Indian Self Rule

Philp, Kenneth

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Part One

The Indian New Deal

Winnebago basket makers in front of their home near the Winnebago Agency, Nebraska.
I was one of those who first translated the Indian Reorganization Act to our people in Bannock and Shoshone. I have waited fifty years to see this legislation work and to see it enforced by the Interior Department. Now it seems to me the whole intent of the government was to play games with our lives in order to steal our lands and resources. We had high hopes at first.

I am now discouraged. There is no separation of powers under the tribal set up. There are no separate judicial, legislative, and executive branches of tribal government. For this reason, I believe we were intentionally set up to fail. The checks and balances of these three powers are taken for granted in the white man’s world. To the reservation Indian, these guarantees of freedom do not exist. As an example, the reservation Indian has no grievance recourse but to a tribal court. All other non-Indian citizens can go to the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court. How many of you who live off the reservation would like to end your grievance with the city court?

Back then, we were told to tell our people that our tribal self-government would be based on a foundation of law. This has not happened. Lacking a foundation of law, we are now a pitiful people. Our tribal governments are now compared to dictatorships in the banana republics of South America.

Who is responsible? The Interior Department has failed to act as a responsible trustee. As a result, basic tribal laws are flagrantly violated. The tribal politicians have learned how to be deceitful to be elected, to practice nepotism, to outlaw those opposed to their practices, and to violate any law they wish to gain their end.

Edward Boyer, a member of the Ft. Hall Shoshone-Bannock tribe.

Of late years, somewhat of a cult has developed around John Collier. He is perceived as the hero of Indian rights, a warrior in the struggle for recognition of such rights. He is not our hero. Collier was vindictive and overbearing. He tolerated no dissent, neither from his staff nor from the tribes. He was a rank opportunist in politics, at once espousing and then rejecting one or another proposal.
He did not hesitate to use informants and the FBI against Indian opponents. He habitually tampered with the truth in his dealings with Indians.

Rupert Costo, Cahuilla, president of the American Indian Historical Society

I think that this legislation [the Indian Reorganization Act] has worked out very well for our reservation. We have six council men, a chairman, and a chartered livestock association. The IRA revolving credit fund enabled many of our younger tribal members to obtain loans and get started in the cattle business. In the early 1930s, we did not have enough irrigation water. Tribal leaders persuaded the government to build a storage dam . . . and we gained access to plenty of water.

Arthur Manning, Shoshone-Paiute leader, former council member on the Duck Valley Reservation

Collier's work as Commissioner of Indian Affairs is probably the most impressive achievement in the field of applied anthropology that the discipline of anthropology can claim. Collier reversed a policy of tribal disintegration that had been accepted as a national goal for over one hundred years and established a new political, economic, and social status for America's Indian minority. . . .

Collier succeeded in preserving Indian identity from complete absorption in the "melting pot" by creating a system of autonomous tribal entities within the political and economic superstructure of American society as a whole. He pursued this policy because it offered the best chance of preserving Indian tribal identity: Indian "grouphood" as he put it.

Wilcomb E. Washburn, Smithsonian Institution