infrastructure within the DoD to support initiatives related specifically to Indigenous Peoples. While there are broader programs across the military branches, many remain limited in scope and do not consistently include Indigenous-specific goals, content, or partnerships.³⁰ Nonetheless, drawing on Indigenous perspectives can still provide meaningful contributions to the DoD. Below are several areas where such integration – if approached thoughtfully and in collaboration with Indigenous communities – could yield positive outcomes:

1. **Enhanced Cultural Competency and Diversity:** Incorporating Indigenous histories and values into training and operations could increase cultural literacy among service members. This would support more effective engagement in multicultural environments and align with broader DoD goals for inclusive leadership.
2. **Improved Morale and Inclusion:** Recognizing the unique cultural contributions of Indigenous service members could foster greater belonging and strengthen morale. Given the historical exclusion of Native American identities from mainstream military narratives, visible inclusion could serve as a corrective step.
3. **Strategic and Tactical Innovation:** Indigenous warrior traditions—such as decentralized decision-making, deep environmental awareness, and

³⁰ Mitchell and Rubenson, “Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense”; Institute for Veterans & Military Families, “Native Americans in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life.”

intergenerational knowledge transfer—offer tactical concepts that can complement and diversify conventional military doctrine.

4. **Strengthened Community and International Relations:** Honouring Indigenous cultures could improve the DoD's relationships with Native American Nations and enhance its legitimacy in Indigenous communities. This relational groundwork may also bolster recruitment and build trust in military-community interactions.
5. **Operational Effectiveness in Diverse Environments:** The integration of Indigenous ways of knowing can support the DoD's global peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, especially in contexts that require high cultural sensitivity and environmental adaptability.

While these benefits are promising, realizing them will require more than symbolic gestures. The DoD must navigate the pluralism of Indigenous cultures in the US, ensure that integration efforts are community-driven, and advocate for sustained policy support. In the absence of a centralized framework like the Treaty of Waitangi, partnerships must be locally grounded, flexible, and tailored to the specific histories and expectations of each Indigenous Nation involved.

Challenges and Considerations

While the potential benefits are significant, integrating Indigenous warrior cultures into the US military framework presents several challenges. These include navigating cultural sensitivities, ensuring authentic and respectful integration, and addressing potential institutional resistance.

1. **Cultural Sensitivities and Appropriation:** There is a fine line between honouring and appropriating Indigenous cultures. The DoD must be careful to engage with Indigenous communities in a way that respects their traditions and perspectives, avoiding superficial or exploitative practices.
2. **Institutional Resistance and Change Management:** Introducing new cultural elements into a longstanding military institution like the US DoD may encounter resistance. Overcoming this requires effective change management strategies, leadership buy-in, and a clear demonstration of the benefits of cultural integration.

3. **Authentic Engagement and Partnership:** For integration to be successful, it must be based on authentic engagement with Indigenous communities, involving them in the planning and implementation processes to ensure that their cultures and histories are represented accurately and respectfully.
4. **Training and Education:** Incorporating Indigenous warrior cultures into the military requires comprehensive training and education programs to ensure that service members understand and value these contributions. Developing such programs will necessitate resources, expertise, and a commitment to ongoing cultural competence education.

In conclusion, the integration of Indigenous warrior cultures into the US DoD has the potential to bring about significant benefits, enhancing the military's cultural competency, operational effectiveness, and community relations. Drawing lessons from the NZDF's experience, the US DoD can develop a strategic approach to embrace the rich warrior heritage of Native American cultures, fostering a more inclusive, effective, and culturally aware military force.

Recommendations

To meaningfully integrate Indigenous warrior traditions into the US DoD, strategic actions must be both culturally respectful and contextually appropriate. Lessons from the NZDF offer a valuable framework, but must be adapted to the specific sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the United States. Unlike New Zealand—where Māori represent a single, nationally recognized Indigenous People supported by a constitutional framework in the Treaty of Waitangi—the U.S. encompasses hundreds of federally recognized Indigenous Nations with diverse cultural practices and no single treaty structure guiding defence or cultural policy. This pluralism, coupled with the current lack of formal political support for initiatives specific to Indigenous Peoples in the DoD, presents unique challenges to policy implementation.

With this context in mind, the following adapted recommendations are proposed:

1. **Establish Flexible, Community-Guided Initiatives:** Rather than a one-size-fits-all program, the DoD should support locally tailored partnerships with specific Indigenous Nations. These partnerships could address recruitment, ceremony integration, or mutual education. Indigenous consultation must guide the scope

and nature of each initiative to respect sovereign rights and avoid cultural appropriation.

2. Develop Culturally Specific Training and Education Programs: The DoD should collaborate with Indigenous educators and veterans to create educational modules that highlight the military history, values, and contributions of Indigenous Peoples. These should be optional but encouraged, and integrated into leadership, ethics, or cross-cultural competencies training. Unlike New Zealand, this will require multiple curricula reflecting the diversity of US Indigenous Nations.

3. Promote Inclusion Through Representative Leadership: Recruitment and retention strategies should identify and support Indigenous candidates for leadership development and mentorship programs. While NZDF benefits from unified cultural representation, U.S. efforts must work across multiple identities and Indigenous affiliations, necessitating broad inclusion frameworks and internal education among recruiters and officers.

4. Invest in Symbolic and Practical Recognition: The DoD should support physical and symbolic efforts to recognize Indigenous service—such as naming ceremonies, commemorative events, or incorporating Native American flags or symbols into installations—where appropriate. Initiatives must be designed in partnership with local Nations to ensure authenticity and avoid superficial gestures.

5. Advocate for Policy Infrastructure and Evaluation: Given the lack of a centralized framework like the Treaty of Waitangi, the DoD should advocate for sustained internal policy development that includes Indigenous Peoples in strategic planning. This includes allocating funding, creating Indigenous affairs offices within branches, and establishing metrics for assessing inclusion and community impact.

By grounding its efforts in mutual respect, flexibility, and authentic engagement, the DoD can take meaningful steps toward inclusion that reflect the unique complexity of the US Indigenous context. While the NZDF provides a compelling model, the US approach

must be decentralized, pluralistic, and responsive to Native American sovereignty and cultural variation.

Conclusion

The exploration of the NZDF's integration of Māori culture and the potential for the US DoD to adopt similar practices with Native American warrior traditions underscores a critical opportunity for cultural transformation within the US military. This comparative analysis has demonstrated that the NZDF's culturally responsive practices have enhanced organizational cohesion, cultural competency, and legitimacy in both domestic and international contexts. By contrast, the US DoD's engagement with Indigenous Peoples remains fragmented, under-resourced, and largely symbolic, despite the significant historical and ongoing contributions of Native American service members.

Adopting elements of Indigenous warrior traditions in the US defence sector could provide a range of benefits, from improved morale and tactical innovation to stronger community relations and enhanced diversity. However, the US context is notably more complex than that of New Zealand. The absence of a unified legal or treaty-based framework, the diversity of Indigenous Nations, and the lack of political momentum for programs specific to Indigenous Peoples present significant barriers to implementation. As such, any integration strategy must be community-driven, locally contextualized, and attentive to Native American sovereignty and cultural specificity.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by several factors. First, it draws primarily on secondary literature, policy analysis, and case studies rather than original fieldwork or interviews with Indigenous service members or military officials. Second, while the comparison between the NZDF and the US DoD provides useful insights, it is inherently asymmetrical due to differences in size, geopolitical roles, and historical legacies. The generalizability of NZDF practices to the US context must therefore be approached cautiously. Finally, this article focuses primarily on cultural and institutional integration rather than broader socioeconomic determinants of military service among Indigenous Peoples, which could form the basis for future research.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a valuable starting point for reimagining the relationship between the US military and Indigenous Nations—not only by honouring the past but also by shaping a more inclusive and resilient future force.

By implementing the recommendations outlined in this article, the DoD can begin a deliberate, ethical, and strategic process of acknowledging and integrating Indigenous warrior traditions. Doing so not only aligns with broader democratic values but also has the potential to transform defence culture in ways that strengthen national unity, operational effectiveness, and social equity.

Bibliography

- Affairs, Department of Veterans. "Tribal Government Relations - U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs," 16 June 2022. <https://department.va.gov/administrations-and-offices/tribal-government-relations/>.
- Belich, James. *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2015.
- Burns, Christopher, Maia Hetaaraka, and Alison Jones. "Te Tiriti o Waitangi: The Treaty of Waitangi, Principles and Other Representations." *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 59, no. 1 (1 June 2024): pp. 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-024-00312-y>.
- Burns, R. Ignatius. "Coeur d'Alene Diplomacy in the Nez Perce War of 1877." *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 63, no. 1 (1952): pp. 37–60.
- Claudia Orange. "Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the Treaty of Waitangi." Government. TeAra - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Accessed 15 April 2025. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-tiriti-o-waitangi-the-treaty-of-waitangi/print>.
- Hare, Jan, and Michelle Pidgeon. "The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling." *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 34, no. 2 (21 July 2011): pp. 93–111.
- Hill, Richard Synyer. *State Authority, Indigenous Autonomy: Crown-Maori Relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa 1900 - 1950*. Wellington: Victoria Univ. Press, 2004.
- Institute for Veterans & Military Families. "Native Americans in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life." Syracuse University, November 2021. <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IVMF-Native-Americans-in-the-Military-from-Service-to-Civilian-Life-Nov2021.pdf>.
- Lavoie, Jayde, and Jill Barclay. "Improving the Canadian Armed Forces' Recruitment and Retention of Indigenous People: Best Practices from the New Zealand Defence Force." Policy Brief. North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 8 September 2020.

- Middleton, Angela. "Missionization, Māori, and Colonial Warfare in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand." In *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, edited by James Symonds and Vesa-Pekka Herva. Oxford University Press. Accessed 7 January 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199562350.013.32>.
- Mitchell, Donald, and David Rubenson. "Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense." RAND Corporation, 1 January 1996. https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR630.html.
- National Museum of the American Indian. "The Long Walk | The Navajo Treaties." Native Knowledge 360, 2024. <http://nmai.si.edu/nk360/navajo/long-walk/long-walk.cshtml>.
- Nick Estes. "Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance." Harvard Kennedy School: Diversity, Inclusion, & Belonging, 2019. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/library-research-services/collections/diversity-inclusion-belonging/our-history>.
- Robert Wooster. "Plains Wars | Definition, History, & Legacy." Britannica, December 20, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Plains-Wars>.
- Rohan Laljani. "The Navajo Long Walk: A Cultural History of Genocide." *Janus: The Undergraduate History Journal*, 2020. https://www.umdjanus.com/_files/ugd/15371a_c9dcbe155321470daba4e3125e8129ef.pdf#page=21.
- Scoppio, Grazia. "Embracing Indigenous Culture in Military Organizations: The Experience of Māori in the New Zealand Military." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 2019). <https://jmss.org/article/view/62816>.
- Smithsonian. "Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations." National Museum of the American Indian, 21 September 2014. <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=934>.

— — —. “National Native American Veterans Memorial.” National Museum of the American Indian, 11 November 2020.

<https://americanindian.si.edu/visit/washington/nnavm>.

— — —. “Native Knowledge 360°.” National Museum of the American Indian, 2025.

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>.

Tamahou Anthony Donald Ripia. “He Korowai: The Integration of Māori Cultural Practices and Knowledge within the New Zealand Defence Force: A Case Study of Te Taua Moana, the Royal New Zealand Navy.” Master’s Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2019.

<https://openrepositorystage.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/3aeac6ef-a1d6-4715-828a-abcaad634396/content>.

Thornton, Russell. “Cherokee Population Losses during the Trail of Tears: A New Perspective and a New Estimate.” *Ethnohistory* 31, no. 4 (1984): pp. 289–300.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/482714>.

Turtle, Beverly (Smith). “Reclaiming Social Justice and Human Rights: The 1830 Indian Removal Act and the Ethnic Cleansing of Native American Tribes.” *Journal of Health and Human Experience*, 1 January 2021.

https://www.academia.edu/80604738/Reclaiming_social_justice_and_human_rights_The1830_Indian_Removal_Act_and_the_ethnic_cleansing_of_Native_American_tribes.

U.S. Department of Defense. “Native American Affairs.” Government. DoD Environment, Safety & Occupational Health Network and Information Exchange, 6 February 2025. <https://www.denix.osd.mil/na/>.

U.S. National Park Service. “Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site.” Government. U.S. National Park Service, 21 November 2024.

<https://www.nps.gov/sand/index.htm>.

West, Elliott. “Preface.” In *The Last Indian War*, by Elliott West, xvii–xxv. Oxford University Press New York, NY, 2009.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195136753.002.0005>.

Young, Harvey. "Remembering Genocide within Our Borders: Trail of Tears and US Museum Culture." In *Performance in the Borderlands*, edited by Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, pp. 206–24. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294554_12.