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CHAPTER THREE

The War on Poverty

Alfonso Ortiz, LaDonna Harris, Robert L. Bennett, Robert Burnette

Indians under my jurisdiction really enjoyed the short but happy life of the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity. We did not waste all the money that came to the reservation but we spilled a little bit here and there. We began the Rough Rock School with OEO money. We also started the Navajo Community College, the first Indian community college in the world, with OEO funds. Today, the government has cut back appropriations, but when you rely on government programs you are going to have feast and famine.

Graham Holmes, former BIA superintendent and area director

One of the tragedies of OEO is that it helped make the people of Alaska dependent upon the non-native economy. Before OEO, Alaska had one of the most integrated native economies left in the United States. I do not want to romanticize that subsistence economy. It was a very hard life. People lived off the resources that were indigenous to the area. It was not the kind of life that I could lead. But people got by and they did not need outside assistance.

What happened with OEO was that the government decided that these “poor” people needed access to the goods and services associated with the non-native economy. I agree that it is not pleasant having ten people living in a ten by ten foot square log cabin when the temperature is thirty degrees below zero. OEO made it possible to build new houses for many native people. Who can argue with that? The only problem is that you have to have heating oil, plumbing, and electricity. That cost money but it did not make any difference. OEO officials were determined to provide people with a non-native economy in an area that could not support it.
Today, the people in rural Alaska that are hurting the most are the ones that participated in that economy. OEO programs were a false promise because President Ronald Reagan is now trying to cut $5 million worth of BIA general assistance money in Alaska. Over 80 percent of that money was targeted to pay for heating oil bills for individual homes and villages. If there had never been an OEO, those people would still be living in small cabins but they would not be freezing to death.

Don Mitchell, Alaska Federation of Natives

Alfonso Ortiz

Whatever positive virtues there have been in various federal programs for Indians since the Indian Reorganization Act, it is clear that they have not lasted long enough to solve problems. This also happened with the Office of Economic Opportunity. By 1976, because of benign neglect during the administration of President James E. Carter, the OEO programs had come to a grinding halt. How can the federal government and the American people expect one or two administrations to solve problems that have been building up for generations? That is why nothing permanent happened when Indian people received $122 million from the Economic Development Administration.

In 1964, I was at home in San Juan Pueblo. I was appointed chairman of the Community Action Committee to apply for federal funds. We met during the late summer and into the autumn. I went with the executive director of the New Mexico State Commission on Indian Affairs from pueblo to pueblo to explain the opportunities under the OEO. The Santa Ana Council could not believe that they could apply directly to Washington for funds. We offered to help them with the forms, and they finally agreed to start the application process. This was repeated in pueblo after pueblo. They were astounded that they could bypass the Indian agency and the area office and go directly to Washington.

This was the kind of world into which OEO came. Once the money started flowing, Arizona State University, the University of Utah, and the University of South Dakota set up technical assistance centers. They brought tribal leaders to those universities for workshops in proposal writing, report filing, and end-of-year accounting proced-
The OEO took the mystique out of the white man’s proposal writing. Indians were taught that they could do it themselves.

The OEO funds provided for tribal program administrators. The relationship with the federal government was becoming so complex that a part-time tribal chairman or an unpaid governor could not possibly keep up with the paperwork and the accountability procedures that were instituted in order to obtain federal funds from a variety of programs. Many future Indian leaders would gain valuable experience working for the OEO.

For example, two successive Navajo tribal chairmen came directly out of the OEO programs. Peter McDonald, who served as chairman for twelve years, was enticed out of a comfortable middle-class existence in Southern California where he worked as an engineer. McDonald went back to Window Rock to run the new Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity. He used that experience as a launching pad for his first bid for the tribal chairmanship. Peterson Zah, the tribal chairman who succeeded him in 1982, started out in the OEO legal services program.

The OEO programs bypassed the chain of command in the Indian Bureau. It was not necessary to worry about people who were defensive about keeping their jobs. The OEO created a new class of Indian leadership that is still around today. These people are not intimidated by bureaucratic procedures. When they go to Washington, they are no longer afraid to wander beyond the friendly atmosphere of the BIA offices to ask other agencies for assistance.

Important cabinet level agencies also began to get into the Indian field. The Department of Commerce ran the Economic Development Administration. By 1972, EDA grants and projects had completely overshadowed the old OEO programs. Other agencies that assisted Indians included Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Agriculture, which had a nutritional program for mothers and children.

The Headstart program was very important. It was not only beneficial for kids who learned basic skills. It was also a good thing for Indian communities. It put the parents in the classrooms as para-professionals, teacher’s assistants, and cooks and janitors. Long estranged parents no longer felt that they were giving their children over to another world.
Poor people on the reservations were truly invisible in the mid-1960s. When they had problems with off-reservation police because they owed money on television sets, cars, and trucks, they would not go to lawyers. Instead, they would suffer quietly and have their goods repossessed even though they actually had rights to them. The OEO put idealistic young attorneys right in the midst of those communities. These poor people finally had a recourse for their legal problems.

Another legacy of OEO was vocational training. In the Southwest, there was a vocational training program for silversmiths. About one hundred silversmiths were trained in the eight northern pueblos. These people now derive all or a good portion of their income from making silver jewelry. All of this happened because of the training they got under the OEO programs.

There is also a thriving adobe plant that turns out adobe bricks for homebuilding. It is always behind in orders. The plant employs about fifteen people from the eight northern pueblos. It was started under OEO and helped along by HUD. The pueblo home improvement program is another positive benefit of OEO.

LaDonna Harris

Initially, Oklahoma was not eligible for OEO funds, because the state did not have Indian reservations. But everyone in Oklahoma knew that the tribes were not integrated into the community and that they should belong to the local Community Action Programs, so those of us who had been organizing over the western part of the state immediately decided to meet and talk about the problem of segregation.

A short time later, we raised this issue with Washington and could not get an answer. One of the unique qualities of OEO was that people would not let regulations stop them. We persuaded the University of Utah to write us into their OEO program so we could bring both eastern and western Oklahoma tribes together to talk about their concerns. The outcome of this effort was the creation of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity. It was the first time in the history of the state that the plains tribes got together with the civilized tribes. We discussed how Indian people in Oklahoma could become eligible under the law to take advantage of the OEO program.
We started with Headstart programs. The Kickapoos outside of Norman developed an excellent Headstart program. The Indian Headstart programs were some of the best in the country. They were very unique. When the whole Headstart program was threatened during the Nixon administration, the influence of Indian communities saved it.

We also started a youth program under OEO. People such as Sargeant Shriver and Bobby Kennedy visited the state and this created a lot of consciousness raising. We developed programs for high school dropouts. This was extremely important because 75 percent of the Indian children, which made up 50 percent of the total population, were dropping out of high school.

Lyndon Johnson was the first president to make a major address on Indian affairs. He also created the National Council on Indian Opportunity. President Johnson appointed me to this council because of my interest in urban Indians. We met with every member of the cabinet other than the secretary of defense and the secretary of state. The vice-president was our chairman. It is hard to imagine today that the eight Indian members of the council met as equals around the table with seven cabinet members from all those different executive departments. Unfortunately, this experiment was short lived.

When Richard Nixon was elected, in 1968, the momentum that had been built up from OEO continued. President Nixon advocated self-determination but he also wanted to dismantle OEO. The curious thing is that he did not dismantle the Indian program. Community services continued to exist after the Indian desk was transferred over to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

I will stand up and defend OEO as long as I live. Indian leadership developed out of that program. The only people that you could communicate with in the Carter administration were community organizers that came out of OEO. One of the reasons that all of the advocacy groups collapsed was that President Carter co-opted them and brought them into the administration on the second and third level.

Under the Indian Reorganization Act, tribal governments never really functioned. But when OEO was established, tribal governments had the funds to begin Headstart programs and reservation economic development. Tribal governments also established human services programs to help their people.
OEO taught us to use our imagination and to look at the future as an exciting adventure. It taught us that there are other ways of doing things. Today, we must go forward in the same spirit and try to link up with all those other entities that do business with the federal government, to get money and to insure our survival.

ROBERT L. BENNETT

Economic poverty has been very pervasive in Indian communities for a long time when compared with the rest of the country. Most tribes have accommodated themselves to this situation and learned to live with it. For example, in 1924, the trust period on all the allotments on the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin were not extended. Most of the land was lost when the allottees could not pay their taxes. Because there were no social services, they had to develop a system to accommodate the disaster that had befallen them. The old people were taken care of by the younger people, and bartering was commonplace. It was not unusual for a family to bake a couple of extra loaves of bread and send them next door. People, more or less, took care of themselves.

Poverty is going to remain with tribes for a long time. We have two kinds of poverty. One is where people do not have anything. The other kind is where people cannot manage what they have. I am especially concerned about the latter situation. Tribes that received per capita claims settlements frequently did not invest these funds. I know from experience that tribes placed these funds in local banks when they should have bought the bank. The amount deposited was more than the assets of the bank. These kinds of opportunities were not taken advantage of, and poverty lingers on.

Poverty also is pervasive because of the dysfunction of the capital market within the Indian community. When a million dollars is invested in most communities, it generates approximately ten million dollars of cash flow. But in Indian communities, one million dollars generates just one million dollars of cash flow. Furthermore, in most Indian societies profit making is not a part of their economic system. Most tribes engage in barter. These are basic problems that are related to poverty. Tribes are going to have to come to grips with them.
Today, the government is cutting back poverty programs. The big question is whether people on reservations can reinstitute a way to take care of each other. IRA tribal constitutions and bylaws need to be rewritten to revitalize the district or community system.

There are some real mitigating circumstances in connection with poverty on reservations. Indians had lived with poverty so long they did not know they were poor until the poverty programs came along. The War on Poverty did a lot of good things. I am not arguing that point. But I am suggesting that reservation communities will have to go back to old ways of dealing with these problems now that federal government is dropping programs.

The lack of funding has created a dangerous situation on some reservations. For instance, one tribe had a $150,000 shortfall in their law and order program because of cutbacks in funds. People went to the tribal council and got an appropriation of tribal money for $150,000. How long will tribal funds last, if tribes have to constantly make up for the shortfall in federal programs? Tribes must look at these programs and develop a system of priorities.

Furthermore, if the Congress finds out that a tribe is spending $150,000 on a program, they are going to say, “We do not have to give them any more money.” Tribes will have to project their income over the next several years. They must determine how much of their money will be needed to make up for shortfalls as the cost of these programs increases.

We are now in a period of readjustment. Hopefully the managerial experience that Indians received in operating OEO programs will serve them in good stead. It takes good management to retrench, just as it does to expand. When termination was implemented, the tribes were able to marshal a great deal of support because the public concluded that the government was not carrying out its treaty obligations. But you cannot marshal the same support for additional funds that you can to fight oppression. Tribes are going to be forced, more and more, to rely on their own resources. They will have to use their leadership and managerial skills to make a readjustment.
Robert Burnette

When John F. Kennedy flew into Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1960, I met him at the airport and had the privilege of introducing him to the entire state. He put a war bonnet on his head, and he left it on for a few minutes. This encounter set the stage for the future, and I was asked to attend secret meetings of President Kennedy's committee on pockets of poverty. This committee was the beginning of OEO.

We were able to get OEO enacted on the reservations so quickly because we had a lot of friends, not only in government, but out of government. We had the AFL-CIO, the National Council of Churches, and other groups. We were able to pay the travel expenses for many tribal leaders who came to Washington, setting the stage for a show of power up on Capitol Hill and at the National Cathedral. All of these things were well planned and executed.

An unforeseen problem was that OEO diverted the attention of Indian people from their sacred land. People ran over each other to get jobs at $2.50 an hour. They forgot all of the things that they had learned as Indian people, because they were so eager for employment. Everybody wanted to go to work and move off their land. People forgot their gardens, and they even gave up their range units to participate in OEO programs. But the OEO did do a lot of good in the field of education and in the social service areas. We have many Indian leaders today that are products of OEO.

Hardly any of the OEO funds that went to tribes were audited by the United States government. Audits of this money will make us all look very bad in the management of funds. It will appear that an awful amount of corruption existed on the reservations. It is true that tribal councils sometimes did not handle this money correctly, but it was not an indication of outright criminal acts. It was simply mismanagement. The Bureau of Indian Affairs did not help us. The BIA was ignored by the people who rushed around to get OEO money. This grantsmanship business became a disease. We need to document and justify how this money was spent.

During the OEO era, many of our leaders forgot who they were and why they were elected. They were obsessed with getting federal grants. For example, there was, for a short time, a $5 million fund from
which tribes could borrow money to start cattle and farming associations. This was exactly what Indian people needed. Pine Ridge BIA policemen organized and bought $120,000 worth of cattle. But this fund was eliminated one year later, and tribes accepted this action without protest.

I do not remember any tribe, individual, or organization recommending amendments to the OEO act. It faded away and nobody went to battle for it. There were no organizations set up to fight for the improvement of OEO. The same thing happened to the Indian Reorganization Act. There is always room for improvement and we ought to do that with future legislation.