

Preface to
The Vanishing White Man
By Stan Steiner

Written in 1976 and published in 1987 by University of Oklahoma Press

Preface

The earth has been generous and kind to us. It has blessed our country with great riches by blessing us with vast resources of energy. On our land, in our mountains, on our rivers, and in our sky America has sometimes seemed to be a new Garden of Eden, a gift of God. So blessed, we have come to believe that these resources are eternal and infinite.

But we have been mistaken. Even in our country our resources are as finite as are all human riches.

A few years ago when we realized our mortality we called it the "Energy Crisis." It was not.

If there was an energy crisis, it was not created by the manipulation of oil prices by OPEC. Nor was it the result of the contemporary struggle for political supremacy between the East and the West. There is nothing unusual and new in our country's use of its natural resources to create its national strength—as did the powerful civilizations of the past—the Greeks and the Romans, the Egyptians, the Mayans, the Chinese, and the Europeans.

There is something more fundamental to the myths and the beliefs of America in the way we perceive and use our energy, something unique to our country that is given its shape and meaning by the nature of energy. Energy resources give us not only our physical but also our spiritual strength, in which fantasy and reality are wedded, one to another, to give birth to those ideas that are deeply American.

In the past, conflicting and antagonistic views of energy prevailed. They still do. In this book I present the energy concepts of ecologists, Western ranchers, Native Americans, U.S. senators, corporate executives of energy companies, cabinet officers, cowboys, and nuclear scientists. This composite of contrasting pictures of energy sources and uses needs to be better understood.

For the "energy crisis" is still with us in our minds, if not in fact. And it grows larger.

To each of us the energies of our nation have a different source and meaning. We see what we have learned to be true, and we know what we perceive as knowledge, if not wisdom.

On the plains of Montana the foreman of a coal strip mine solemnly explains that his bulldozers have not destroyed the land, they have "created" it. A former secretary of the interior in the president's cabinet, a wealthy developer and entrepreneur, exclaims that man does not "own" the energy of the sun, it belongs to God. A rancher in Wyoming believes that nature, not man, determines human life. He talks to the moose and elk, while another cattleman says that he produces energy as does a power company; his energy is the grass he grows in his pastures. In Los Alamos, New Mexico, a director of the nuclear laboratories where the atomic bomb was conceived says a scientist's Ph.D. may make him not wiser about the mysteries of energy but more foolish; and in Washington, D.C., a U.S. senator complains that his fellow legislators may be ignorant about the nature of energy because so few of these government officials have ever held the earth in their hands, a simple handful of dirt.

So everyone sees energy to be what they know. The nature of energy is limited in each person's experience, and in our era of increasing specialization that knowledge grows narrower, more confined, and less panoramic; more simplified by the complexities of our knowledge, more specific and limited and less biblical.

In the past twenty years, the differences in our views of energy have, if anything, intensified. The "energy crisis" was caused not by a decline of energy resources but by an increase. Most of the new sources of energy were man-made, like nuclear power and the unknown furies to be released by the technologies of the "Star Wars" Strategic Defense Initiative.

And these new sources of physical and spiritual energies consume not only themselves, like gas and oil, but much of the world around them. They are creating ecosystems of their own and are producing new philosophies of life and religious concepts to deal with, if not explain, the way they are altering our consciousness and changing our image of ourselves and our universe.

Christopher Columbus conquered the sea, and the sea conquered him. It is the old story.

In discovering new energy sources, we create our own enemies. The quest becomes self-destructive not because of its failures but because of its successes. These wondrous achievements have taken human life beyond human comprehension as in the guise of conquering the universe, we are conquered by it.

The Hopi elder voiced that dilemma in *The Vanishing White Man*, talking against entering space because, as he said, when a human being enters space, space enters the person. He did not believe the white race wise enough to understand this.

And in this sense, the old Hopi said, the whites, not the Indians, are the vanishing race.

All civilizations devour the sources of their own strength, making use of them wisely or foolishly and then discarding them. The countries of our contemporary world seem to differ little in

this from their ancestors, and the young astronauts of modern science seem to have learned little from the old medicine men on the limits of energy.

In a sense *The Vanishing White Man* is a prophecy of the things to come. Rancher and oilman Robert O. Anderson, the chairman of the Atlantic Richfield Corporation, on hearing the title of the book called it "Prophetic!"

Perhaps it is. If so, it has become not less but more prophetic since it was written.

Nothing has happened in the last decade to cast doubt on this book's prophecies. If anything, the situation described by the tribal medicine men and nuclear scientists has become more urgently in need of thoughtful consideration. It is all the more disturbing and troublesome that the problems we face are no longer the concern of presidential commissions and media talk shows, for it seems that the public has accepted paradox as the way of life of the future.

The profound ironies of our history have prepared us for more complex and conflicted views of the sources and uses of the energies of our rich land. Yet, as do all people, we seek a more simple-minded and orderly belief in our potency and power as a nation.

It is a shame to have settled for the worshiping of the lesser gods of creation. Thereby we have lost sight of the irony.

Not long before the Civil War a young cadet wrote an essay for his ethics class at West Point in which he lamented the coming death of what he called "a noble race," the Native Americans. The Indians were a vanishing race, he wrote, and he eulogized their death with sorrow and compassion.

The young cadet was George Armstrong Custer. He was wrong. It was he, not the Indians, who soon would vanish.