

The Ultimate Welfare State The American Indian

Even when motivated by good intentions, government programs meant to aid Indians led to harsh consequences for Indians, but government “care” continues.

by Bob Adelman

Any man who thinks he can be happy and prosperous by letting the government take care of him, better take a close look at the American Indian. — Henry Ford

Using their portable forge, members of Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery fabricated various iron implements and traded them to the Mandan and Hidatsa Indian tribes in what is now North Dakota, in exchange for corn, beans, squash, and tobacco to sustain them during the winter of 1804-5. Several months and a thousand miles later the Corps was surprised to see that one of their implements, an axe, had preceded them.

So well-developed was the tribal economy that, every fall, a wide diversity of tribes, including Crees, Cheyennes, Assiniboines, Crows, and Sioux, descended on the Mandan villages to trade meat products, horses, and even musical instruments for Mandan corn. This entrepreneurial spirit, which resulted in the development of trade routes extending thousands of miles, surprised even Lewis and Clark.

That is how it was before whites assumed a paternalistic role over the American Indian.

After whites conquered the Indians, the Indians were subjugated — made into wards of the federal government. Under the government’s “care,” Indians transmuted from proud, self-determining, self-reliant peoples to pathetic, welfare-supported shells of their former selves. William F. Jasper noted in our August 27, 1990 issue that the change happened quickly, as was illustrated when Indians came under government care when Alaska became a state:

Dan Cole was born a member of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma 75 years ago....

During the late 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s, Cole spent considerable time in Alaska, much of it working as a civil engineer supervising the construction of installations for the U.S. Coast Guard. His hiring of Eskimo and Indian construction crews was unprecedented....

“By our standards they [the native Americans] were considered very poor,” Dan Cole remembers. “Their annual income at that time was about \$50-\$80 per year. They lived in log or sod homes that were unheated. Their diet consisted mainly of fish, seal, and whale. But they were happy and healthy.” Then came Alaska’s statehood in 1959. “One of the first things that happened was federal money started pouring in. Free food, welfare checks. There was no incentive to go out and brave the elements



One of the few who managed to make the transition from warrior to American citizen was Quanah Parker, a Comanche chief and later a successful rancher in Oklahoma.

to fish and hunt, or to hold a job. They started to stay in town to drink and gamble. Their family lives and tribal unity began to disintegrate.... Their diet shifted to potato chips and soda pop so that they were soon in bad health and their teeth were falling out.”

It's true that some of the pathology and poverty of the American Indians was a result of government programs meant to intentionally harm Indians, but most were the consequence of actions designed to help the Indians, policies that turned entrepreneurial spirit and self-sufficiency into dependency and despondency, from which tribes all across the nation, with precious few exceptions, still suffer today.

Americanizing the Indians

As early as 1790, there developed the "assimilation" thesis (sometimes called Americanization) that was designed to convert Indians to European-American ways of doing things through education and behavior modification, as summarized by Wikipedia:

Americanization policies were based on the idea that when indigenous people learned United States (American) customs and values, they would be able to merge tribal traditions with American culture and peacefully join the majority society. After the end of the Indian Wars, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the government outlawed the practice of traditional religious ceremonies. It established boarding schools which children were required to attend. In these schools they were forced to speak English, study standard subjects, attend church, and leave tribal traditions behind.

This policy was tacitly approved by the chief justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall, in 1831 when he declared that the Indian tribes were "domestic dependent nations" whose "relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian." Thereon, the national government took on the role of a Nanny State over the Indians, a role that didn't change even as policies

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Lewis and Clark were astonished to discover how highly developed were the economies of the Mandan and Hidatsa Indian tribes during their trek through what is now North Dakota in the winter of 1804-1805.

regarding the future of the Indians took on a schizophrenic character, swinging back and forth between attempts to assimilate them into white society (meaning, in this case, act like whites) and something called "tribal sovereignty." As Andrew Boxer, writing in *History Today*, explained:

A guardian prepares his ward for adult independence, and so Marshall's judgment implied that US policy should aim to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream US culture.

But a guardian also protects and nurtures a ward until adulthood is achieved, and therefore Marshall also suggests that the federal government has a special obligation to care for its Native American population. As a result, federal policy towards Native Americans has lurched back and forth.

With government's approval, statist, later to be called Progressives, took the opportunity to expand government beyond its constitutional bounds of protecting the lives and property of its citizens, "to one whose ends and scope would change to take on any and all social and economic ills," as explained by R. J. Pestritto, Shipley professor of the American Constitution at Hillsdale College.

As the Indian Wars entered their final stages, Indians were being forced onto reservations, a

policy that President Ulysses S. Grant applauded. In his State of the Union speech in 1871, Grant affirmed his Indian "peace policy":

The policy pursued toward the Indians has resulted favorably....

Many tribes of Indians have been induced to settle upon reservations, to cultivate the soil, to perform productive labor of various kinds, and to partially accept civilization.

They are being cared for in such a way, it is hoped, as to induce those still pursuing their old habits of life to embrace *the only opportunity which is left to them to avoid extermination.* [Emphasis added.]

In short, Grant's "peace policy" was submit or die.

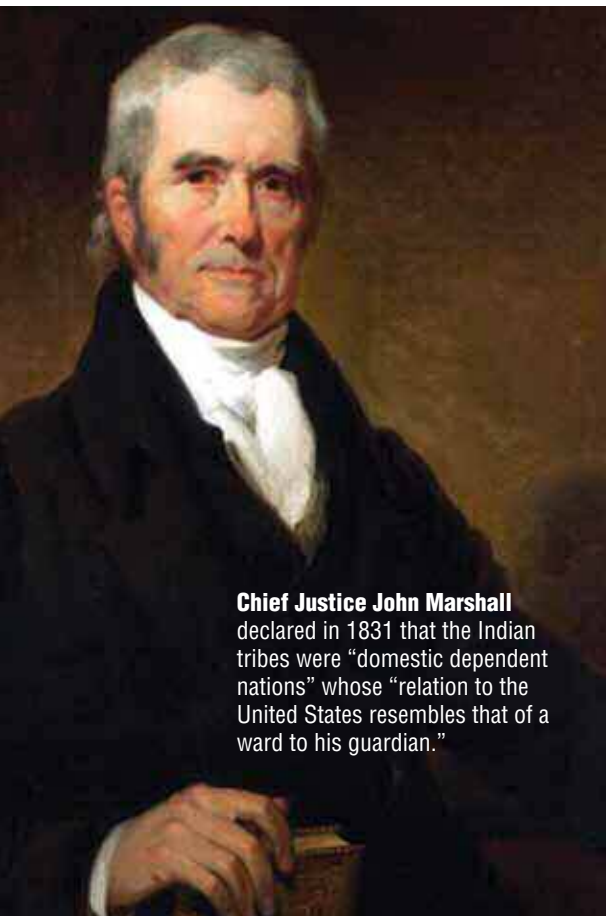
Those concerned over the welfare of the Indians on their reservations began, in the early 1870s, to call themselves the "Friends of the Indians." They included Herbert Welsh, who later counted among his friends and associates Progressives Teddy Roosevelt; Louis Brandeis, a future Supreme Court Justice; and Frederick Law Olmsted, the co-founder of the liberal magazine *The Nation* (which now proclaims itself as "the flagship of the Left").

In addition, Richard Henry Pratt, an outspoken opponent to the reservation system and believer in assimilation, was a leader in the "Friends of the Indians" movement. Pratt experimented in educating Native Americans, teaching them to reject their

tribal culture and beliefs and adapt to “white society.” In the mid-1870s he introduced classes in English, Christianity, art, guard duty, and craftsmanship to several dozen Indians who had been captured at the end of the Red River War.

In 1879, he founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Indian children were forcibly removed from their reservations and indoctrinated in classes designed to, as Pratt put it, “kill the Indian to save the man.” His school’s brutality, characterized by kidnappings and beatings of students caught speaking in their native language, eventually led to his forced retirement in 1904.

The “friends” based its plans and policies on the assumed perfectibility of man if only his environment were changed. In 1882, the “friends” formed the Indian Rights Association (IRA) whose objective was to “bring about the complete civilization of the Indians and their admission to citizenship.” The IRA opened an office in Washington, D.C., to lobby for progressive legislation.



Chief Justice John Marshall declared in 1831 that the Indian tribes were “domestic dependent nations” whose “relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.”

Doomed Through Dawes

The friends’ crowning achievement, known variously as the Dawes Act of 1887 or the General Allotment Act, had several primary goals, including:

- Breaking up the tribes as social units
- Encouraging individual initiatives
- Encouraging those individuals to become farmers
- Dividing reservation land into separate small parcels
- Giving those parcels to individual Indians once they were deemed “competent”
- Selling any remaining reservation land to outsiders.

Specifically the Dawes Act parceled out reservation land by giving the head of a family 160 acres, a single individual 80 acres, and those under age 18 40 acres. In addition, the land wasn’t given in “fee simple” — outright ownership of the property with few restrictions on use — but was to be held in trust for 25 years, at the end of which term an Indian was deemed “competent” to manage the land for himself, provided he “has adopted the habits of civilized life,” according to the statute.

Though giving Indians private property rights over land could have been a very good thing in that it would enable them to once again become self-reliant (as the Dawes Act’s promoters claimed, and were proven right in a few cases), the land allocation was laden with faults — hence, a large number of Indians suffered. When Henry M. Teller, one of Colorado’s first two senators after statehood was granted in 1876, heard about the Dawes plan, he saw immediately the potential negative impact it would have on the Indians and the opportunity it would give to crooks:

[The Dawes plan would] despoil the Indians of their lands and make them vagabonds on the face of the earth....

The real aim [of the Dawes plan of “allotment”] was to get at the Indian lands and open them up to settlement [by outsiders].

The provisions for the apparent benefit of the Indians are but the pretext to get at his lands and occupy them....

If this were done in the name of Greed, it would be bad enough; but to do it in the name of Humanity ... is infinitely worse.

As allotment proceeded, the impact as predicted by Teller far exceeded his worst expectations. Because the plots were so small, even those that were productive weren’t large enough to sustain their owners. Because the owners didn’t really own the land nor could they sell it or trade it, much was left fallow. In addition, much of reservation lands were arid and incapable, even in the hands of skilled farmers, of producing anything of value.

By 1900, reservation lands dwindled from 150 million acres to 78 million, and by 1934 were further reduced to about 50 million. This land “lost” to the tribes did not always signal harm to Indians — but it often did, with the notable exception of land that was given “fee simple.” On such lands, the owners could do what they wanted, including selling the land to get money to do something else, such as live and work in towns. Overall, however, Dawes was an administrative catastrophe.

One unforeseen consequence of the actions of the Progressive do-gooders was “fractionalization”: As the original owners of the parcels handed out under the Dawes Act died, their interests were passed on to their heirs. In 1922, the General Accounting Office (GAO) conducted an audit to see what impact such “fractionalization” was having. On the 12 reservations surveyed, the GAO discovered there were over a million owners of Indian reservation land which, if it were divided up among those owners, would give each owner less than one square foot of ground. For all intents and purposes, those parcels were worthless.

As the rolling disaster precipitated by the Dawes Act became more and more apparent, Congress passed the unconstitutional Burke Act in 1906, which, to the delight of the Progressives, gave nearly unlimited power to the executive branch — specifically the Secretary of the Interior — to speed up the allotment process so that Indians could take “fee simple” possession of their property immediately, provided an Indian was “competent and capable of managing his or her affairs.” The Indian caretakers’ happiness was short-lived, however, as it quickly became

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apparent that much of the Indian land was headed for liquidation because the parcels were not economically viable, and were also subject to taxation. As unpaid taxes piled up, much of the land was sold for back taxes, as anticipated (according to author Paul Robertson) by the Interior Department at the time.

Time for Tribal Sovereignty

Progressives became increasingly aware of the disaster and decided to change their intervention in the lives and culture of the unhappy Indians still remaining on what was left of the reservations. Accordingly, a left-wing think tank called the Institute for Government Research (later known as the Brookings Institution) issued in 1928 its 847-page *Meriam Report*, named for the director of the research team, Lewis Meriam.

Meriam had all the proper credentials: degrees from Harvard University, George Washington University, and the Robert Brookings Graduate School, and years of government service working on the Indian “problem.” In general, the report found that the Dawes and Burke Acts had failed miserably in their intended purpose (assimilating the American Indian into American

culture), while providing the opportunity for graft and corruption in the agencies assigned to enforcing them.

The report stated that “the health of the Indians compared with that of the general population is bad” and “the income of the typical Indian family is low and

the earned income extremely low.” The schools provided poor diets, were overcrowded, and did not provide adequate medical services. Said the report: “The survey staff finds itself obligated to say frankly and unequivocally that the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate.”

Working behind the scenes and closely with Meriam was another Progressive, one John Collier. Collier decided that a change in policy was called for: the institution of the policy of “tribal sovereignty.” This policy reflected the Progressive ideology that Indians could not be allowed independent nation status within the United States, instead referring to the Indian tribes as “domestic dependent nations.” This perfectly denoted the intention of Progressives to keep the Indians “dependent.”

The first thing that was needed was more legislation, and in 1934, Collier got his wish: passage under the Roosevelt administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, with himself in charge as commissioner of Indian Affairs (now called the Bureau of Indian Affairs). Known colloquially as the “Indian New Deal,” the act allowed Collier to busy himself with all manner of

welfare state projects, funded with taxpayer monies, employing Indian workers in various make-work schemes. The allocation scheme under the Dawes Act was slowed but not eliminated, and some small part of reservation lands that had been sold to outsiders was returned to some tribes.

Collier’s schemes resulted in Indians becoming even more reliant on the federal government for their well-being. Following the end of WWII, Congress began to address the continuing decimation of the Indian population by stressing assimilation once again, and it issued House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, which stated:

Whereas it is the policy of Congress, as rapidly as possible, to make the Indians within the territorial limits of the United States subject to the same laws and entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities as are applicable to other citizens of the United States, to end their status as wards of the United States, and to grant them all of the rights and prerogatives pertaining to American citizenship.

This resolution, later enabled by law, terminated the relationships the government had established with most of the tribes, leaving them to fend for themselves without the government assistance to which they had grown accustomed. One of those most drastically and negatively affected was the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin. The Menominee people had no tribal hospitals or clinics. The tribal hospital at Keshena was closed when it failed to meet state standards, and the county lacked funds to restore it. The tribe had three times the infant mortality rate as the rest of the state and 90 percent of Menominee children needed dental care but couldn’t get it.

Activists worked to reestablish federal funding, which resulted in the Menominee Restoration Act, signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1973. The Menominees now have their own constitution along with the reinstated flow of federal funding upon which they depend. This leaves the tribe with slightly greater control over how those federal funds are spent, while remaining dependent upon the government for survival. The 1975 Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act extended such care and



AP Images

Among those suffering most under continued federal government “assistance” are young children, whose education in Indian schools often borders between poor and non-existent.



Jack Lowery helped start the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain. Lowery is a member of the Lumbee Tribe, one tribe that managed to escape the clutches of federal dependency.

attention to other tribes, essentially doing nothing more than cementing into place continued federal funding to the tribes but through block grants instead of handouts. The whole charade was a distinction without a difference: The tribes were to remain “domestic dependent nations.”

Indians Today

Today American Indians remain the poorest of the poor. The rate of homes without electricity on reservations is 10 times the national average. One-fifth of reservation households lack running water, compared to just one percent of households nationwide. One half of Navajo and Hopi Reservation residents lack indoor plumbing. One out of five lack basic kitchen facilities, such as running water, a range, or a refrigerator. More than half of reservation households have no telephone service and fewer than 10 percent have Internet access. Of all ethnic groups, American Indians have the highest rate of suicide, the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, and the lowest life expectancy.

The worst of the worst is the Pine Ridge Reservation in Allen, South Dakota, not far from where Lewis and Clark first discovered the independence and thriving entrepreneurial spirit of the American Indians. Income on Pine Ridge is the lowest in the nation, at \$1,539 per person per year. Eighty percent of the residents are unemployed.

Infant mortality there is five times the national average. The death rate due to diabetes is three times higher than the national average. Life expectancy as of 2007 was 48 for males and 52 for females.

This is the progress under Progressivism.

And yet, a few tribes flourish. Consider the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) in northwest Montana, who have been allowed to oversee forests rich in pine, larch, and Douglas fir. They manage forests alongside the National Forest Service (NFS) and, according to an encouraging study done by Alison Berry of the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), they outperform the NFS in nearly every statistical category because “they have a vested interest in the continuing vitality of their natural resources.” Berry quotes tribal forest manager Jim Durglo:

Our forest [notice, please, the ownership and pride underlying the use of that word “our”] is a vital part of everyday tribal life. Timber production, non-timber forest products and grazing provide jobs and income for tribal members and enhance the economic life of surrounding communities.

As for the NFS, consider what Jim Peterson, editor of *Evergreen Magazine*, said: “The tribes do a lot of things I wish we were doing on our federal forest lands if we weren’t all knotted up in litigation.”

Only one timber sale by the CSKT has been questioned by environmentalists since 1976, so careful have they been with the stewardship of their forest. On the other hand the NFS has faced numerous lawsuits over its management of the forests.

Or consider the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, who operate under the Lumbee Act of 1956, which tribal members agreed to only under the following condition: “Nothing in this act shall make such Indians eligible for any services performed by the United States for Indians because of their status as Indians.”

The Lumbee have never been a sovereign nation or ever had a treaty with the federal government. They live as any other U.S. citizens. And they are thriving. As John Stossel noted recently:

Lumbees own their homes and succeed in business. They include real estate developer Jim Thomas, who used to own the Sacramento Kings, and Jack Lowery, who helped start the Cracker Barrel restaurants.

The Lumbees started the first Indian-owned bank, which now has 12 branches.

If tribes can somehow extract themselves from the clutches of federal government handouts, their chances for reversing their descent into poverty will likely improve greatly. In the Cato Institute’s massive report *Indian Lands, Indian Subsidies, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs*, researcher Chris Edwards contends that

rather than subsidizing and regulating life on reservations, federal and tribal policymakers should focus on building a legal and economic environment to allow individual Indians to prosper.

Congress and the tribes should focus on expanding individual property rights, making rule-of-law reforms, and removing barriers to investment and entrepreneurship.

There has been progress in many Indian communities in recent decades, and with further reforms Indians could finally realize their full potential.

This is the only way the legacy of Progressivism can be reversed. To borrow the slogan from The John Birch Society, Indians will succeed only with “less government, more individual responsibility, and, with God’s help, [they will then be able to achieve for themselves] a better world.” ■