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Genocidal history of a 'most civilised society'

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"Where today are the Pequot? Where are the Naragansett, the Mohican, the Pokanoket, and many other powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished before the avarice and the oppression of the White Man, as snow before the summer sun." - Tecumseh of the Shawnees

WHEN Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke of the European propensity for war at the recent Umno general assembly, he was criticised for playing to the gallery. Classic Mahathir Western-bashing, screamed the critics. But what do the records say?

Mothers with nursing infants shot right through. Little boys butchered as they came out of hiding. Others, defenceless, murdered where they stood or hunted down whilst fleeing for their lives. The frosty banks of Wounded Knee Creek ran red with blood.

Three hundred Sioux men, women and children, including the old and ailing Chief Big Foot, died on that day of infamy, Dec 29, 1890, in the massacre at Wounded Knee, the incident the Seventh Cavalry of the US Army unashamedly portrayed as "a battle".

Wounded Knee marked the end of "the Indian Wars", the brutal and bloody conflict that engulfed native inhabitants of America as they attempted to protect their homeland from the marauding colonists from Europe.

It signalled the complete subjugation of the native inhabitants; scores of tribes were annihilated while those that were not, were consigned to live on reservations much like wildlife reserves in Africa.

But the story began in 1492 when Christopher Columbus landed on an island off the American coast and "discovered" the New World.

The island's inhabitants, whom Columbus called Indios, treated him honourably as befits a guest. Columbus repaid their kindness by kidnapping 10 of them and shipping them back to Spain where one died upon arrival. Within a decade, hordes of Spaniards who came in the wake of Columbus in search of gold and minerals decimated tribes of natives, later known as Tainos, and sold others into slavery.

Thus, the stage was set for a brutal colonisation of the New World, initially dominated by the Spaniards. Hernan Cortes ruthlessly conquered an area now known as Mexico and annihilated the Aztecs in 1518.

Thirteen years later, Francisco Pizarro overwhelmed the Incas, who ruled a large swathe of South America, in a particularly brutal campaign.

Other Europeans who appeared on the scene later displayed the same inclinations to savagery and barbarism. In 1641, Dutch soldiers massacred Raritan Indians in two Staten Island villages, bayoneting the sleeping men, women and children and hacking their bodies to pieces.

The English were no less brutal. Upon arriving in Virginia in 1607, they established a colony called Jamestown. To control the native Powhatans, they crowned one of them, Wahunsonacook, king. He became more subservient when John Rolfe married his daughter, Pocahontas, in a union immortalised in films until today.

But after Wahunsonacook's death, the Powhatans rose against the English encroachment of their homeland, resulting in the cruel decimation of the native population in just a few years.

To provide a doctrinal justification for their domination, the colonials invented "Manifest Destiny". According to the doctrine, Europeans were a superior race and therefore had the right and obligation to rule the savage natives as they saw fit. They were "ordained by destiny" to rule

all of America.

But according to Dee Brown's classic Indian history of the American West, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, Manifest Destiny was expressly crafted to justify frequent transgressions of land designated "permanent Indian frontier" in treaties between colonists and Indians.

The doctrine underpinned European colonialism worldwide, not just in the Americas. From Africa to Asia to Australia, "the White Man's Burden" was the excuse for invading and appropriating land settled by others for tens of thousands of years.

"The superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilise the inferior races," said Jules Ferry, French Prime Minister (1880-1881, 1883-1885), in an address to the French Chamber of Deputies.

Ferry's remarks betray the widespread perception among European colonists that indigenous peoples were uncivilised savages. Thus, native inhabitants were forced to adopt European ways; those that didn't were regarded as savage beasts to be hunted down like dogs.

"They were no better than dogs, and it was no more harm to shoot them than it would be to shoot a dog when he barked at you," said one Reverend William Yate, speaking of Australian aborigines in 1835.

Such perceptions led to the wanton killing of the aborigines, who have lived in Australia for over 60,000 years, since the first British settlement was established in the area later known as the Sydney Basin in 1788. Tens of thousands of aborigines have been killed in massacres by posses of settlers and policemen, according to author Bruce Elder in his book *Blood on the Wattle*, a chronicle of massacres of aboriginal Australians since 1788.

Indeed, the US and its allies have demonstrated in the recent past an inclination to wage war on countries and governments deemed as threats to their national security and strategic interests.

The unilateral strike on Iraq is an obvious case in point which evokes memories of Columbus, Cortes and Pizarro.

Which brings one to Dr Mahathir's recent remarks about Europeans. Surely, his detractors aren't so narrowminded as to read his statement as a denial of Europe's great contribution to civilisation. He has frequently acknowledged the superiority and dominance of the Westerners (read: people of European stock) in many spheres of human endeavour, especially science and technology.

Neither is he denying the share of other races and ethnic groups in the history of human conflict, military or otherwise.

His central theme, one surmises, is that the European stock is martial in nature, if history is to be the judge. Going by global events in the recent past, nothing has changed. The overriding concern, then, is that Malaysians must thoroughly appreciate the nature of Europeans for they dominate the unipolar world.

Given the overwhelming military superiority of the United States, this scenario is not expected to change radically in the foreseeable future.

The preeminence of the US will probably not be affected despite some attempts at creating or recreating other centres of power as a counterbalance. Neither Europe nor Asia, much less Africa or any regional or multilateral organisation, can hope to challenge the US and its allies in the immediate future.

For this reason, one disagrees with suggestions that Dr Mahathir assume the leadership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference at its upcoming summit in Malaysia in October.

Given OIC's track record of impotence and division, one is pessimistic at the prospect of it ever being able to prosecute its agenda for the

Muslim world. Should the OIC remain highly politicised and divided, it will shackle Dr Mahathir's talent, calibre and leadership.

In short, he must be free of OIC's internal bickering. Only then can we hope for his continued guidance as a vigilant sentinel against aggression, oppression and tyranny.