


THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

Introduction

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Guided Readings: America in Ferment - The Tumultuous 1960s

The Native American Power Movement

In November 1969, 200 Native Americans seized the abandoned federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. For 19 months Indian activists occupied the island in order to draw attention to conditions on the nation's Indian reservations. Alcatraz, the Native Americans said, symbolized conditions on reservations: "It has no running water; it has inadequate sanitation facilities; there is no industry, and so unemployment is very great; there are no health care facilities; the soil is rocky and unproductive." The activists, who called themselves Indians of All Tribes, offered to buy Alcatraz from the federal government for "\$24 in glass beads and red cloth."

On Thanksgiving Day, 1970, 350 years after the Pilgrims' arrival, Wampanoag Indians, who had taken part at the first Thanksgiving, held a National Day of Mourning at Plymouth, Massachusetts. A tribal representative declared, "We forfeited our country. Our lands have fallen into the hands of the aggressor. We have allowed the white man to keep us on our knees." Meanwhile, another group of Native Americans established a settlement at Mount Rushmore, to demonstrate Indian claims to the Black Hills.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new spirit of political militancy arose among the first Americans, just as it had among black Americans and women. No other group, however, faced problems more severe than Native Americans. Throughout the 1960s, American Indians were the nation's poorest minority group, worse off than any other group according to virtually every socioeconomic measure. In 1970 the Indian unemployment rate was 10 times the national average, and 40 percent of the Native American population lived below the poverty line. In that year, Native American life expectancy was just 44 years, a third less than that of the average American. In one Apache town of 2,500 on the San Carlos reservation in Arizona, there were only 25 telephones and most homes had outdoor toilets and relied on wood-burning stoves for heat.

Conditions on many of the nation's reservations were not unlike those found in underdeveloped areas of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The death rate among Native Americans exceeded that of the U.S. population as a whole by a third. Deaths caused by pneumonia, hepatitis, dysentery, strep throat, diabetes, tuberculosis, alcoholism, suicide, and homicide were 2 to 60 times higher than the entire U.S. population. Half a million Indian families lived in unsanitary dilapidated dwellings, many in shanties, huts, or even abandoned automobiles.

On the Navajo reservation in Arizona, which is roughly the size of West Virginia, most families lived in the midst of severe poverty. The birthrate was very high; two-and-a-half times the overall U.S. rate and the same as India's. Living standards were low; the average family's purchasing power was about the same as a family in Malaysia. The typical house had just one or two rooms, and 60 percent of the reservation's dwellings had no electricity and 80 percent had no running water or sewers. Educational levels were low. The typical resident had completed just five years of school, and fewer than one adult in six had graduated high school.

During World War II Native Americans began to revolt against such conditions. In 1944 Native Americans formed the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the first major intertribal association. Among the

group's primary concerns were protection of Indian land rights and improved educational opportunities for Native Americans. When Congress voted in 1953 to allow states to assert legal jurisdiction over Indian reservations without tribal consent and the federal government sought to transfer federal Indian responsibilities for a dozen tribes to the states (a policy known as "termination") and to relocate Indians into urban areas, the NCAI led opposition to these measures. "Self-determination rather than termination!" was the NCAI slogan. Earl Old Person, a Blackfoot leader, commented, "It is important to note that in our Indian language the only translation for termination is to 'wipe out' or 'kill off' ... how can we plan our future when the Indian Bureau threatens to wipe us out as a race? It's like trying to cook a meal in your tipi when someone is standing outside trying to burn the tipi down."

By the late 1950s a new spirit of Indian nationalism had arisen. In 1959 the Tuscarora tribe, which lived in upstate New York, successfully resisted efforts by the state power authority to convert reservation land into a reservoir. In 1961 a militant new Indian organization appeared, the National Indian Youth Council, which began to use the phrase "Red Power" and sponsored demonstrations, marches, and "fish-ins" to protest state efforts to abolish Indian fishing rights guaranteed by federal treaties. Native Americans in the San Francisco Bay area in 1964 established the Indian Historical Society to present history from the Indian point of view, while the Native American Rights Fund brought legal suits against states that had taken Indian land and abolished Indian hunting, fishing, and water rights in violation of federal treaties. Many tribes also took legal action to prevent strip mining or spraying of pesticides on Indian lands.

The best known of all Indian Power groups was AIM, the American Indian Movement, formed by a group of Chippewas in Minneapolis in 1966 to protest alleged police brutality. In the fall of 1972, AIM led urban Indians, traditionalists, and young Indians along the "Trail of Broken Treaties" to Washington, D.C., seized the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., and occupied them for a week in order to dramatize Indian grievances. In the spring of 1973, 200 heavily armed Indians took over the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, site of an 1890 massacre of 300 Sioux by the U.S. army cavalry, and occupied the town for 71 days.

Militant protests paid off. The 1972 Indian Education Act gave Indian parents greater control over their children's schools. The 1976 Indian Health Care Act sought to address deficiencies in Indian health care, while the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act gave tribes control over custody decisions involving Indian children. A series of landmark Supreme Court decisions aided the cause of Indian sovereignty and tribal self-government. The 1959 *Williams v. Lee* case upheld the authority of tribal courts to make decisions involving non-Indians. The 1968 case of *Menominee Tribe v. United States* declared that states could not invalidate fishing and hunting rights Indians had acquired through treaty agreements.

Beginning in the 1970s, a number of tribes initiated lawsuits to recover land illegally seized by whites. In 1980, the federal government agreed to pay \$81.5 million to the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot of Maine, and \$105 million to the Sioux in South Dakota. Court decisions also permitted tribal authorities to sell cigarettes, run gambling casinos, and levy taxes.

Indians are no longer a vanishing group of Americans. The 1990 census recorded an Indian population of over 2 million, five times the number recorded in 1950. About half of these people live on reservations, which cover 52.4 million acres in 27 states, while most others live in urban areas. The largest Native American populations are located in Alaska, Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. As the Indian population has grown in size, individual Indians have claimed many accomplishments, including receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction by N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa.

Although Native Americans continue to face severe problems of employment,

income, and education, they have decisively demonstrated that they will not abandon their Indian identity and culture or be treated as dependent wards of the federal government.

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