

TELEVISION REVIEW | 'STANDING SILENT NATION'

The Battle Over Hemp on an Indian Reservation

By Virginia Heffernan

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The story of a dirt-poor but enterprising family thwarted by shocking, stupid acts by jerks armed with red tape and guns produces a single effect: umbrage.

It's good umbrage, mostly, that surging, almost euphoric response to a crusading documentary that frees you from the duty to be even-handed or hear out the other side.

The one side — the good guys, the Oglala Lakotas, that is, in the perspective of “Standing Silent Nation,” tonight on “P.O.V.” on PBS — has done everything so exactly right, so modestly and appropriately and life-lovingly and hopefully right. And the bad guys, the Drug Enforcement Administration and eventually certain quarters of the federal government, don't only seem heartless, they also come across as idiots. Even R. James Woolsey Jr., the former director of central intelligence and no one's pushover, says so.

The story is about the White Plumes, an impoverished, endangered Lakota family on the struggling Pine Ridge Indian Reservation (the site of the Wounded Knee massacre) in South Dakota. Citing the reservation's right as a sovereign nation (established by treaty) to grow whatever it might on its hardscrabble land, the White Plumes tried seven years ago to harvest industrial hemp.

Many other American Indians joined forces with them.

Unemployment on the reservation stands at 85 percent. Their hope was that a banner crop like hemp (a botanical cousin of marijuana), which cannot by law be grown elsewhere in the United States, might get the tribe working again.



A federal agent, J. C. Salley, with hemp from the Pine Ridge crop.
Debra White Plume/"P.O.V."

But in spite of the apparent consensus that hemp crops would be good for the future of the Lakota, and the widespread doubt about the danger of hemp for the body politic, federal agents raided the crops the very first year. They took in trucks, guns and weed-whackers. They whacked and seized. And then the war was on.

Every year since, the White Plumes have tried to harvest hemp, and every year the federal agents have become more aggressive in trying to stop them.

According to the film, hemp contains about 1 percent of the psychoactive substance THC (marijuana contains about 20 percent), and was commonly grown in the United States and used for rope and sails during World War II. Having been controlled before the war, growing hemp was criminalized thereafter in a sweeping effort to crack down on marijuana. Many people interviewed on the program, including Mr. Woolsey, believe that the ban was overzealous, as industrial hemp, a hearty and weedy plant with low environmental impact, has up to 25,000 uses, mostly as fiber and oil. It is also virtually impossible to use it to get high. Furthermore, if they are grown together, hemp "contaminates" marijuana, making it less potent as a mind-altering drug.

Led by a merry, philosophical, even-keeled man named Alex White Plume, the White Plumes and their allies are impressive. Resigned and resilient at once, they make it hard to tell how and why they keep going when the cards seem so plainly stacked against them. As often as not, the absurdity of the government's position seems to amuse them slightly — as does their perpetual defiance of it.

It is possible that in seeking a viable crop, the Oglala Lakota have found the next best thing: a purpose.

P.O.V.

Standing Silent Nation

On most PBS stations tonight (check local listings).

Courtney Hermann, producer; Suree Towfighnia, director and cinematographer; Sharon Karp, editor; American Documentary Inc., series producer. Produced by Prairie Dust Films in association with Native American Public Telecommunications.