

THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

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Instances in which the Indian people of the Americas formed themselves into cohesive forces across tribal lines to oppose an invader or to press for an advantage to themselves are strikingly lacking in the history of the western hemisphere. The crumbling of Mexico and Peru, centers of extraordinary cultures, was brought on in large part by the failure of those Indian groups to put up a common front of resistance.

Within our own borders, such unions of Indian tribes as have been achieved have been brief, sporadic and ineffective. The Pueblo Rebellion of 1680, resulting from the concerted action of all the Pueblos, achieved its brilliant coup, then faded at once and was never restored. The efforts of Pontiac and Tecumseh to awaken the tribes of their day to a sense of the dangers besetting them, failed ingloriously.

The Iroquois people, who came nearest to holding fast the loyalties of scattered tribes, had the ill fortune of supporting the wrong group of white men, and in the end their genius for organization was frustrated. The Ghost Dance movement which might have wrought an emotional unity of the western tribes, came to grief on a bitter winter day before the rifles and Hitchcock guns of the Seventh Cavalry at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota.

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Justice Johnson served as Assistant County Attorney of Rogers County, Oklahoma, later as County Attorney and City Attorney of Claremore, Oklahoma. In 1934, he was elected District Judge of the 12th Judicial District of Oklahoma where he served continuously until his election to the Supreme Court of Oklahoma in 1948, where he is now serving a six year term. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society; a member of the Judicial Council of Oklahoma; a member of the Governors' Interstate Indian Council and President of the Intertribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma. He was a guiding light in the establishment of the National Congress of American Indians, and has been its President since it was founded. It is worthy of note and altogether fitting that the leader and president of this national organization to promote the progress of all American Indians is a native of Oklahoma where there have been no Indian reservations for over forty years and where Indians are citizens of the State with many of them counted among the leaders in professional, business and official life.—Ed.

Where fear and self-interest and religious fervor failed in past history, what likelihood was there that reason and logic would succeed in achieving union in modern times? Here, too, the record was not encouraging. Indians had attempted intertribal organizations before now and failed to bring it off. The American Indian Association, the National Council of American Indians, the American Indian Federation—these and other efforts failed to organize around a program and to stay alive. It is necessary to start with these sobering thoughts before going on to discuss the aims and hopes of the effort to create an organization of Indians.

Against the dismal record, were all the excellent reasons why the Indians should form themselves into an active, independent, articulate group. Everybody else had taken a hand in determining Indian welfare and Indian destiny—why should not the Indians themselves?

Against the discouraging record, also, it must be noted that Indians have persisted in the effort to achieve intertribal solidarity, within regions and within cultural groups. The All-Pueblo Council stood up against the powerful combination of private and public interests, and won victory for the Pueblo peoples and their lands. The Sioux people have kept alive a treaty council group, acting independently for the several Sioux tribes or bands, and in a common front in their long efforts to get recognition for their rights in the Black Hills.

The Indians of Nevada, for several years before the interruption of the war, met annually. These meetings were independent of any Indian Service influence and were highly successful. The Indians of Montana and, more recently, those of the Pacific Northwest, have organized regional conferences in which the mutual interests of the tribes in those areas will be advanced.

What are some of the reasons a nation-wide organization of Indians is imperative? Jurisdiction over Indians reposes in the U. S. Congress, with a federal agency to administer the laws passed by it. Indian affairs in comparison to national affairs, are small indeed. Few men in Congress have the time to make a thorough study of the needs and the desires of the Indian people. The few who do seriously study these matters are generally lost in the great storms and struggles which fall upon Congress. The Indian Service, as the administrative agency, is not always in the best position to influence Congressional policy. There are times when this federal agency is under fire by the public or by Congress. On such occasions, the Indian Service is often partisan and its recommendations must be viewed with skepticism by the Indians. Thus in moments of crises Indian tribes and the Indian people generally are left without an effective champion.

Conquered and forced into wardship by the white settlers of the United States, the Indians remained silent for more than a century. Others spoke for them. Sometimes these speakers were friends. Sometimes they were persons who spoke once for the Indians and twice for themselves. The Indians listened and watched and waited to speak their own minds and in their own behalf. Their speaking began at Denver, Colorado in 1944.

Indian delegates from 27 states representing some 50 tribes came to Denver that November. They had no financial angel paying the costs. Their personal funds were barely enough to defray travel expenses and their keep. No powerful political or other backers sponsored their gathering, but a strong and common purpose brought them together. This purpose was embodied in their creation, on that historical occasion, of the National Congress of American Indians of the United States and Alaska, an organization composed entirely of Indians designed to act and speak for themselves.¹

The underlying objective in forming this body was to inspire Indians, through planning and action together, to fulfill their destiny as independent, self-reliant citizens and not remain as dependent retarded wards of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs generation after generation. Its purpose is not to duplicate the functions of the Indian Bureau. On the contrary, its responsibility is to help the Bureau develop and apply policies in the interest of Indian welfare and to eliminate those policies and functions hostile to that welfare. Key goals set by the National Congress of American Indians to accomplish this fulfillment are as follows:

1. *Achievement by Indians of all rights under the Constitution and Laws of the United States.*
2. *Expansion and Improvement of Educational Opportunities*—provided for Indians, with special stress on professional and vocational training.
3. *Putting into Effect Better Methods*—finding productive employment for Indians and development of resources within their home communities.
4. *Major Increase in Health Facilities and Training for Indians*—clinics, hospitals, visiting nurses, nutrition courses, etc.
5. *Equitable Settlement of Indian Claims*—on the background of avarice-guided despoilment for many decades.
6. *Preservation of Indian Cultural Values*—presentation to the public of a better understanding of these first Americans.

¹ *The Indians of the United States Seek Together to Attain Citizenship*, a pamphlet published by the National Congress of American Indians, which may be obtained from the Secretary, 202 Dupont Circle Building, Washington, D. C.



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Supervisor, the National Congress of American Indians.

The National Congress of American Indians operates on a nation-wide basis. Its membership is limited to persons of Indian blood who belong to tribes recognized by the Federal Government. Two types of membership make up the organization: tribal and group affiliation and individuals.

Some of the accomplishments of the Indian Congress since its organization in 1944 are: It had a large hand in bringing about the creation of the Indian Claims Commission established by law in 1946, which provided a forum where Indian tribal claims might be more speedily adjudicated. It has fought for justice for the Indians of Alaska who have yet to be given an opportunity to obtain title to lands which they have occupied since time immemorial and which are rightfully theirs. It took the lead in securing for the Indians in the Southwest the right to vote. In 1944 there were several states which denied the Indian that right, notwithstanding the fact that all Indians were made citizens of the United States under the act of 1924.

In both World Wars I and II the Indians contributed more in the purchase of War Bonds and man power to aid in the war effort than any other comparable group within the nation and today thousands are fighting for their country in Korea. It was difficult to understand how any state could deny this fundamental right to such a loyal group of original Americans. Law suits, in which the Indian Congress had a part, were filed in the Courts of New Mexico and Arizona as a result of which final judgments were obtained decreeing the acts denying the Indians the right to vote unconstitutional.

It took the lead in securing Social Security Act privileges for the Indians of New Mexico and Arizona. It has stood with the Pyramid Lake Paiute Indians of Nevada in opposing efforts in Congress to deprive them of lands confirmed to them by the United States Supreme Court. It has published and circulated to Indians in all parts of the country a monthly *Bulletin* which gives them a detailed report and summary of legislative matters pertaining to Indian affairs and discusses topics of current interest to Indians.²

It has insisted on the right of Indian tribes to have attorneys of their own choosing to represent them and it has vigorously opposed arbitrary regulations of the Bureau of Indian Affairs restricting the opportunity of Indians to learn by experience, by mistakes as

² *Washington Bulletin*, a monthly publication, published by the National Congress of American Indians, Ruth M. Bronson, Editor, 202 Dupont Circle Building, Washington 6, D. C. This Bulletin is mailed without charge to members paying \$3.00 or more to the work of the National Congress of American Indians. To non-members the rate is \$5.00 per year.

well as by success. It has initiated a program to train leadership of local Indian communities in finding solutions for their problems.³

Today we have more than 400,000 officially recognized Indians in the United States and Alaska, divided into approximately 200 different tribes, speaking more than 55 distinct languages, of whom some 241,000 are living on some 50 reservations in various stages of adjustment.⁴ A few are very rich but most of them are very poor. Some are living much in the same manner as they lived 200 or 300 years ago and are still using the primitive methods of making a living. Others are technically trained and highly skilled in the professions in public life and in the industries and are making satisfactory adjustments into the social structure of the community in which they live. The latter is especially true in Oklahoma, with the exception of some isolated groups.⁵

Notwithstanding the progress some Indians have made, generally speaking, the American Indian today presents one of our most pressing social and economic problems. There are large segments in each of the tribes who are living in isolated rural communities and because of historical factors, bad lands, bad health, lack of schools and lack of opportunity are sub-marginal socially and economically and have been prevented from becoming assimilated into the social and economic life of the Nation. Many are living in dire need and want.

The conditions of the Navaho tribe of Arizona and New Mexico which numbers more than 60,000 reflects a tragic story of neglect and indifference on the part of our government. In 1868, when the Navaho capitulated to Kit Carson and his army, the United States entered into a peace treaty with them. By its terms the Navahos agreed to stay on the reservation and compel their children to attend school. On the other hand, the United States committed itself to the Navahos in several important particulars, among which was a pledge that "for every 30 children between said ages (6-16)

³ The planning and direction of this project is under the supervision and direction of Mr. D'Arcy McNickle and Mrs. Henry Roe Cloud. Mr. McNickle is a member of the Flathead tribe, distinguished writer and Indian leader, who for sixteen years has served as special assistant to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in charge of tribal relations. Mrs. Roe Cloud is a member of the Chippewa tribe, who has had wide experience in the development of Indian leadership and in club work of various types among both Indian and white groups. She is now the National Chairman of Indian Affairs for the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Mrs. Roe Cloud was selected as the American Mother of 1950 in recognition of her outstanding achievements in helping to build a better life in the communities in which she has lived.

⁴ *Aspects of Indian Policy* prepared by the Legislative Reference Service of the Library of Congress for Committee on Indian Affairs (79th Congress 1st Session), p. 5.

⁵ W. G. Stigler, Congressman from Oklahoma, "Extension of Remarks", *Congressional Record*, February 21, 1952, Page A1109.

who could be induced or compelled to attend school a house shall be provided and a teacher, competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education, shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians and satisfactorily discharge his or her duties as a teacher."⁶

This provision of the treaty has been disregarded. There are more than 15,000 bright-eyed, intelligent school children between the ages of 6 and 16, who are without school facilities or educational opportunities. Hundreds of children brought to school by their parents are turned away for lack of room. Thousands of Indian children have no shoes, even in winter. It is estimated that three out of every 10 Navaho children born die before they are one year old. Fifty percent of all deaths on the reservation are children under the age of five years.⁷ The death rate from tuberculosis on the reservation is the highest in the Nation. It is estimated that the death rate of the Navahos from this disease per 100,000 is 380 as compared to the death rate of 40 per 100,000 for the rest of the population. There are approximately 2,000 active cases of tuberculosis on the reservation.⁸

The land of the Navahos is very poor and at best can meagerly support but little more than one-half of its population. What is true of Navahos is also true of the Pimas and the Papagos and other tribes in the Southwest.

The National Congress of American Indians is endeavoring to bring to the attention of the American public the true picture of the Indian's plight. It is believed that when once the public is cognizant of the deplorable conditions under which many American Indians live, it will respond to his needs and public opinion will demand that legislation in the form of rehabilitation bills or other measures to improve his standards of living will be adopted. It is not to the credit or best interest of any nation to have within its borders a large segment of people living below the standards of health, sanitation and education of other citizens.

Today, many tribes are possessed of material resources in reservation status which require only additional development and utilization by the Indians in order to provide an adequate standard of living for the tribe. Assistance should come from the Federal government for this development, either in the form of loans or grants, or both, so that Indians may have an opportunity to improve their standards of living and at the same time hasten the day when they will be self-supporting citizens and integrated into the life

⁶ Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties*, Vol. II, "Treaty with the Navaho, 1868", Article 6, p. 782.

⁷ "Our Navajo Children are Americans Too", a pamphlet published by *Save the Children Federation*, 80 Eighth Avenue, New York 11, New York..

⁸ George I. Sanchez, *The People*, published by the United States Indian Service, Haskell Institute Print Shop, Lawrence, Kansas, March, 1948.

of the community. This program can be accomplished, or fulfilled, only through the cooperation by the Indians and the Government in all phases of program operations from the planning stage to the final execution.

The Indian situation is at a point where it is imperative that Congress, The Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indians themselves and the general public are going to have to work together toward a common objective to provide opportunities in the form of long-range programs which will enable the Indians to make a decent livelihood for their families. Long range programs must be adopted for this purpose if the Indians are to be spared the tragic fate of the Navaho and other Indians of the Southwest, in 1946 and 1947 when truck caravans were rolling into that section from all parts of the Nation bringing clothing and food to prevent death from exposure and starvation.

The U. S. Congress recently authorized an appropriation of fifty million dollars to India, and has sent millions to Europe to help the needy. In the light of this, it can ill afford not to help its own native American Indian people.

In dealing with the various Indian problems of the past, the United States has followed many policies and has made many mistakes. It followed a policy of extermination, forced migration, isolation and paternalism. What happened to the Indian is a matter of history which almost everyone knows. Those who resisted were destroyed. Some retired to the reservation and became bitter while others compromised and accepted the way of life offered them by the white man.

Lack of greater progress by the Indian Bureau toward the solution of the Indian problem after more than 100 years of administration lends strength to the idea that a thorough study of the administration of Indian affairs should be made for the purpose of determining the feasibility of making adjustments which will lead to the elimination of duplicate services between the various units of the Federal government as well as between the States and the Federal government with a view of streamlining the administration of Indian affairs in keeping with current needs and responsibilities.

In some areas there is a pressing need for the continuation of many services which can best be administered by the Indian Bureau for and on behalf of the Indians, but definite steps should be taken to consolidate State and Federal services wherever feasible and practical, and place such services under the supervision and control of the State. Such services as health, education and welfare may well be taken over by some of the states, which would result in more effective and efficient administration. It is encouraging to note that within recent months the Bureau of Indian Affairs has taken

definite steps in this direction in the fields of education and health by entering into contracts with the states to take over and administer these services.

It is felt that a strong Indian leadership such as is embodied in the National Congress of American Indians can effectively aid the Indian Bureau and the Congress of the United States to develop and apply policies for the improvement of Indian administration and to eliminate policies and functions detrimental to Indian progress and welfare.

One reason the Federal government has failed to make greater progress in its dealing with the Indians is because Indian leadership in the past, for the most part, has been negative and effective only in resisting the Federal policy. The philosophy back of the creation of the National Congress of American Indians was that Indian leadership should contribute to the formulation of Federal policy and should take the leading part in inquiring into the needs of the Indians and in making those needs vocal. Such leadership would perform an invaluable service.

Uninformed and misinformed members of Congress frequently introduce ill-considered legislation in Congress to abolish, or curtail work of the Indian Bureau on the theory that it is an expensive department of government maintained at an enormous cost to the Nation. The Indian Bureau may be due criticism but the fact remains that there is much work ahead for that agency before it can be liquidated. It would be tragic indeed for many tribes if the Indian Bureau were discontinued now, and their affairs turned over to the States, which for the most part are wholly unprepared to assume the burden of education, welfare, health, conservation and road construction. Immediate relinquishment of Federal supervision over the Indians in such States as New Mexico and Arizona would place a burden on those States which could not be borne because of lack of schools, hospitals and other facilities now administered and maintained by the Federal government and lack of funds to provide these facilities.

However a planned program should be followed by the Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the progressive liquidation of the Indian Service. While this cannot be done over night it can be realized tribe by tribe, area by area or state by state. Indians in such states as Oklahoma, Minnesota, California and Washington before too long should be ready for complete relinquishment of Federal control. Indeed for all intents and purposes many tribes are free from any control and supervision over their affairs. At one time the Indian Bureau followed the policy of making the Indian a "better Indian" and to encourage him to follow tribal government and retain the reservation status. Such a policy tended to segregate the Indian and continue the Indian problem indefinitely.

We should evolve a plan which will eventually lead all American Indians down the road to independence and complete absorption into the general citizenship. The American Indian wants first of all to be an American citizen like other American citizens. He wants to assume the responsibilities of citizenship and to enjoy the privileges of citizenship. For years, many Indian tribes have been in distress, in dire need. The extent of their suffering and their need is not generally known. The reasons for this are many: With the removal of the Indians to remote areas, most people lost sight of them—forgot them. Few Americans know the Indians as people who still live here in America today.⁹ When they are pictured at all, they are usually pictured as renegades, or hostiles, or in terms of old-fashioned history. Many people have forgotten the important contributions of the Indians to white civilization and white culture. The Indians taught the white man how to cope with the wilderness of this new continent, taught him to hunt, fish, trap and canoe. The Indians gave the white man the great gifts of cotton, corn, tomatoes, tobacco, potatoes, peanuts, beans and squash and these have today become multi-billion dollar American industries. Many Indians now have bad lands and death in return. Let us help the surviving American Indians to find a place in our American communities and right the old wrongs.

⁹ Suggested Readings for the history and progress of the Indian tribes in the state of Oklahoma: Edward Everett Dale, *Oklahoma: The Story of a State* (New York, 1950); Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman, 1934); Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (Norman, 1951).—Ed.