

In *Indian Leadership*, ed. by Walter L. Williams (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1984).

## **Twentieth-Century Indian Leaders: Brokers and Providers**

By Walter L. Williams

When Native American leadership is discussed, it is usually in the context of the frontier era. Skillful Indian diplomats or brave military leaders, defending their lands from white encroachment, is the customary image. Since the passage of the frontier, however, the struggle of Indian peoples to retain their lands, to exercise control over their lives, and to preserve their cultures has continued unabated. In this struggle, as in previous eras, leaders emerged to meet the challenges of the times. After a period of demoralization which some native groups experienced, the importance of leadership among twentieth century Indians intensified rather than diminished. Just as the population of Native Americans has steadily increased since 1900, belying stereotypes of "the Vanishing American," so has the role of native leadership increased in complexity.

Scholars have been slow to recognize the significance of a new Indian leadership in the twentieth century. The work of those who assumed prominent roles in their tribes, after they were under the domination of the United States, was inherently restricted by the legal and social requirements of white America. In earlier eras, the United States had recognized the sovereignty and nationhood of Indian peoples through government-to-government negotiated treaties. This form of international agreement provided specific promises of continued self-government and guaranteed land control to Indians, in return for their cessions of certain lands and peaceful alliances with the United States. The treaty promises, however, proved to be of little use as the decades passed and whites established more and more authority over reservations. By a gradual process from the mid to late nineteenth century, more often involving legal maneuvering than military conquest, the government negated treaty provisions through congressional acts, administrative fiats, and court decisions.

Bit by bit, tribal governments were allowed less and less power, while white agents of the federal Office of Indian Affairs took more control from Indian leaders. This trend culminated in 1887 with the passage of the General Allotment Act, by which Congress hoped to do away with tribes entirely by dividing the remaining lands into individually allotted plots. This meant that

Indians, treated as individuals rather than as nations, would deal directly with government agents rather than through their own leaders. This "Dawes Act" became the basis for United States Indian policy from 1887 to 1934. Its main effect was not to assimilate the Indians, but drastically to decrease the Indians' land base. The Dawes Act was responsible for the loss of perhaps eighty-six million acres of land, and further decline of native self-government.

In this context, the government worked to reduce still further whatever powers the tribal governments retained, and finally to try to wipe out tribal leadership altogether. By the late 1890s, as the United States was embarking on an era of imperialistic expansion abroad, it had already consolidated its own "internal colonies" in its patterns of rule over Indians. Without any rights of citizenship, and without the intercession of tribal governments, the noose of colonial control tightened on many native peoples.

With much of their remaining lands being economically barren, and as populations started to grow, the Indian-controlled restricted land base was overtaxed even more. The resulting poverty and despair within many reservations became further justification for federal agents to treat Indians as "helpless and dependent wards." Native religions were outlawed, white social and economic patterns were enforced, and children were forcibly separated from their families to attend distant boarding schools. Such policies were rationalized on the grounds that the solution for "the Indian problem" was for natives to be absorbed into the America melting pot. This policy of forced assimilation ignored the fact that Indians had never asked to be assimilated and had never granted the abolition of their governments and their leadership traditions.

Given the intensity of United States efforts to wipe out tribal leadership, it is not surprising that traditional leaders in many tribes entered an era of deep demoralization and malaise. What is surprising is the rapidity with which a new Indian leadership emerged in the early twentieth century. This new leadership recognized that the old days of independence were gone, and in many respects they were so acculturated in the white man's ways that they sought no return to previous lifestyles. Often well educated in white schools and comfortable in white society, the first generation of Indian leaders to emerge on the national level included persons like Charles Eastman and Gertrude Bonnin. Yet despite their acceptance of assimilationist ideals, they also contributed a new ideal of their own: a Pan-Indian identity that emphasized the commonness of Indians of all tribes. They recognized things that Indians held in common, much more than previous tribal leaders had done. While they valued a "civilized" lifestyle, they also respected their native traditions enough to recognize the injustices of the

federal colonial domination. This first generation of Pan-Indianists offered a “best of both worlds” approach for modern Indians. and a renewed effort to gain control over their lives. By their critique of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in particular, they helped to set the stage for a reform of United States Indian policy.

As memories of the old Indian wars receded, and especially after the contribution of many Indian volunteers in World War I, sentiment for a reform of United States Indian policy gained momentum in the 1920s. But bureaucratic wheels turned slowly, even after it was obvious to most Americans that the old forced assimilation and allotment policies were a disaster. It was not until 1933, when President Franklin Roosevelt appointed John Collier as the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs, that substantial changes occurred. In the 1920s, Collier had been one of the leading non-Indian critics of government Indian policy. When he became head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he began an 'Indian New Deal' that would be one of the major changes of modern Indian history. The capstone of Collier's efforts resulted in the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. This act did not go nearly as far as Collier had wanted, but it marked the end of allotment, began land reclamation programs, encouraged a new respect for Indian culture, and sponsored revitalization of tribal governments.

Yet the Indian New Deal was a two-edged sword. While endorsing the concept of inherent tribal sovereignty, it nevertheless continued allowing federal intervention in tribal government without regard to treaty guarantees. New constitutions for the tribes were written by white lawyers, based on Euro-American models and with no understanding of traditional native patterns of government and leadership. The United States Secretary of the Interior retained a veto power over tribal government actions, while the BIA bureaucracy continued to function. Much of the potential for the Indian New Deal remained simply an ideal that was never fully accomplished, as reform sentiment declined and the nation drifted into an era of another world war and a cold war.

In the context of the Indian Reorganization Act, still another generation of national Indian leaders emerged on the scene. In many respects this new leadership could deal as brokers with the federal government, from a position of strength based on the newly active tribal governments. What has been too often ignored is the impact of Native American women in this national leadership role. In fact, much of the credit for the survival of Indian culture in the twentieth century goes to Indian women, both within their local communities as well as on the national scene. New studies run to rectify this oversight. By focusing on

the reform role of native women, times with the aid of white women's organizations, this aspect of American Indian leadership is finally receive.

American Indian leaders, female or male, had to struggle in the post-World War II era simply to prevent the gains of the Indian New Deal from being under. mined. A more conservative mood existed among white Americans, and this mood was reflected in 1950s policies to terminate federal treaty obligations to Indian tribes. This idea of termination marked a revival of the old melting pot theory that Indians should be "freed" from their reservations. Most Native American leaders saw it as simply another attempt to separate them from their land base. National organizations, like the National Congress of American Indians, spent much of their time fighting off government attempts to coerce tribes into accepting termination. Of those tribes that were terminated, most suffered economic disaster. The major response that the Eisenhower administration offered Indians was to relocate them in cities, which many Indians regarded as still another effort to separate them from their lands.

With reservations languishing, and the nation entering another era of great change in the 1960s, a new generation of Indian activists emerged. Often in opposition to the established cliques of some factionalized IRA tribal governments, this new activism awakened sentiments of self-determination, enforcement of the treaties, and a renewed pride in Indianness. The last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented era of Pan-Indianism and cultural renaissance for many tribes. In terms of political leadership, calls for "Red Power" were heard among both reservation and non-reservation Indians. In times of heightened expectations clashing with continued poverty and powerlessness, it was probably inevitable that Indian activism would enter an era of political turmoil, factionalism, and violent confrontation.

What has often not been recognized is how the emergence of new activist groups, especially the American Indian Movement, spoke to the concerns of Indians who were not dealt with adequately by the tribal governments. Some tribes were deeply factionalized, so the IRA majority-ruled governments did nothing more than create a permanently dissatisfied minority class. Other Indians, off reservations and in the cities, had no stable leadership to which they could turn. Such groups, suffering as a powerless minority under white domination, without even minimal self-government and civil rights, were the bases for American Indian Movement activism. AIM finally gave them an alternative to silent withdrawal and direction for challenging discrimination and demoralization. Local studies of non-reservation Indian offer a micrcosmic

view showing how AIM grew, by the efforts of charismatic young leaders who built their movement on local resentments that had grown up over years of mistreatment.

While the national Pan-Indian leaders have been important in verbalizing Indian concerns regarding federal policy, it has been on the local level that Indian leadership has had its most immediate impact on native people. Local studies of reservation politics show the ramifications of national policies and trends, and the actual roles that community-based tribal leaders follow. One of the most tragic features of twentieth century reservation politics has been the existence of extreme factional divisions within a tribe. In the past century the role of Indian leaders has been transformed by the necessity of dealing with a non-homogeneous community. Under the pressures of forced acculturation part of many tribes' populations naturally accepted the new Protestant-ethic identity offered by the missionaries and government agents. This created a separate identity from the traditional Harmony-ethic communalism of most tribes and a resulting competition for leadership positions. By these diverse groups being thrown together on the same reservation, modern Indian leaders have had to deal with pressures not felt earlier. Traditionally, groups with differing goals would have simply moved apart. But with a geographically-set land base, they cannot do this. Factionalism is the price that modern Indian tribes have had to pay.

Factionalism is a salient fact of twentieth century reservation life. Whether by settling competing tribes who were previously enemies on the same reservation, or by refusing to divide territories of "progressive" and "traditionalist" factions, it seems that federal policies often either intentionally or unintentionally exacerbated intra-tribal turmoil. If this is seen as a means of further weakening Indian power, it fits into the approach that whites have used toward Indians since the colonial era. By keeping Indians occupied in conflict with one another, whites managed to divide and rule. That Indians have factionalized, given the extreme pressures their societies have been forced to endure, may be understandable. But it does not relieve each generation of Indian leaders from the necessity of struggling to overcome factional divisions which paralyze action toward outside threats.

Specific studies of particular reservations can point out that it is a fallacy to attribute Indian factionalism to racial differences of "full bloods" versus "mixed bloods." This division, where it exists, is more likely based on economic rather than genetic differences. Just as with the United States itself in its own Civil War, Indian factional disputes emerged over fundamental questions facing

native communities about their future. Knowing the real basis of factionalism may make dealing with its conflicts more possible, so Indian leaders today must be aware of their history especially in the reservation period.

What is also particularly important is for Indians to know of successful patterns of tribal Leadership. By too exclusive a focus on the problems facing Indian leaders, it is easy to come away with an attitude of fatalistic pessimism. Focusing on Indian leaders who have accomplished significant gains for their people is obviously important as role modeling, but it is also important simply because it shows what has been achieved by Indian people. Despite a government policy that for much of the past century has explicitly tried to dissolve tribal leadership, such leadership survives. Not only has tribal leadership not been wiped out, it has flourished in many tribes. This is an indication of the remarkable continued persistence that Native Americans have evidenced over the centuries of white encroachment.

An examination of tribal leadership shows that it is not simply a matter of dominant individuals exerting their rule over others. Instead, the successful tribal leader has usually been a personification of a much wider network of kin, a continual interaction of numerous people throughout the social group. The successful tribal leader is able to inspire people to work for the common good, to overcome differences for the good of the tribe as a whole. This effort is done by bringing leadership into support of different groups in society, whether it is by age or education or social status. Successful leadership is therefore more likely to use the advice of both the aged and the younger generations, and is more likely to define people (even individuals of mixed genetic ancestry) as full-fledged members of the in-group rather than as an opposite faction to be opposed. Some groups, like the Osages or the Gros Ventres, managed to create a sense of unity out of a diverse population by appealing to the strengths of the educated "mixed bloods" in helping the less educated. Mixed blood leaders as far back as Chief John Ross of the Cherokees have repeatedly shown the wisdom of traditionalist adoption of "mixed blood" spokespersons into their group.

As several of these tribal leadership studies included here show, the success of Indian leaders may depend primarily on their skill at negotiating terms with whites. Caddo leaders, for example, persistently and skillfully negotiated a favorable settlement on the tribes' land claims. Osage and Gros Ventre leaders wisely held out for the best terms in negotiations with government allotment commissions. By retaining more of their land base, and especially with mineral resources held in common by the tribe, dramatic differences in tribal economic

status could result. The implications of the importance of holding tribal resources communally is a major argument against per capita payments that many contemporary tribes are dealing with today. To be considered successful, an Indian leader must actually accomplish positive results, for which he will be highly respected.

Besides serving as a broker in dealing effectively with whites, successful Indian leaders must also serve as providers for their people. This may be providing things in a material sense, in terms of massive give-aways of provisions to help those less fortunate. But it also involves respected leaders providing cultural and spiritual inspiration for the people. In the early twentieth century, when tribal governments had no official status, it involved keeping the tribal government operating even on an informal basis. The fact that tribal leadership continued to exist is evidence of that strong bond of cultural continuity that is still evident among many tribes today.

The successful leader must, in short, have a vision for the betterment of his people. He must recognize the primary importance of holding onto control of the land base. He must unite an appreciation for progressive techniques with an almost reverent respect for the traditions, thus avoiding factional conflicts. He must operate not on the basis of amassing a simple majority of supporters, but on drawing in as many different elements of the reservation population as possible. He must show generosity toward tribal members, and an aggressive competition toward outsiders. Such a grab bag of characteristics is not easy to find, but it is helpful to have an adequate social basis on which leaders can build. If the population is divided and hostile to opposite factions, if resources have been squandered individually rather than held communally, if religious divisions cannot be accommodated, and if genuine self-determination does not exist, then it is much more difficult for any leader to emerge who can bring about positive accomplishments.

Each reservation must examine its own situation to determine how best it can improve the situation of its people, but the role of Indian leadership is crucial in coming to terms with the possibilities which exist. It is impossible in one volume to cover all aspects of leadership facing Indian tribes and communities today. But it is hoped that these essays will offer ideas in diverse areas of reservation life: ideological, social, and economic as well as explicitly political. By illustrating specific examples of Indian leadership, on both the national and tribal levels, and by suggesting bibliographical resources for further study, these essays offer a clearer understanding of the nature of American Indian leadership in the twentieth century.