Indian Self Rule

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PART TWO

Termination

Omaha Indians at a temporary road camp near the Winnebago Agency in 1936 or 1937.
The Navajo mounted patrol in the 1930s.
The Indians were descendants of peoples who knew, before the onslaught of a foreign culture, the freedom of the eagle on wing all across the North American continent. Under Crazy Horse they beat the pants off Custer on the Little Big Horn in a final attempt to preserve it. They won the battle but lost the war. They died mercilessly with Chief Big Foot at Wounded Knee because they did not have that freedom.

The 1930s held a ray of hope that they would again see some of the freedom reappear with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act. The rising tide of expectations for Indians soared into the 1940s. It disappeared in the dark clouds of World War II.

If Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito were bent on destroying freedom, Indians would gladly suffer their sons and daughters to join the battle; most of them did not wait to be drafted. The BIA offices were moved from the Capitol to make space for personnel needed there to prosecute the war. Tribal members left home for far away places to help build ships, tanks, and airplanes. At home they endured the effects of leaner budgets—no law and order personnel in some places, health facilities poorly staffed, if at all—and willingly gave up land for bombing ranges. All these and more hardships they cheerfully endured.

The Indians believed that when the dark clouds of war passed from the skies overhead, their rising tide of expectations, though temporarily stalled, would again reappear. Instead, they were threatened by termination. After the devastation in Europe, there was the Marshall Plan; Japan had its course set by MacArthur. For the Indians, on the other hand, there was House Concurrent Resolution 108. Soaring expectations began to plunge. Termination took on the connotation of extermination for many.

Benjamin Reifel, Sioux, former congressman from South Dakota and commissioner of Indian affairs

Has the relocation of Indian people been successful? The answer remains as complex and varied as the different people who participated in the program. Unquestionably, those people who took part in the process after 1958 (and who generally were better prepared for their urban experience) achieved a higher degree of “success” than did many of the earlier participants. Indeed, a significant number of Indians from
throughout the program's history have "made it" in the white man's world, and although many periodically revisit their former reservation communities, they remain permanently settled in their urban surroundings, successfully supporting themselves and their families.

Others have been less fortunate. They have been poorly prepared to cope with life in the city and have continued to eke out a living in the fringe area of the urban environment. Shackled by the realities of city life, many of these people exist in a limbo comprised of poverty, welfare, and frustration. Of course poverty and frustration also existed back on the reservation, but within the tribal communities individuals had the security of membership in an extended circle of family and friends. There were heavy burdens to bear, but on the reservations the load could always be shared.

There seems to be one general consensus about the Indians' urban existence. Separated from old friends and family and set adrift in an urban wasteland, many of the Indian people have gravitated toward new communities emerging in response to the impersonality of city life. Often centered around urban "Indian centers," new Indian communities have arisen in which the shared experiences of city life transcend many of the older ties to tribes and reservations. Almost all urban Indian people still identify themselves as members of tribal groups, but many have much more in common with other urban Indians, regardless of their tribal affiliations, than with their kinsmen back on the reservation.

It is in the cities that the modern pan-Indian movement flourishes. Lumped together as "Indians" by whites, many urban Indian people have come to see themselves more as "Indians" and less as members of any particular tribe. It is ironic, therefore, that the BIA and the urban experience have done more to foster the pan-Indian movement than all the great chiefs of the past.

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