with advanced industrial technologies may be conveniently located — out of sight and mind of the mainstream public — in "remote" Indian areas.

Cumulatively, the federal government has very sound reasons (from its perspective) for determining that the advantages of maintaining discrete Indian territories within the United States under direct U.S. trust control, vastly outweigh any potential benefit accruing from a final absolute absorption of these residual areas. The history of conquest which has always marked the U.S. relationship to Native Americans has correspondingly been transformed into a process of colonization, albiet of an "internal" variety peculiar to highly evolved settler states (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa are other prime examples of this phenomenon). It is to the impacts of this system of internal colonization upon American Indian environments and the people who inhabit them that we now turn. In this regard, focusing on the two regions of the United States showing the greatest concentrations of Indian population seems entirely appropriate.

The Four Corners Region:

The meltdown last April of a poorly designed Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, in the Ukraine, captured worldwide attention and caused much concern as to the safety of Russian atomic power generation. Rather less known or talked about is the fact that the U.S. government operates a similarly designed facility (creating weapons grade uranium and plutonium) at its Hanford site, immediately adajacent to the Yakima Indian Reservation in the state of Washington. Such a relationship between this country's nuclear industry (both federal and private) and American Indian territories is hardly unique.

Although less than two-thirds of North America's uranium deposits are known to lie within reservation areas, eighty percent of the mining and one hundred percent of the production of it have occurred there since it became a profitable commodity during the period of 1950-1952. The bulk of this activity has occurred in the so-called Grants Uranium Belt of the Colorado Plateau, the "Four Corners Region" where the boundaries of the states of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico intersect. The area is also home to the greatest concentration of Indian population remaining in North America, being the location of the Navajo, Southern Ute, Ute Mountain, Hopi, Zuni, Laguna, Acoma and several other Puebloan nations.

In 1952, the Kerr-McGee Corporation was awarded the first contract (by the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs; duly endorsed by the Navajo Tribal Council) to mine uranium on Navajo land, employing one hundred Navajo miners at two-thirds the off-reservation wage scale.(4) In the same year, a federal mine inspector discovered that the ventilation fans in the mine's primary shaft were not functioning. When the same inspector returned in 1955, the ventilation fans ran out of gas during his visit. By 1959, radiation levels in the shaft of this Shiprock, New Mexico facility were estimated as being ninety to one hundred times permissible limits for worker safety. Nothing was done about the situation before the uranium deposit being mined played out and Kerr-McGee's Shiprock operation was closed down in early 1970. At that point, the corporation simply pulled out, leaving the local community to contend with some seventy-one acres of "raw" uranium tailings, containing approximately eighty percent of the original radioactivity found in uranium ore, piled in huge mounds beginning less than sixty feet from the San Juan River, the only significant surface water in the Shiprock area.(5)

Of the one hundred and fifty Navajo mine workers who worked underground at the Shiprock facility over the years, eighteen had died of radiation induced lung cancer by 1975. By 1980 twenty more were dead of the disease and another ninety-five had contracted serious respiratory ailments and cancers. Birth defects such as cleft pallate and other anomalies linked to increased radiation exposure had risen dramatically, both at Shiprock and at downstream communities which had been badly contaminated by tailings blowing into their drinking water. Yet by 1982 forty-two similar mining operations were occurring on or immediately adajacent to Navajo land, as were seven milling operations; fifteen new uranium oriented projects were on the drawing board. Of these, just one — the Kerr-McGee facility at Churchrock — discharges some eighty thousand gallons of water from its primary shaft ("dewatering") per day, contamination which is introduced directly into local and downstream water supplies.

In July of 1979 the United Nuclear uranium mill, also located at Churchrock, was the site of the largest radioactive "spill" in U.S. history. A mill tailings dam broke under pressure and released more than one hundred million gallons of highly contaminated water into the Rio Puerco River. Although United Nuclear had known of cracks in the dam structure at least two months before the break, no repairs were made. One thousand, seven hundred Navajo people were immediately affected, their single water source contaminated beyond any conceivable limit, and the sheep and other livestock upon which they depend for subsistence heavily contaminated in the aftermath.(6) The Churchrock community was denied such immediate compensation as emergency water and food supplies, and the corporation stonewalled for more than a year before agreeing to pay even a minimal out-of-court settlement to its victims. The same sort of situation prevails across the Navajo nation from the windswept tailings piles at Dalton Pass in the east to those at Tuba City in the west.

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At the neighboring Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, the situation is perhaps worse. The Anaconda Corporation, which leases seven thousand acres of Laguna land via an arrangement negotiated by the Interior Department, operated a uranium stripping plant there from 1952 to 1981 when, as in the case of Kerr-McGee's Shiprock mine, the profitably extractable ore played out. In 1973 the Environmental Protection Agency informed the Indians that Anaconda's Jackpile mine (second only in size to Namibia's Rossing Uranium Pit) had seriously contaminated the Rio Paguate River, the Pueblo's only surface water. In 1975 it was revealed that the ground water underlying the virtual whole of the Grants Uranium Belt, into which Laguna's wells are tapped, was also highly contaminated. In 1978 the EPA followed up by discovering that the tribal council building, community center and newly constructed Jackpile housing project were also very contaminated, and that the corporation had used low grade uranium ore as the material with which to "improve" the Laguna road network. Additionally, it was soon found that disturbed ore pockets had permeated much of the arable land available to the Pueblo.

Such conditions are so pervasive throughout the Four Corners Region that the term "radioactive colonization" has been coined to describe the situation. However, uranium contamination is hardly the end of the environmental havoc being forced upon the Indians of the Colorado Plateau by federal policy combined with corporate interest. For example, WEST Group, a consortium of twenty-three energy production companies based in Salt Lake City, Utah, has established a rapidly proliferating complex of coal-fired generating facilities in the area. The largest of these, the Four Corners Power Plant, emits such a huge and dense plume of smoke that it was one of only two features of human origin observable to the naked eyes of astronauts in space (the other was the Great Wall of China). As a result of these power plants spewing thousands of tons of nitric and sulpheric acids and various particulate matter into the atmosphere each day, the formerly crystalline air of Monument Valley — sporting a visibility of some one hundred miles in 1950 — is now clogged with enough pollution to reduce lines of vision to fifteen miles or less in many cases. The smoke has also caused a radical increase in the acidity of rainfall throughout the region, with all the consequent damage to wildlife and vegetation that this entails.

Worse in some ways is the fact that the coal which fires these generators comes from the same land. One location, Black Mesa in the Navajo-Hopi Joint Use Area of Arizona, contains the largest (at least twenty billion tons) and most accessible (lying less than six inches below the surface of the ground in some places) deposit of low-sulpher coal in North America. Given that it has long been known that the stripmining of arid terrain such as Black Mesa leaves the land unreclaimable in any meaningful sense, fruition of plans to expand present Peabody Coal mining operations to "full development" of the deposit will render the area uninhabitable by both Navajos and Hopis. Indeed, under provisions of Public Law 93-531, the U.S. government is presently engaged in the forcible relocation of thirteen thousand Indians from the Joint Use Area as an expedient to clearing the way for accelerated coal stripping. This has been termed as an act of genocide.

Finally, it has been found that the most cost effective means of transporting coal from mine pits, both at Black Mesa and elsewhere in the area, to railheads and power plants is by slurry; that is, by literally washing it in a "solution" of fifty percent coal through pipelines extending from point to point. Water for this purpose is already pumped from subterranean aquifirs by the millions of gallons annually. Should mining operations be expanded to the projected maximum over the next decade, it is predicted that all groundwater in the area will be depleted by a time very early in the twenty-first century. An "American Sahara" will result.

The National Science Advisory Commission perhaps had all of these factors in mind when, in 1972, it informally recommended to the Nixon administration that serious consideration be given to designating the Four Corners Region a "national sacrifice area" for purposes of attaining "national energy self-sufficiency" by 1999.(7) While no U.S. President has yet been audacious enough to employ such terminology publicly, it is clear that the Advisory Commission's prospectus of converting the Colorado Plateau into a gigantic uninhabited energy park, available for use as a repository for wholesale toxic waste disposal and storage, is well under way. For the ecosystem of the area, as well as the native nations in it, the scenario spells a final liquidation.

The Black Hills Region:

That groundwater has also been heavily affected is witnessed by an Indian Health Service report that indicated well tests at the reservation village of Slim Buttes showed gross alpha levels of radiation in the water three times the national safety standard. A new well at Slim Buttes, drilled later, resulted in tests recording alpha levels fourteen times the standard. Then Tribal Chairman Stanley Looking Elk requested that one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars of a two hundred thousand dollar federal allocation for reservation water management be committed to securing emergency, uncontaminated water supplies for the afflicted community. In a response strikingly similar to that of United Nuclear at Churchrock, the Bureau of Indian Affairs agreed, but stipulated that such water be provided only for consumption by cattle (the beef being sold in non-Indian markets).

Perhaps the reason for the government's stonewalling on the issue of the radioactive contamination of Pine Ridge is that much worse is yet to come. Not the least cause of this could be the situation, reported in "Akwesasne Notes" during the summer of 1980: "The Air Force retained an area near which residents have sighted large containers being flown in by helicopter. These reports have raised strong suspicions that the Gunnery Range is being used as a dump for high-level military nuclear waste, which may be leaking into the Lakota aquifir. In the same area, the rate of stillborn or deformed calves has skyrocketed. Northeast of the area are twelve nuclear missile sites whose radioactive effects are unknown."

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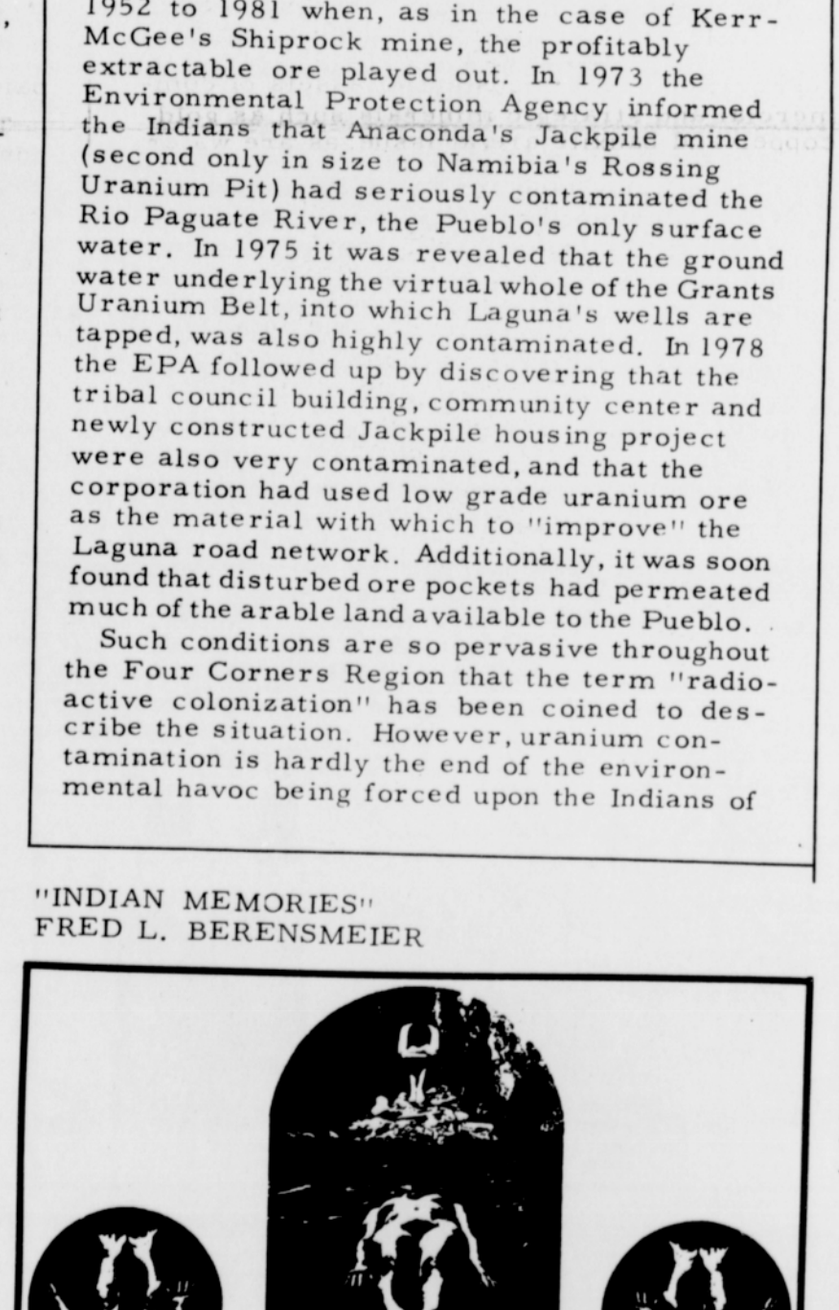

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