

Vampire Policy is Bleeding Us Dry – Blood-Quantums Be Gone!

by Suzan Shown Harjo

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Native Peoples have the traditions, openness and patience that come from measuring time and possibilities against the entirety of our ancient cultural continuum. That's why we, collectively, have gotten so many things right - we have tried things out for myriad generations, incorporating those that work and discarding those that do not.

We like to observe something new from a distance and circle around it for a while. We don't hate or love the new thing - we just show it respect. It could be dangerous, like a rifle, a tool of destruction and of providence. It could be charming, like cut-glass beads, a good way of sharing a vision.

We may want to admire it from afar and we may want to invite it to our camp, either to stay as family or to come and go as a friend.

Oftentimes, decisions about societal incorporation have been forced upon us. Our ancestors did not get to make a leisurely decision about "civilization," for example. From 1880 to 1936, the federal government banned our traditional religions and made

outlaws of our spiritual leaders. While American Indians were starving and eating rancid rations, the coffers of Christian denominations were fattened by annual congressional appropriations for civilizing the Indian. Children were taken to prison schools, parents were held hostage at home and no one had a choice in this new thing.

This new thing was a way for the white man to keep Indian land without keeping treaty promises. Some white men had a theory that went roughly this way: Savages could be tamed and taught to be God-fearing and English-speaking at the government schools and their allegiances to their families and tribes would diminish. Cross-tribal and non-Indian alliances should be encouraged until Indians value pan-Indianness and white values.

The federal government calculated it would take three generations for American Indians to breed themselves out as tribal people. By 1900, the terms "full-bloods" and "half-breeds" were commonly used on reservations and in popular culture.

Eligibility for most federal Indian programs was made dependent on a quarter-degree-Indian-blood-quantum requirement. The idea was that the United States would continue to uphold treaty promises for health, education, land protection and the like, but only until the Indians were down to one-quarter Indian blood. At that point, the government could stop paying for their new lands, water, gold and silver.

In the 1930s, the BIA forced many tribes to codify this slow genocide policy in tribal constitutions, declaring that once their people were down to a certain level of tribal blood, they would cease being tribal citizens and Indian people. In the 1940s, the BIA made lists of those tribes whose people had low tribal blood quantum and few cultural attributes, who could be sent sailing down the mainstream, and of those whose people spoke their tribal language and practiced their traditional ways, who still needed the government to take care of them.

Congress, in the 1950s, started terminating ties with tribes whose people were the most deculturated. Some tribes even raised their blood-quantum requirements to one-half to escape being targeted for termination.

Now, the blood-quantum requirements are having exactly the pernicious effect on many Native Peoples they were intended to have. Lots of children and grandchildren of tribal citizens do not qualify for enrollment, because their parents and older ancestors married outside their nation. We are not talking about the pseudo-Indians who have zero Native ancestors or cultural ties. These are real Indian kids and many of them speak their language, practice their traditional religion, contribute to their nation and, in fact, are the future of their nation.

So, what federal laws are forcing us to keep these blood-quantum requirements? None.

In the mid-1970s, the Supreme Court ruled that no federal agency or any entity except an Indian tribe could determine who its people are. For even longer, the high court has held that Indian nationhood and tribal citizenry

are political, not racial matters. If we cling to these blood standards, which are solely about race, some clever neo-terminationist is going to try to unravel the Indian political status doctrine by using the fixation on and fiction of tribal blood. (The BIA draculas make us particularly vulnerable in this regard by their continuing use of CDIBs - certificates of degree of Indian blood.)

For the past 25 years, we have been free from any federally imposed standards for tribal citizenship. While some nations dropped the blood-quantum nonsense, most have not. This is an excellent (and sad) example of internalized oppression. We don't need the federal government to breed us out of existence - we are doing it ourselves.

I talked with some tribal leaders this year who do not know that tribes have had the power for a quarter of a century to drive a stake in our constitutions' vampire clauses. Some want to do it, but are worried about fakes flooding the tribal rolls and siphoning off precious tribal monies and benefits.

Native Peoples have traditional ways of defining citizenship, ways that worked for millennia before there were any non-Natives or pseudo-Indians in our countries. Those ways begin with family. If one or both parents are tribal citizens, frauds are automatically eliminated.

For those leaders whose nations have lost their traditional ways of deciding citizenship, there are more than 560 Native nations today with governmental relations with the United States. Ask a leader of one of those what kind of citizenship standards they have. Shop around - compare tribal citizenship requirements to those of France, India, China, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mexico or the United States.

Blood quantum is not new things and they are not our things. We have circled them and been surrounded by them for more than a century, easily long enough to know that we do not respect them, need them or want them. Doing something about this is almost as easy as one, two, three - blood quantum, begone!



Airman First Class Joshua B. Morrow, Airman First Class Joshua S. Severson, Allen Dale June (81 years old), and Major Kent Wong, 388th Component Maintenance Squadron Commander, Hill Air Force Base, Utah

Morrow Meets Navajo Code Talker

Allen Dale June visited Hill Air Force Base in Utah on April 11, 2003. He's one of five surviving members of the original 29 Navajo code talkers who developed the important secret code used during World War II.

He presented a briefing about his involvement as one of the original 29 Navajo code talkers. He also is the recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal.