

Putting a price on Indigenous lives

William Kiser's sweeping history tracks three centuries of bounty hunters paid to kill and mutilate Native Americans.

by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue
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In Review



The Business of Killing Indians

Scalp Warfare and the Violent Conquest of North America

By William S. Kiser
Yale University Press
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Beginning in the 17th century, as European nations competed for territory in North America and immigrants struggled to settle the land, Indigenous inhabitants were killed and disfigured for pay. Drawing examples from three centuries, from 17th-century New France and New England to 18th-century Texas-Mexico borderlands to 19th-century Pacific Coast territories, historian William Kiser narrates the history of racial hatred and promises of financial reward that motivated the butchery of human beings by volunteer bounty hunters.

Accounts of gratuitous disfigurement and performative violence have been known throughout human history. Gospel writers Matthew and Mark record that Herodias, princess of the Herodian dynasty of Judea, called for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Ancient Roman occupiers made public displays of crucified people. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, African Americans in the South were lynched in public displays. In 2013, political scientist Lee Ann Fujii coined the phrase “extra-lethal violence” to describe face-to-face lethal violence that deliberately transgresses norms about the treatment of human bodies in order to achieve political or financial gain. Kiser analyzes this disturbing topic broadly, framing the scalping of Native people for pay by European killers and their Native allies as extirpative in intent.

Underlying scalp warfare during the centuries of European settlement was the belief that Native people were subhuman and therefore could be stalked and killed for money. While the practice varied, it remained rooted in a common factor: racial hatred. Kiser’s comment on an early French policy of supporting small paramilitary groups by paying them for indiscriminate killing and scalping applies throughout the book: There was “a perception of non-Christianized Indians as ‘savage’—and thus fit for scalping.” Performative violence against Native people ultimately was aimed at genocide. Looking back through the lens of the 1948 Genocide Convention at the United Nations, Kiser concludes that “scalp warfare was almost always genocidal in its intent, [if] less often genocidal in its outcome.”

In 1641, New Netherland governor Willem Kieft issued an edict offering wampum (shell beads) in exchange for severed heads of Native Lenape people. Relations between the Lenape, who lived along the Raritan River in what is now northeastern New Jersey, and Dutch settlers streaming onto Lenape land had deteriorated. By adopting what he believed to be an Indigenous practice of extra-lethal violence, Kieft leveraged alliances with mercenary Native fighters and opportunistic European scalp hunters to clear the way for colonial settlement activity.

Kieft knew that a few years earlier New England Puritans had decapitated Pequot people with whom they were at war. The colonists attached severed heads of Native people to poles in public squares as trophies of conquest and as warnings to those excluded from European settlement aspirations. These gruesome displays warned of further violence and prefigured official scalp policies in British colonies. Between 1675 and 1760, 69 “scalp proclamations” were issued in New England, resulting in the deaths and mutilation of at least 375 Native people.

Looking on from a distance, administrators in Europe for the most part opposed extra-lethal commerce. A 16th-century papal statement recognized the “humanity of the so-called New World’s Indigenous peoples.” Nevertheless, local officials joined missionary priests and ministers in approving bounty programs that rewarded the killing of Native Americans throughout North America.

In 1837, legislators in the Texas-Mexico border region issued permits that allowed raiding of Native villages. Permit holders could submit *piezas* (body parts) as proof and receive payment. The permit program was designed to accomplish what nascent governments and poorly organized militias could not: eradicate or enslave Comanche and Apache people. Kiser estimates from the historical record that hundreds of contract killers hunted Native people in the US-Mexico borderlands. While alcohol inflamed much of the murdering and mutilation, virulent racism and the promise of financial reward are what fueled it.

For 30 years in the middle of the 19th century, gangs of volunteer bounty hunters, called “coast rangers” by author J. Ross Browne, roamed the northern Pacific coastline, killing and maiming Native people without restraint. In 1861, Browne, an Irish immigrant and a government inspector of Indian agencies, published an exposé on the treatment of Native people by White settlers in *Harper’s Monthly*. Readers learned from Browne’s article that California settlers “kill [Natives] in every cowardly and barbarous manner that could be devised.” Three years later, in Colorado, more than 100 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were massacred, their bodies mutilated for trophies, leading to an investigation by Congress and ultimately to a congressional report titled *Condition of Indian Tribes*.

In the introduction to that 1867 report, Senator James R. Doolittle wrote that “in a large majority of cases Indian wars are to be traced to the aggressions of lawless white men.” Two years later, President Ulysses S. Grant’s peace policy effectively ended rogue bounty hunting—replacing it with the forced resettlement of Native people onto reservations and enrollment of Native children at boarding schools.