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## **Native American Activist, Author Winona LaDuke on "The Militarization of Indian Country" and Obama Admin's "Lip Service" to Indigenous Rights**

Native American activist and writer Winona LaDuke joins us to discuss her new book, *The Militarization of Indian Country*. LaDuke covers the legacy of the seizure of Native American lands by the U.S. government — which became sites for industrial and military use, including army bases, nuclear testing sites, coal and uranium mining — and how the military-industrial complex is encroaching on native communities. LaDuke lives and works on the White Earth Nation in northern Minnesota and is executive director of the group Honor the Earth. "Indian country is not to be assaulted by the U.S. military," says LaDuke. [includes rush transcript]

### **TRANSCRIPT**

*This is a rush transcript. Copy may not be in its final form.*

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Well, Winona, in terms of the military, this seems to be a constant historical inability to grasp, the relationship of the government to Native American people. I was struck particularly by — during the wars in Kosovo, when the United States used — constantly talked about the Apache helicopters that were leading the fight against ethnic cleansing, or the new helicopter that supposedly was going to be the stealth helicopter that the military developed but then had to scrap, the Comanche helicopter. And there seems to be a constant insensitivity to the long struggle for freedom and defense of their land by the Native American peoples on the part of the U.S. military.

**WINONA LADUKE:** The reality is, is that the military is full of native nomenclature. That's what we would call it. You've got Black Hawk helicopters, Apache Longbow helicopters. You've got Tomahawk missiles. The term used when you leave a military base in a foreign country is to go "off the reservation, into Indian Country." So what is that messaging that is passed on? You know, it is basically the continuation of the wars against indigenous people.

Donald Rumsfeld, when he went to Fort Carson, named after the infamous Kit Carson, who was responsible for the deaths of thousands of Navajo people and their forced relocation, urged people, you know, in speaking to the troops, that in the global war on terror, U.S. forces from this base have lived up to the legend of Kit Carson, fighting terrorists in the mountains of Afghanistan to help secure victory. "And every one of you is like Kit Carson."

The reality is, is that the U.S. military still has individuals dressed — the Seventh Cavalry, that went in in Shock and Awe, is the same cavalry that massacred indigenous people, the Lakota people, at Wounded Knee in 1890. You know, that is the reality of military nomenclature and how the military basically uses native people and native imagery to continue its global war and its global empire practices.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Winona, you begin your book on the militarization of Native America at

Fort Sill, the U.S. Army post near Lawton, Oklahoma. We broadcast from there about a year ago in that area. Why Fort Sill? What is the significance of Fort Sill for Native America?

**WINONA LADUKE:** Well, you know, that is where the Apaches themselves were incarcerated for 27 years for the crime of being Apache. There are two cemeteries there, and those cemeteries — one of those cemeteries is full of Apaches, including Geronimo, who did die there. But it is emblematic of Indian Country's domination by military bases and the military itself. You've got over 17 reservations named after — they're still called Fort something, you know? Fort Hall is, you know, one of them. Fort Yates. You know, it is pervasive, the military domination of Indian Country.

Most of the land takings that have occurred for the military, whether in Alaska, in Hawaii, or in what is known as the continental United States, have been takings from native land. Some of — you know, they say that the Lakota Nation, in the Lakota Nation's traditional territory, as guaranteed under the Treaty of 1868 or the 1851 Treaty, would be the third greatest nuclear power in the world. You know, those considerations indicate how pervasive historically the military has been in native history and remains today in terms of land occupation.

I must say, on the other side of that, we have the highest rate of living veterans of any community in the country. It's estimated that about 22 percent of our population, or 190,000 of our — or 190,000 — or 190,000 living veterans in Native America today. And all of those veterans, I am sure, are quite offended by the use of Geronimo's name, you know, in the assault on bin Laden and in the death of bin Laden.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Winona, in your book, you go through a lot of these takings of land and what it's been used for. Obviously, the nuclear accident following the tsunami in Japan has been in the news a lot lately, but you talk about the origins of the United States's own nuclear power, the mining of uranium, the development of Los Alamos Laboratory. Could you talk about that and its connection to Indian Country?

**WINONA LADUKE:** You know, native people — about two-thirds of the uranium in the United States is on indigenous lands. On a worldwide scale, about 70 percent of the uranium is either in Aboriginal lands in Australia or up in the Subarctic of Canada, where native people are still fighting uranium mining. And now, with both nuclearization and the potential reboot of a nuclear industry, they're trying to open uranium mines on the sacred Grand Canyon. You know, we have been, from the beginning, heavily impacted by radiation exposure from the U.S. military, you know, continuing on to nuclear testing, whether in the Pacific or whether the 1,100 nuclear weapons that were detonated over Western Shoshone territory. You know, our peoples have been heavily impacted by radiation, let alone nerve gas testing. You've got nerve gas dumps at Umatilla. You've got a nerve gas dump at the Skull Valley Goshute Reservation. You have, you know, weapons bases, and the military is the largest polluter in the world. And a lot of that pollution, in what is known as the United States, or some of us would refer to as occupied Indian Country, is in fact all heavily impacting Indian people or indigenous communities still.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** You also talk about the radiation experimentation in Alaska in the

1960s in your book. I don't think — very few people have heard of that. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

**WINONA LADUKE:** Yeah. You know, I was an undergraduate at Harvard, and I remember I used to — I researched all this really bizarre data, but there was this project at Point Hope, where the military wanted to look at the radiation lichen-caribou-man cycle, of bio-accumulation of radiation. And so, they went into the Arctic. You know, there's widespread testing on native people, because we're isolated populations. We're basically — you know, most of us in that era were genetically pretty similar. It was a good test population, and there was no accountability. You know, testing has occurred, widespread. But in that, they wanted to test, so the village of Point Hope was basically irradiated. Didn't tell the people. Documents were declassified in the 1990s. And all that time, this community bore a burden of nuclear exposure that came from the Nevada test site, you know, and in testing those communities.

You know, Alaska itself is full of nuclear and toxic waste dumps from the military, over 700 separate, including, you know, perhaps one of the least known, but I did talk about it in this book, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, VX Lake, where they happened to forget about some nerve gas canisters, a whole bunch of them, and they put them out in the middle of the lake, and they sank to the bottom. And then they remembered a few years later, and then they had to drain the darn lake to go get all these — you know, all the nerve gas, VX, out of the bottom of the lake. And, you know, they renamed it Blueberry Lake, but it's still known as VX Lake to anybody who's up there. And, you know, the unaccountability of the military, above reproach, having such a huge impact on a worldwide scale, having such a huge take at the federal trough, the federal budget, and in indigenous communities an absolutely huge impact in terms of the environmental consequences of militarization.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're talking to Winona LaDuke, Native American activist, writer. Her latest book is called *The Militarization of Indian Country*. Winona, talk about the history of native participation in and opposition to war. But begin with your dad, with your father.

**WINONA LADUKE:** Yeah, you know, I wrote this book out of a debt, really, to my father. My father was a Korean War resister, and he spent 11 months in prison for refusing to fight a war that he did not believe was his. There is a long history of native people, whether the Zunis, whether the Hopis, whether Iroquois, whether the Ojibwes, who said, "You know, that's really not our war. We're staying here."

The United States, you know, people — one of the reasons that it is said that native people received citizenship in 1924 was so that they could be drafted. And they have been extensively drafted. You know, for a whole variety of social, political, historic, cultural and economic reasons, native people have the highest rate of enlistment in this country, from historic to present. You know, in some places, in our Indian communities, you have very dire economic situations, and the military recruiters are very aggressive. And young people do not have a lot of choices. I mean, I had a young man from my community say, "Auntie, I joined the military." I said, "Why did you join the military?" He says, "Because I was either going to jail or going to

the military." You know, and I have heard that story more than once in Indian Country.

So, having said that, you have a history of warrior societies, of people who are proud, who have defended our land. You know, 500 years is a long time to defend your territory. And, you know, we're still here. And within that, our warrior societies continue, whether it is at Oka, whether it was at Wounded Knee, whether it is on the front lines of the tar sands in Alberta, Canada, or whether it is in the Grand Canyon, defending our territory. At the same time, you have a number — you know, a large rate of enlistment. And so, you have native veterans who are, in our community, highly regarded for who they are as courageous individuals and a very significant part of our communities. At the same time, there is no program to reintegrate these individuals into our society. A lot of — you know, the highest rate of homelessness is in the veterans in this country. And many other issues of PTSD and such exist widespread in our communities because of our isolation and our high rates of enlistment and our high rates of veterans.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Winona LaDuke, you also talk, when talking about Fort Sill, about the Comanche people asking for Fort Sill not to destroy Medicine Bluff. Can you talk about the sacred places in the United States, starting with Fort Sill? Where are they threatened, and how do you preserve these lands?

**WINONA LADUKE:** Well, you know, the military has — the U.S. government is the largest landowner. The United States — you know, native people are large landowners, but the military has a huge chunk of our territories. And in those, there are a number of places that are our sacred sites. Perhaps the best examples are really in Hawaii, where the military took the island of Kaho'olawe, an entire island, to turn it into a bombing range for 40 years. You know, that was my first politicization, I would say, as to the impact of the military in indigenous communities. Took a whole island, and then, eventually, the island is now returned. The aquifer is cracked from bombing. And, you know, it is in — it's unconscionable, the practice. Today, Hawaii, you see the continuation of the expansion of military holdings there. Pohakuloa is an expansion for the Stryker that they are looking at on the Big Island of Hawaii to take another 79,000 acres of land — there's only so much land on an island — full of sacred sites, full of historic sites, that Hawaiians, Native Hawaiians and all people have a right to visit but now is becoming a part of a military base. And increasing land takings, particularly in Hawaii, is one of the worst cases.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And Winona, as we mentioned earlier, you were a vice-presidential candidate twice on the ticket, an Independent ticket, with Ralph Nader. And as you see now, in these years of the last few years of the Obama administration, do you see any significant change in the way that the Native American nations across the country have been treated under the Obama administration?

**WINONA LADUKE:** You know, I would say that things are better. I would say we've got a few egregious problems still. You know, you have, for instance, the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. As you likely know, there were four holdout countries, as of 2007, that did not sign on. U.S. and Canada are the only two countries that have yet to sign on

the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Obama administration made some lip service to it, posturing. I was thinking maybe we're in like some kind of yoga position on it; I don't know what posture he's in. But we'd like to see that carried out. As well, you know, apology — you know, these are, in many ways, symbolic gestures. There was an apology to native peoples that was issued, but no one heard it. So its' kind of like saying, you know, "I'm sorry," to a wall. Probably should have a little formal apology.

But then there is the reality of — that things in Indian Country are not getting better. You can't keep putting money in the federal budget for the military and robbing everything else, so that people on my reservation and other reservations don't have housing, don't have education money, don't have health service, you know, don't have basic, basic rights. And the only way in the native community, really, to get economically ahead, in many cases, is to become a military contractor.

I don't know if you noticed in the book that it turns out that Blackwater is a Native American contractor. Now, I didn't know that, you know, and I really hadn't thought of them as a Native American contractor. But with the Chenega native corporation, they've got about \$1.9 billion in federal contracts that they received, most of those as a sole-source, non-bid contractor, because they went under the shell of an Alaskan native corporation, the Chenega Corporation. And so, you know, native communities are becoming military contractors because that's where the money is. You know, so the irony of the whole history of colonization, military colonization, valiant patriots like Geronimo fighting against the U.S. taking of our lands, the destruction of our peoples, to now a situation where the largest private army in the world is a Native American contractor. And the fact that they so egregiously abuse the name of Geronimo and, in widespread cases, you know, refer to Indian Country as the territory that is to be taken by the U.S. military, you know, it is time to revisit this history.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Finally, Winona LaDuke, ending on where we began, with Geronimo, you supported President Obama, Barack Obama, for president, the first African American president, who — it was under him that this Geronimo name was given. Of course, I'm sure it wasn't he, himself, who gave this name for this operation to kill bin Laden. He was born in Hawaii. His school, native name, and you talk about Hawaii being so important in native history. Your thoughts about President Obama in light of what — this latest controversy?

**WINONA LADUKE:** Well, you know, I think a formal apology is due to the native community, to the family of Geronimo, as requested.

I think that a review of the impact of militarization on Indian Country — you know, we are trying to get back some of our land that is held by the military, but it's so darn toxic. And the military is busy making more things toxic, getting more exemptions under federal law, so that they are above any environmental laws. You know, it would be nice to get something back that was taken, and to get it back clean and to get it back good, whether Badger Munitions in Wisconsin, Fort Wingate. But we don't want — we don't want toxic land, you know, back, returned to our people.

Reviewing the military psychology of Kit Carson, you know, and using that nomenclature,

how offensive it is to native people. And talking about some kind of a justice, in terms of — I don't have an answer — it's a tricky one — how you make justice with the military. But what I would say is that what was done historically was wrong, what was done this week was wrong, and it would be an opportunity for the Obama administration to do the right thing in relation to Indian Country, because Indian Country is not to be assaulted by the U.S. military.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Winona LaDuke, I want to thank you very much for being with us, Native American activist, writer. She lives and works on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota, executive director of the group Honor the Earth. Her new book, just out, *The Militarization of Indian Country*.



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