

**Selected, Edited, and with Issue Framing Material by:**  
 Larry Madaras, *Howard Community College*  
 and  
 James M. SoRelle, *Baylor University*

## ISSUE



### Was the Pequot War Largely a Product of Native American Aggression?

**YES:** Steven T. Katz, "The Pequot War Reconsidered," *The New England Quarterly* (1991)

**NO:** Alfred A. Cave, from "The Pequot War and the Mythology of the Frontier," University of Massachusetts Press (1996)

#### Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you will be able to:

- Understand some of the differences between the traditional and revisionist interpretations of the causes of the Pequot War.
- Summarize several key events leading up to the Pequot War.
- Evaluate the role played by religion in the conflicts between Native Americans and British American colonists.
- Identify the competing perspectives of Native Americans and colonists with regard to the causes of the Pequot War.
- Explain the concept of a "clash of cultures" as it pertains to the interactions of Native Americans and colonists in New England and throughout the British North American colonies.

#### ISSUE SUMMARY

**YES:** Steven Katz argues that the Pequot Indians, through a series of raids, ambushes, and murders in the 1630s, sought to realize their geopolitical ambitions by destroying European settlement in New England and that, after efforts to negotiate failed, New England colonists sought to protect themselves from Pequot aggression by waging a defensive war to prevent further assaults on colonial settlements in the region.

**NO:** Alfred Cave insists that the Pequot War resulted from a clash of cultures in which Puritan leaders, preoccupied with the idea that Native Americans were part of a Satanic conspiracy, were convinced that violence was essential to intimidate indigenous Americans in order to secure colonial settlements, terminate Indian autonomy, and control land and resources in New England.

**R**elations between Native Americans and Europeans were marred by the difficulties that arose from people of very different cultures encountering each other for the first time. These encounters led to inaccurate perceptions, misunderstandings, and failed expectations. While at first the American Indians deified the explorers, experience soon taught them to do otherwise. European opinion ran the gamut from admiration to contempt; for example, some

European poets and painters who expressed admiration for the Noble Savage while other Europeans accepted as rationalization for genocide the sentiment that "the one good savage is a dead one."

Spanish, French, Dutch, and English treatment of Native Americans differed and was based to a considerable extent on each nation's hopes about the New World and how it could be subordinated to the Old. The Spaniards exploited the Indians most directly, taking their gold and

silver, transforming their government, religion, and society, and even occasionally enslaving them. The French were less of a menace than the others because there were fewer of them and because many French immigrants were itinerant trappers and priests rather than settlers. The Dutch presence in North America was relatively short-lived. In the long run, the emigration from the British Isles was the most threatening of all. Entire families came from England, and they were determined to establish a permanent home in the wilderness.

The juxtaposition of Native American and English from the Atlantic to the Appalachians resulted sometimes in coexistence, other times in enmity. William Bradford's account of the Pilgrims' arrival at Cape Cod describes the insecurity the new migrants felt as they disembarked on American soil. "[T]hey had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather beaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor. . . . Besides, what could they see but a hideous and deserted wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men. . . . If they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world." Historical hindsight, however, suggests that if anyone should have expressed fears about the unfolding encounter in the Western Hemisphere, it should have been the Native Americans because their numbers declined by as much as 95 percent in the first century following Columbus's arrival. Although some of this decline can be attributed to violent encounters with Europeans, there seems to have been a more hostile (and far less visible) force at work. As historian William McNeill has suggested, the main weapon that overwhelmed indigenous peoples in the Americas was the Europeans' breath which transmitted disease germs for which most American Indians had no immunities.

Upon arrival, English settlers depended on the Indians' generosity in sharing the techniques of wilderness survival. Puritan clergymen tried to save their neighbors' souls, going so far as to translate the Bible into dialects, but they were not as successful at conversion as the French Jesuits and Spanish Franciscans. Attempts at coexistence did not smooth over the tension between the English and the Indians. They did not see eye to eye, for example, about the uses of the environment. Indian agriculture, in the eyes of English settlers, was neither intense nor efficient. Native Americans observed that white settlers consumed larger amounts of food per person and cultivated not only for themselves but also for towns and villages that bought the surplus. Subsistence farming collided with the market economy.

Large-scale violence erupted in Virginia in the 1620s, the 1640s, and the 1670s. In the latter decade, frontiersmen in the Virginia piedmont led by Nathaniel Bacon attacked tribes living in the Appalachian foothills. In New England, from the 1630s through the 1670s, Pequots, Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Mohegans, Podunks, and Nipmunks united to stop the encroachments into their woodlands and hunting grounds. King Philip's War lasted from June 1675 to September 1676, with isolated raids stretching on until 1678. Casualties rose into the hundreds, and Anglo-Indian relations deteriorated.

In the next century Spain, France, and England disputed each other's North American claims, and Native Americans joined sides, usually as the allies of France against England. These great wars of the eighteenth century ended in 1763 with England's victory, but disputes over territorial expansion continued. Colonial officials objected to the Proclamation of 1763 by which King George III's imperial government forbade his subjects from settling west of the Appalachian watershed. The area from those mountains to the Mississippi River, acquired from France at the recently negotiated Peace of Paris, was designated as an Indian reservation. From 1763 to 1783, as Anglo-colonial relations moved from disagreement to combat to independence, the London government consistently sided with the Native Americans.

The full range of experiences of Europeans encountering Native Americans in the New World does not lend itself to easy, unalterable conclusions regarding the nature of those contacts. The consequences of these interactions depended upon when and where they took place and which particular groups were involved, and there was rarely any constant or consistent pattern of behavior. One tribe might experience cordial relations with European colonists at one point in time but not another. A particular tribe would get along well with the French but not the English or Dutch; in another generation, the same tribe might enter into an alliance with its former enemies. A case in point is the history of Indian-white relations in early Virginia. The colonists participating in the Jamestown expedition, for example, were attacked by a group of Indians almost as soon as they set foot on American soil. A few months later, however, Powhatan, the dominant chief in the region, provided essential food supplies to the Jamestown residents who were suffering from disease and hunger. By the latter part of 1608, however, the colonists, under the leadership of John Smith, had begun to take an antagonistic stance toward Powhatan and his people. Smith attempted to extort food supplies from the Indians by threatening to burn their villages and canoes. These hostilities continued long after

Smith's departure from Virginia and did not end until the 1640s, when colonial leaders signed a formal treaty with the Powhatan Confederacy.

Similar experiences occurred in New England where colonists and Native Americans maintained reasonably cordial relations in the early years of settlement. Tensions over land usage, trade, and acts of violence, however, soon produced warfare in southern New England in the 1630s. Following the murder of several Englishmen, Puritan officials demanded that the Pequots, who were held responsible for the deaths despite evidence that members of other tribes in the region were culpable, turn over the guilty parties for prosecution by colonial courts. The Pequot sachem Sassacus refused but did provide restitution in the form of wampum, believing this to be a satisfactory response. Subsequently, in 1637, New England officials sent armed colonists to exact revenge on the Pequots at Fort Mystic, where raids resulted in the deaths of all but a few of the Indian inhabitants, and the village was put to the torch. Plymouth Colony governor William Bradford described the scene in his autobiography: "It was a fearful sight to see them [mainly Pequot women and children] thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies in their hands and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy."

Responsibility for the outbreak of the Pequot War (1636–1638) has become the topic of considerable debate among scholars of colonial America and specialists in Native American history. While most of the nineteenth-century treatments of this conflict are marred by racist characterizations of Native Americans generally, in the twentieth century, historians have traditionally recognized that New England Puritans certainly were guilty of the slaughter of their Pequot adversaries. At the same time, however, many like Alden Vaughan in *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620–1675* (Little, Brown, 1965) have argued that the Pequots represented a threat to New England security and that Puritans acted in self-defense to resist Pequot aggression. Revisionists have been far more critical of the Puritans. Most notable in this regard is Francis Jennings, whose book *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (University of North Carolina

Press, 1975) refocused the argument on Puritan greed, prejudice, and bigotry. For Jennings, the Pequots were trapped in the middle of an ongoing competition among colonial residents in Massachusetts Bay Colony, Plymouth and Connecticut over land and control of trade in the region. Neal Salisbury avoids Jennings' polemical style and concludes in *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500–1643* (Oxford University Press, 1982) that the conflict with the Pequots succeeded in bringing the New England Puritan community together to refocus on its divine mission of dispatching the indigenous peoples from their midst. In her book *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), Karla Ordahl Kupperman insists that the Pequot War was prompted by English efforts to exercise undisputed power in New England.

In the following essays, the reader will find two very different interpretations of the causes of the Pequot War. In the first selection, Steven T. Katz challenges revisionists who view the conflict as an act of racist genocide on the part of New England Puritans. According to Katz, Massachusetts Bay Colony leaders attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate with the Pequots in an effort to bring the murderers of John Storer and John Oldham, and other colonists to justice. English colonists, Katz argues, had every reason to fear for their safety as long as the Pequots attempted to destroy English settlements throughout New England. The Puritans fought a defensive war that included the decision to burn the Pequot village at Fort Mystic and had no intention of carrying out a full-scale war against these Native American adversaries.

Alfred Cave views the Puritans as the aggressors in this conflict as they attempted to make the New England frontier safe for their followers. Cave disputes the argument that the Pequots were a threat to Puritan security except insofar as they attempted to control European trade and maintain a network of allied tribes throughout New England. Characterizing the Pequots (and Native Americans for that matter) as savages, instruments of Satan, and enemies of Christianity, the Puritans overreacted to rumors promulgated by the Mohegan sachem Uncas that the Pequots were preparing to assault the expanding Puritan settlements. The attack at Fort Mystic resulted and ultimately destroyed Pequot hegemony in the region.

Alfred A. Cave



## The Pequot War and the Mythology of the Frontier

① Although the Pequot War was a small-scale conflict of short duration, it cast a long shadow. The images of brutal and untrustworthy savages plotting the extermination of those who would do the work of God in the wilderness, developed to explain and justify the killing of Pequots, became a vital part of the mythology of the American frontier. Celebration of victory over Indians as the triumph of light over darkness, civilization over savagery, for many generations our central historical myth, finds its earliest full expression in the contemporary chronicles and histories of this little war. The myth from its inception was grounded in a distorted conception of Indian character and behavior. The Pequot War was not waged in response to tangible acts of aggression. It cannot be understood as a rational response to a real threat to English security. It was, however, the expression of an assumption central to Puritan Indian policy. Puritan magistrates were persuaded that from time to time violent reprisals against recalcitrant savages would be necessary to make the frontier safe for the people of God. The campaign against the Pequots was driven by the same assumption that had impelled Plymouth to massacre Indians suspected of plotting against them at Wessagussett in 1623. The incineration of Pequots at Fort Mystic served the same symbolic purpose as the impalement of Wituwamet's head on Plymouth's blockhouse. Both were intended to intimidate potential enemies and to remind the Saints that they lived in daily peril of massacre at the hands of Satan's minions.

Two letters written by clergymen to civil authorities in 1637 tell us much about the Puritan mind-set. Both warn of the dangers of hesitation or leniency in dealing with the Pequots. The Reverend Thomas Hooker, responding to the attack on Wethersfield, predicted that any delay in undertaking a punitive war against them would lead other Indians to conclude that Englishmen were cowards. If that happened, Hooker predicted, all of the tribes would "turne enemyse against us." In a similar vein, the Reverend

John Higginson, writing from Fort Saybrook, declared that "the eyes of all the Indians of the country are upon the English. If some serious and very speedie course not be taken to tame the pride and take down the insolency of these now insulting Pequots . . . we are like to have all the Indians in the country about our ears." The assumption, voiced here by Hooker and Higginson, that all Indians are natural enemies of Christians and that the English frontier in Connecticut can therefore be made secure only through the employment of extreme measures against the Pequots, was obviously shared by the English commanders whose cruelty to noncombatants and prisoners of war shocked their Indian allies.

In their reflections on the Pequot War, Puritan apolo- ② gists argued that English troops were instruments of divine judgment. Early Puritan historians portrayed the war as a key episode in the unfolding of God's plan for New England. Captain John Mason, who believed that the English had been saved from a general Indian uprising only by divine intervention, ended his "Brief History of the Pequot War" with praise of the Almighty: "Let the whole Earth be filled with his Glory! Thus the lord was pleased to smite our Enemies in the hinder Parts, and give us their land for an Inheritance." Mason's colleague, Captain John Underhill, concurred. Through God's providence, "a few feeble instruments, soldiers not accustomed to war," defeated a barbarous and insolent nation, "putting to the sword "fifteen hundred souls." Underhill rejoiced that through God's will "their country is fully subdued and fallen into the hands of the English," and he called on his readers to "magnify his honor for his great goodness." A dissenting note was struck by Lieutenant Lion Gardener who, in a work written in 1660, wondered why the Bay Colony leaders made war against the Pequots to avenge the worthless old reprobate Stone, while the Narragansetts, whom he presumed guilty of the murder of the worthy Captain Oldham, went scot-free. But Gardener, no less a Puritan than his colleagues, warned against trusting Indians

and complained about lax military preparedness. After describing Indian tortures, he predicted that hundreds of Englishmen would die in agony and dishonor, "if God should deliver us into their hands, as justly he may for our sins."

No other Puritan writer expressed any misgivings about whether the English had attacked the right adversary in 1637. The Massachusetts Bay Colony historian Edward Johnson, writing of the English massacre of Pequots at Fort Mystic, declared that "by this means the Lord strook a trembling terror into all the Indians round about, even to this very day." Through righteous violence, Johnson believed, God had pacified the forces of Satan in the wilderness. That theme dominated Puritan thinking about Indian wars. The commissioners of the United Colonies of New England in 1646 called for the writing of histories that would record how God "hath cast the dread of his people (weak in themselves) upon the Indians." Increase Mather, in his *Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England* (1676), wrote that the defeat of the Pequots in 1637 "must be ascribed to the wonderful Providence of God, who did (as with Jacob of old, and after that with the children of Israel) lay the fear of the English and the dread of them upon all the Indians. The terror of god was upon them round about." Incorporating that notion into his grand history of New England, Cotton Mather later declared that, through God's providence, the Puritans were enabled to achieve not only "the utter subduing" of the Pequots but "the affrighting of all the other Natives" as well, and thereby secured several decades of peace.

As the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates, Puritan preoccupation with the idea that Indians were part of a satanic conspiracy against God's true church in the wilderness led them to interpret Pequot recalcitrance as evidence of malevolent intent. But it does not follow that we can therefore explain the Pequot War solely and simply as the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding about certain specific occurrences, for the conflict was more fundamentally the outgrowth of a profound incompatibility of cultures. Puritan ideology precluded long-term coexistence with a "savage" people unwilling to acknowledge Christian hegemony. Clarification of Pequot intentions in the short run would not necessarily have changed the long-term outcome. A reading of their commentaries on Indian affairs suggests that our assumptions about the desirability of peaceful coexistence were not necessarily shared by the founders of Puritan New England or by their immediate successors. Although they feared Indian war and prayed that they be spared its horrors, they also suspected that it was both necessary and inevitable. Apologists for the Fort Mystic massacre did not

invent the image of the Indian as a savage killer to excuse the Pequot War, nor did Pequot actions inspire a new view of Indian character. There is ample evidence, as we noted in the first chapter of this study, that from the founding of the first English settlements in North America onward, Englishmen in general and Puritans in particular saw in Native American culture only the "degeneracy" of those who follow the Devil rather than God; they accordingly were predisposed to regard Indians as untrustworthy and treacherous and were thus prone to overreact to rumors of impending Indian attacks.

Their acceptance of customary English anti-Indian prejudice in itself does not fully explain Puritan behavior. We must also examine Puritan ideas about the role of Indians in God's providential plan for New England. Here we encounter concepts quite alien to modern sensibilities, embedded in explanations so far removed from our sense of historical processes that it is tempting to dismiss them as irrelevant. But let us look more closely, for we must try to understand the seventeenth century on its own terms. Fundamental to the Puritan understanding of the dynamics of New England history was the assumption that only through God's special protection of his people could Christians survive in a wilderness realm dominated by Satan and inhabited by satanic savages. God intervened early to soften the hearts of the godless heathens who lurked in New England's forests and wastelands. Ultimately, he controlled their behavior. It therefore followed that troubled Indian relations might well be a frightening sign that God's protection had been, or was about to be, withheld for some reason. Throughout the seventeenth century, rumors of impending Indian attack occasioned deep soul-searching and calls for reformation in Puritan New England.

The Pequot War inspired the earliest expressions of the idea that Indian wars were providentially ordained events intended to test and chastise God's people. John Higginson suggested that the Lord had set "the Indians upon his servants, to make them cleave more closely together, to prevent contentions of brethern." Edward Johnson hinted that God had unleashed the Pequots in order to punish the Puritans for their lack of proper severity in dealing with Anne Hutchinson and the antinomians. Those suggestions foreshadowed the portrayals of the role of divine providence in Indian warfare that would dominate the literature inspired by King Philip's War half a century later. Historians of that conflict spoke of God's need to test his Saints in the fire of battle, punish his people for straying from the true way, and give them also opportunity to serve as the vehicles of God's wrath in exterminating heathen who refused to embrace the Gospel. Those themes were exploited most

thoroughly by Puritan divines who, in later years, warned of the fearful consequences of declension. Thus, Increase Mather in a sermon preached in 1676 declared King Philip's War God's "heavy judgment," a punishment of the "sin of man's unfaithfulness. . . . Alas that New England should be brought so low in so short a time (for she is come down wonderfully) and that by such vile enemies by the Heathen, yea by the worst of the Heathen." Cotton Mather, in his 1689 election sermon, declared that the "molestations" the English in New England had suffered at the hands of the Indians had come about because God was angry that his people had "indianized"; in other words, they had allowed themselves to succumb to what Mather regarded as Indian vices: idleness, self-indulgence, and dishonesty. The belief that God used Indians as a rod with which to discipline his people became an enduring and vital aspect of the Puritan sense of the past. In his election sermon of 1730, the Reverend Thomas Prince, reviewing more than a century of New England history, exclaimed, "how often has he made the eastern Indians the rod of his anger and the staff of indignation with us! He has sent them against us and given them the charge to take the spoil and tread us down as the mire of the street. They came with open mouth upon us; they thrust thro' everyone they found abroad; they ensnared and slew our mighty men who went forth for our defense; they spoil'd our fields and pastures; they burnt up our houses; they destroy'd our towns and garrisons; they murdered our wives; they carried our young men and virgins into captivity; they had no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eyes spared not our children, they dashed them in pieces." Prince reminded the citizenry that they had survived only because the Lord, although rightly provoked, finally took pity on his own true people and turned against the savages. "He rebuk'd them and set them one against another . . . as wax melteth before the fire, so they perished at the presence of God." But his favor and protection were not to be taken for granted.

God's wrath, in Puritan formulations of the providential view of New England's history, was not reserved for errant Saints. Historians of King Philip's War assured their readers that, although the war was in part intended to punish the English in New England for straying from the true way, the Lord's anger against the Indians was far greater. For our purposes, perhaps the most revealing statement in the later Indian war literature was a declaration from the Bay Colony's superintendent of Indian affairs that God had ordained the war against King Philip in order to punish the Indians who had refused to embrace Puritan Christianity. This was not an entirely new theme. Although lack of receptivity to the Christian Gospel was not stated explicitly as a reason for killing Pequots by any

of the chroniclers of that early war, the preacher's charge to the Connecticut militia to "execute vengeance against the heathen" rested upon the assumption that the English were indeed called upon by the Almighty to visit his wrath upon a very sinful people. Puritan literary celebrations of the Fort Mystic massacre, which strike us as rather grotesque, are grounded in the belief that the burning of Pequots was a righteous act of divine retribution.

Assessments of the causes and consequences of the Pequot War must take into account Puritan ideas about God's attitude toward the unregenerate. The Pequots were not the last indigenous group in New England to suffer what the Puritans believed to be divinely mandated punishment. The Narragansetts and the Wampanoags, friends of the English in 1636-37, both discovered, before the seventeenth century ended, that the Puritan conception of God's providential plan for New England ultimately left no room for vigorous assertions of Native American autonomy, for such assertions offended the Puritan sense of mission. Puritan toleration of Indian independence was never anything more than an expedient; as the population ratio between Englishmen and Native Americans in New England shifted in favor of the English, the Puritan authorities grew increasingly overbearing in their dealings with their Indian counterparts. Puritan Indian policy from its inception was driven by the conviction that, if the Puritans remained faithful to their covenant with the Almighty, they were destined to replace the Indians as lords of New England. Puritan ideology required that Indian control of land and resources be terminated, on the grounds that "savages" did not exploit natural bounty in the manner that God intended. The pressures created by the burgeoning of the English population in the latter half of the seventeenth century reinforced that ideological imperative. Economic changes, such as the declining importance of the fur trade and the expansion of English agriculture and industry, which reduced the need for Indian commerce, further jeopardized the status of Native American communities in a New England dominated by Euro-Americans. The Indian uprising led by Metacom (King Philip) in 1675 represented a desperate, belated, and ultimately futile effort to protect the last remnants of Indian sovereignty in southern New England.

Although Puritan apologists for the war against the Pequots provided one of the earliest English statements of the belief in Indian war as a divinely sanctioned means of extending the light of civilization and true religion into the wilderness, their version of the frontier drama contained some elements that later generations would find strange and uncongenial. Over the years, the myth of heroic struggle against savagery underwent some important changes in

emphasis as secular doctrines of scientific progress and historical evolution, along with a new sense of "manifest destiny," largely but not entirely replaced Puritan notions of divine providence. The idea that Indians might be used by the Almighty to punish the sins of Christians fell from favor. Puritan misgivings about the wilderness as a place of spiritual peril gave way to a more optimistic and uncritical celebration of the frontier as the birthplace of uniquely American virtues. Indian rejection of progress replaced their disinterest in the Gospel or their presumed alliance with Satan as the reason most often advanced to explain their imminent extinction. But in one important particular, the central theme remained the same. On a succession of frontiers, as Winthrop Jordan reminds us, "conquering the Indian symbolized and personified the conquest of American difficulties, the surmounting of the wilderness. To push back the Indian was to prove the worth of one's own mission, to make straight in the desert a highway for civilization."

5 Once the eastern Indians were no longer a threat, some nineteenth-century writers transformed the Native American into a victim rather than a villain. In their pages, the American "savage" emerged as an innocent and hapless primitive doomed by the imperatives of historical progress, an object of pity for whom the sentimental might shed a tear. Historians, novelists, and dramatists now sometimes castigated Puritans and other pioneers for their mistreatment of such a simple and defenseless people. It goes without saying that such sympathy for the Indian as a "much injured race" is not to be found in seventeenth-century Puritan commentaries on Indian wars. But we must not assume that its appearance in later historical writing necessarily meant abandonment of the idea that the conquest and dispossession of Indians were historical imperatives. Until quite recently, the attitude of paternalistic benevolence cultivated by architects of Indian policy as well as by their critics was generally qualified by a condition: The Indian must now cease to be an Indian, must embrace the values, culture, and religion of his dispossessioners, if he is to be deemed worthy of survival. Here we are once again face to face with the premise that drove Puritan Indian policy: denial of the validity and viability of Native American life. Whether the Indian was to be displaced by the workings of divine providence or by the inexorable march of progress, the outcome was much the same. Moreover, it did not matter whether Indians were portrayed as noble or degraded; white Americans over the years generally thought of them as a backward people without history and without a future.

While the frontier struggle for control of land continued, misgivings about mistreatment of Native

Americans had only a very limited impact upon events. As Michael Paul Rogin notes, "not the Indians alive . . . but their destruction, symbolized the American experience." Violence against Indians cannot be explained fully as the outgrowth of the white man's acquisitive instincts. There were other motives at work. Rogin argues that Native American societies in their communal aspects "posed a severe threat," as they inspired "forbidden nostalgia for the nurturing, blissful and primitively violent connection to nature that white Americans had to leave behind." Hence, "the only safe Indians were dead, sanitized, or completely dependent upon white benevolence." Indians were "at once symbols of a lost childhood bliss, and, as bad children repositories of murderous negative projections." Those Indians who physically survived plague, war, and dispossession were therefore not only relegated to reservations, where they lived in abject poverty, but subjected to an onslaught on their cultural integrity through measures such as the so-called Religious Crimes Acts, which outlawed the sun dance and other expressions of Native American spirituality.

6 Intolerance of Indian cultures reflected the persistence of essential elements of the Puritan vision of the struggle between heathen savagery and Christian civilization. Puritan ideology as it pertained to encounters with Indians contained three premises which later provided vital elements in the mythology of the American frontier. One was the image, not original with the Puritans but embellished by them, of the Indian as the Other, primitive, dark, and sinister. Another was the portrayal, first developed in the Pequot War narratives, of the Indian fighter as the agent of God and of progress, redeeming the land through righteous violence. And finally, it is to the apologists for the Pequot War that we owe the justification of the expropriation of Indian resources and the extinction of Indian sovereignty as security measures necessitated by their presumed savagery.

Few historians today confuse these elements of our founding myth with historical fact. The "triumphalist" tone that once characterized the narration of Euro-American victories over presumably savage foes is now muted, or silenced, as scholars struggle to come to terms with the ambiguities as well as the cruelties and injustice now perceived in the encounters of indigenous peoples and European invaders. What place should the Pequots occupy in the new history of intercultural conflict? Despite the ample evidence of arrogance, ignorance, and brutality in the English treatment of Sassacus and his people, it will not do to cast them in the role of passive victims. They were not guilty of the enormities, real or anticipated, with which they are charged in the traditional, pro-Puritan

literature. They were not a threat to the survival of the Puritan colonies. But in their efforts to establish and maintain a far-flung tributary network and to control European trade, the Pequots provoked powerful Indian opposition. Their murder of Indian rivals en route to trade at the House of Good Hope in 1632, the exile of the Mohegan sachems shortly thereafter and the occupation of their hunting preserves, along with the subsequent treatment of Mohegans living in Pequot villages after the final defection of Uncas, all give evidence of a ruthless determination to maintain power that suggests that Sassacus would be seriously miscast were we now to describe him simply as an inoffensive noble savage wronged by the white man. He was inept; he lost, but he was hardly a hapless innocent. Neither were the Mohegan, River Indian, and Narragansett sachems who engineered his downfall.

7 In seeking to use the English as pawns in their power struggles, the sachems made a serious miscalculation. The consequences of alliance with the Puritan colonies were not immediately apparent. The sachems no doubt believed that they could maintain control. The English, as we have seen, were susceptible to manipulation by those who knew how to play on their expectations and anxieties. It was a game that Uncas easily mastered, that Sassacus never learned how to play, and that Miantonomi ultimately lost. But the final outcome was loss of Algonquian autonomy. A revisionist history of the Pequot War written from the Native American point of view—and this present study does not pretend to accomplish that—might well deemphasize decisions made at Boston, Plymouth, Saybrook, and Hartford and focus instead on the miscalculations and blunders in Pequot, Mohegan, and Narragansett councils that paved the way for the early establishment of English hegemony in southern New England. Unfortunately, given the limitations in the source materials, such a reconstruction would be highly conjectural. But we do know enough about Native American politics in southern New England in the early seventeenth century to realize that viewing the conflict from an Algonquian perspective would immediately expose the absurdity of the English belief that they were engaged in some sort of holy war against murderous heathens determined to exterminate Christians. Although the Puritans believed that their actions were driven by their own security needs, and by divine providence, the conflicts that culminated in the Pequot War originally were the outgrowth of the ambitions of rival sachems, not of an anti-English conspiracy. Believing themselves endangered, the Puritan colonies, to the later sorrow

of many of their Indian allies, transformed the quarrel with the Pequots into a successful campaign to establish English dominance.

In their justification of the war against the Pequots, Puritan mythmakers invoked old images of treacherous savages and told tales of diabolical plots. It is now clear that their portrayals of the Pequots bear little resemblance to reality. The Puritans transformed their adversary into a symbol of savagery. Rumors of Pequot conspiracy, although flimsy in substance and of dubious origin, reinforced expectations about savage behavior and justified preemptive slaughter and dispossession. Not only did the Pequot War engender its own myths in reinforcement and embellishment of Puritan ideology; it was the fulfillment of a prewar mythology that foretold conflicts in the wilderness between the people of God and the hosts of Satan. The fact that the triumph of Christians in such conflicts would open the way to English control of land and trade, and to the receipt of tribute, provided powerful material incentives to maintain intact ideas about savagery that justified the domination of indigenous peoples. Puritan apologists for their assault on the Pequots made a significant contribution to the development of an ideological rationale for Christian imperialism. The images they framed of their adversary have been remarkably persistent but now should be recognized as the products of wartime propaganda.

The Pequot War in reality was the messy outgrowth of petty squabbles over trade, tribute, and land among Pequots, Mohegans, River Indians, Niantics, Narragansetts, Dutch traders, and English Puritans. The Puritan imagination endowed this little war with a metahistorical significance it hardly deserved. But the inner logic of Puritan belief required creation of a mythical conflict, a cosmic struggle of good and evil in the wilderness, and out of that need the Pequot War epic was born.

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**ALFRED A. CAVE** is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Toledo. Previously, he held academic positions at the City College of New York, the University of Utah, and the University of Florida. Among his many publications in the fields of Native American and Jacksonian era history, he is the author of *Prophets of the Great Spirit: Native American Revitalization Movements in Eastern North America* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006) and *Lethal Encounters: Englishmen and Indians in Colonial Virginia* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013).