

Why revel in birth of imperial monster?

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Celebrating 'America's 400th Birthday' ignores the genocide of the continent's native people, argues Taiaiake Alfred

"America's 400th Birthday", the year-long staging of the mythologies of colonialism being played out on Virginia's cultural and physical landscapes, culminates this month with the commemoration of the founding of the first permanent English settlement in North America.

Jamestown 2007 is being celebrated as the initial step in Euro-Americans' march to pre-eminence and the foundation of "representative government, the rule of law, free enterprise and cultural diversity". The Magna Carta is on display and the "Erection of the Cross", whereby the continent was claimed for England, has been re-enacted. Its official sponsors are the Verizon Corporation and the Anheuser-Busch beer company, and the Queen and the President will preside at the closing ceremonies. What's not to like?

Well, for one thing, how about the glorification of genocide? It's hard for a native person to be anything but shocked and saddened to the core by the effrontery of it all. Jamestown 2007 is, in essence, a surreptitious celebration of the conquest of our homeland and the destruction of our people in the service of imperialism and the expansion of the white race.

It marks the era that saw indigenous peoples ravaged by diseases introduced by European settlers (on average, our communities lost 75 per cent of their populations) and the dispossession of our homelands by fraud and deceit - not a single treaty entered into by the English Crown or the US has been honoured by the whites. Native people have every right to resent and reject such a celebratory framing of Jamestown's founding. But if we were the kind of people to allow ignorance, arrogance and racism to get to us, we'd all be long dead of blood vessels burst from paroxysms of rage or guilt the minute we realised we were native in America. No. The native reaction to Jamestown 2007 is more reflective.

We reflect on the revisionist history that "America's 400th" represents, and we recognise a pattern of self-immolation that has defined America from its start. Jamestown was not the first English settlement in North America, nor was it the first in Virginia. That distinction goes to Roanoke, which saw the first settlers from England in 1584 and the birth of the first English person in America, Virginia Dare, in 1587. But the history of Roanoke does not fit neatly within the frame of American colonial myths. It failed as a colony because of violent conflicts with native peoples. Twice.

In fact, it was only in the mid-1600s, when the terrible diseases had taken their toll on native population numbers, that Roanoke became a viable and lasting settlement. The organisers of

Jamestown 2007 are careful to state that they are celebrating the first "permanent" English settlement; but there is still the obvious air of wilful forgetting. Roanoke has been edited out of the official history. Yet the destruction of the natives remains the unacknowledged and necessary foundation of the success of Euro-American settlement in this continent.

The descendants of the people of the Powhatan Confederacy, who for millennia inhabited the land beside and lived along what became known as the James River, are presently locked in a struggle with the US federal Government for mere recognition of their existence. They are denied any acknowledgement of their historic rights as the original people of the land. Thus, in 2007, as apologies for the enslavement of African-Americans are finally offered, neither Elizabeth Windsor nor George W. Bush is likely to mark the occasion by acknowledging the existence of the nations who greeted the *Susan Constant*, the *Discovery* and the *Godspeed* when they arrived in this verdant paradise laden with refugees from strife, war and disease and gave Europe a new life here in North America.

No. We will not delude ourselves into hoping that this occasion will spur some thoughtful and honest reflection by Americans on the fact that their society is built on the broken backs of native nations. And we will not trust their conscience to demand of themselves an accounting for the crimes that funded Europe's resurrection and the growth of two Atlantic empires.

Instead, we will resign ourselves to the self-evident fact that what was begun in Roanoke and Jamestown will continue its natural course. From the eastern seaboard of North America, the imperial beast has devoured homelands, cultures and peoples across the North American continent and the Pacific Ocean to Asia and is now consolidating its imperial presence in the Middle East. The conquest of our nations and the theft of our homelands did in fact mark the beginning of something monstrously significant.

But when the truth of it all is contemplated, is your ancestors' westward journey of plunder and the imperial mandate of the white race so ably and destructively claimed by your American cousins really something we should be celebrating?

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