

Nick Tilsen Trump's Mount Rushmore fireworks show is a Fourth of July attack on Indigenous people

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By Nick Tilsen, president of NDN Collective and a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation

On Friday, President Donald Trump will continue his tour of racism and colonialism, moving from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to the sacred Black Hills. Make no mistake, this visit is an attack on Indigenous people.

I visit the Black Hills alongside many other Lakotas every year as part of a tradition we have maintained for thousands of years. Stretching from what is now known as South Dakota into Wyoming, they are a sacred place that I take my family and my children to, like the Vatican for Catholics or Mecca for Muslims. The hills are where I feel most connected to Creator.

Two of the men carved into that mountain are slave owners, and one approved the mass hangings of 38 Dakota men in the largest mass execution in the history of the United States.

The Black Hills are also the site of death, violence and war. They are home to Mount Rushmore — a monument to white colonizers carved by a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer into land stolen from us by the U.S. government in 1877. Two of the men carved into that mountain are slave owners, and one approved the mass hangings of 38 Dakota men in the largest mass execution in the history of the United States.

Trump's visit to Mount Rushmore, timed to America's celebration of the Fourth of July, is almost a natural sequel to his rally in Tulsa — originally coinciding with Juneteenth. He is taking his campaign from the site of one of the United States' most horrific acts of racism to another place with long histories of oppression and state-sanctioned violence.

In 1868, our rights to the Black Hills were written into law through a treaty between the United States and several tribal nations, including the Oglala band of Lakotas, of which I am a citizen. The Senate ratified the treaty, enshrining it as the law of the land equivalent to the Constitution itself. However, when white colonizers discovered gold in our lands in 1874, they attacked us and have illegally occupied the Black Hills ever since.

The Black Hills do not belong to Trump, and visiting this monument to white supremacy is an unacceptable political stunt.

We have never been silent in the face of such attacks on our people and our lands. The legendary Oglala warrior Crazy Horse led our people into battle to protect our lands. In the 1970s, members of the American Indian Movement occupied Mount Rushmore and

declared it to be Mount Crazy Horse. Lakota litigators pushed through a 1980 Supreme Court decision that found the invasion of the Black Hills to be unconstitutional and that the United States must pay a settlement as reparations for trespassing and appropriating our lands without consent. But we have refused to accept the settlement — an amount that has slowly accrued interest and is now well over \$1 billion — because we won't settle for anything less than the full return of our lands as stipulated by the treaties our nations signed and agreed upon.

Now, Trump is making a mockery of our pain and struggles, papering over an egregious theft.

"Mount Rushmore" is a racist and colonialist symbol of a society that does not care for Indigenous people — just like the statues of violent white men from Christopher Columbus to Andrew Jackson — that adorn public spaces across the United States.

Colonialism and racism are alive and well in America. Indigenous people are still facing inequities in accessing education, health care and economic opportunities. We are confronting extractive industries and corporations that only want to further take from us.

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Our lives have been stolen from us; our lands are occupied by colonizers. We've been removed from our homes, and now some of the most impoverished places in the U.S. are Indigenous places of struggle and residence. In South Dakota, where I live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Indigenous people constitute less than 10 percent of the population but roughly half of those booked into the state's jails.

Black leaders and activists have ushered in a historic moment for this country: Everyday people are talking about white supremacy and its impact on our laws and lives. Everyday people are interested in the symbolism and history of racism, and activists are taking down Confederate statues in the South and statues of Christopher Columbus across the nation. But our liberation work must protect and advance Indigenous people, too, including our right to self-determination and sovereignty.

In the midst of a national reckoning on race, the hypocrisy of Mount Rushmore must be interrogated and denounced. The so-called Shrine of Democracy is carved into stolen land that even our Constitution holds to be illegally occupied.

Trump's visit is a deliberate attack on Indigenous people, just as his visit to the site of the Black Wall Street massacre the day after Juneteenth was an attack on Black people. If you truly care about fighting our country's racist history, now is not a day to be silent.