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MODERN TRIBAL ACTION AND THE REVIVAL OF INDIAN HOMELANDS

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The middle of the twentieth century marked the all-time low point for tribal existence on this continent. For generations, reservation Indians had been chained to poverty, dependency, and religious persecution. Now Congress was poised to confiscate the ancestral lands they held so dear. Never had the age-old specter of the “Vanishing Indian” come so close to reality.

Yet, in the ensuing fifty years, in one of the most inspiring movements in American history, Indian people stemmed the inevitable and revived their homelands. It is at once a story of the tenacity and creativity of modern tribal leaders and of the vitality of the American system that, with all its flaws, can still offer hope to the poor and the disenfranchised.

In the early 1950s, American Indians faced three overbearing and seemingly intractable problems. First, they had to endure the worst economic and social conditions of any identifiable group in the country. The desperate economic plight far outstripped any national depression. Income was low and unemployment rampant: It was a rare tribe with a jobless rate below forty percent and some reached ninety.

Hardly any Indian homes had electricity or indoor plumbing—and family housing usually meant a one-room tarpaper shack or, for some, the husk of an abandoned automobile. Infant mortality was five times the national average and life expectancy 25 years less than for other Americans. Native people depended on government rations to survive.

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Indians also suffered a relentless political oppression at mid-century. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, working hand-in-glove with the churches, ran the reservations with an iron grip. For those tribes with mineral deposits or commercial timber, the system was even more elaborate and treacherous: Decisions were made by the BIA and the churches in league with company executives and tribal lawyers only vaguely faithful to their clients. The law, going all the way back to classic opinions by Chief Justice John Marshall, recognized tribes as governments with the right of self-determination. But the law was paper, nothing more.

Further, the concerted campaign of the BIA and the churches included not just control over government but also the suppression of tribal religions and traditions. Indian language, dress, and ceremonies all were backward and uncivilized, and all subject to explicit assimilationist policies in the name of “civilizing” Native Americans. The BIA and mission schools prohibited the old languages and enforced strict dress codes. Church attendance was mandatory. Traditional dances, songs, and rituals violated BIA regulations, enforceable in administrative courts.

The totality of it—the daily challenge to self-identity, to self-worth—was emotionally and spiritually debilitating. Would our country have tolerated even the smallest measure of this broad-scale persecution if it were levied against Catholics, Jews, Seventh-Day Adventists, or the Amish?

On August 1, 1953, the situation became even more dire when Congress undertook perhaps the most extreme Indian program ever adopted. House Concurrent Resolution 108 officially announced the termination policy, a “final solution” that would lead to a sell-off of tribal lands, the withdrawal of all federal support, and the rapid assimilation of Indian people into the majority society. The premise for termination was that many tribes were self-sufficient (and

thus ready for termination) and that the others would be ready within a relatively short period of time.

This theory had no basis in the reality of Indian country. Far from being self-sufficient, poverty-stricken Indian people hung on mainly because of meager federal support and the sustenance they could gain from the land. And for Indian tribes, as place-based peoples, virtually nothing could be more threatening than the expropriation of their land. The early 1950s—especially since termination now cast its shadow—was a time of hopelessness, confusion, and fear in Indian country.

Indian leaders gradually responded and, by the mid-1960s, set daunting goals: Reverse the termination policy; break the BIA's paternalistic hold and reestablish tribes as sovereign governments within reservation territory; and at once achieve economic progress and preserve ancient traditions in a modern technological age. It amounted to a last stand for Indian people. As Vine Deloria, Jr., put it: "If we lose this one, there won't be another."

Against all odds, over the course of two generations, Indian leaders achieved their objectives to a stunning degree. Conditions have improved on every reservation, and in most instances the changes are dramatic. The progress is broad and deep: The standard of living is up; major advances have been made in health, housing, and education; traditional practices have been revitalized; the tribal land base has been expanded; and the great majority of decisions on the reservations are made by tribal governments, not federal or state officials.

To be sure, many problems remain. Economic conditions for most tribes, while significantly improved, continue to lag behind national indicators. Diseases such as diabetes and alcoholism occur at reduced but still unacceptable levels.

Yet the dominant fact is the revival: Even on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation of South Dakota, in the Upper Great Plains where Indian poverty has been the hardest to crack, the Oglala

people once again govern themselves by their own laws, the language lives on, and each year the Sun Dance has ever more adherents.

The gains will always be fragile—it could not be otherwise for a small racial minority—but tribes have established truly significant footholds in the nation’s political, economic, and legal systems. Indian people appear to have accomplished what would have seemed unthinkable in the dark days of the 1950s: the creation of viable, permanent Indian-governed homelands.

The modern Indian movement is one of the most successful social and economic movements in post-World War II America and can fairly be mentioned in the same breath with the civil rights, women’s, and environmental movements. For all of their progress, each of those efforts has suffered serious setbacks and continues to face major obstacles. So too with the tribes, but the relative degree of progress for Native people is comparable to each of those groups. The Indian revival of the second half of the twentieth century is a major episode in American history.

The success of the tribes presents a fascinating saga. The idea that Indian people have achieved so much is counterintuitive to most contemporary Americans, who think of reservations as dead-end streets. Within that general conundrum lies the fact that it really has been tribal action that created the deep change.

Tribal leaders learned how to use the political and legal system to create a framework within which progress could be made. Then they put those laws and policies to work by painstakingly building creative and effective institutions and programs at home, on the reservations. The modern Indian movement has put on grand display America’s truest nobility—its commitment to give dispossessed peoples the chance to thrive—but it took the passionate and informed determination of Indians themselves to activate that impulse.

Another surprise, at a time when the popular conception links Indians to casino lights, is that the progress in Indian country is not due to gaming. To be sure, gaming has brought significant—and in a few cases enormous—financial returns to some tribes. Yet the modern tribal movement had already accomplished much of its program by the time gaming came on the scene in the 1990s.

Further, gaming is organic with the system that Indian leaders envisioned a quarter of a century earlier and then proceeded to make a reality: Tribal gaming is possible because it is one of the many sovereign activities that tribes, as independent governments, can undertake on their own terms, not those of the states. Gaming has played an important role, but the scope of the modern Indian movement goes far beyond it.

Modern American Indian history is fundamentally characterized by Indian leaders who seized the initiative, brought their grievances to Congress and the courts, and, more often than not, accomplished the kind of progress they dared to seek. The reservations desperately needed healing, but Indian people refused to depend on others. In a story that gives inspiration to us all, they did the healing themselves.