“We Took Away Their Best Lands, Broke Treaties”: John Collier Promises to Reform Indian Policy

John Collier’s appointment as Commissioner of Indian Affairs by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 marked a radical reversal—in intention if not always in effect—in U.S. government policies toward American Indians that dated back to the 1887 Dawes Act. An idealistic social worker, Collier first encountered Indian culture when he visited Taos, New Mexico, in 1920, and found among the Pueblos there what he called a “Red Atlantis”—a model of living that integrated the needs of the individual with the group and that maintained traditional values. As Commissioner, Collier proposed a sweeping set of reforms to reverse the previous half century of federal policy. Although he could not win congressional backing for his most radical proposals, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 dramatically changed policy by allowing tribal self-government and consolidating individual land allotments back into tribal hands. His 1938 report as Commissioner of Indian Affairs combined a frank indictment of the broken promises of the past with an insistence that the Indian Service, since 1933, had made a “concerted effort” to rectify those past mistakes.

In all our colorful American life there is no group around which there so steadfastly persists an aura compounded of glamor, suspicion, and romance as the Indian. For generations the Indian has been, and is today, the center of an amazing series of wonderings, fears, legends, hopes.

Yet those who have worked with Indians know that they are neither the cruel, warlike, irreligious savages imagined by some, nor are they the “fortunate children of nature’s bounty” described by tourists who see them for an hour at some glowing ceremonial. We find the Indians, in all the basic forces and forms of life, human beings like ourselves. The majority of them are very poor people living under severely simple conditions. We know them to be deeply religious. We know them to be possessed of all the powers, intelligence, and genius within the range of human endowment. Just as we yearn to live out our own lives in our own ways, so, too, do the Indians, in their ways.

For nearly 300 years white Americans, in our zeal to carve out a nation made to order, have dealt with the Indians on the erroneous, yet tragic, assumption that the Indians were a dying race—to be liquidated. We took away their best lands; broke treaties, promises; tossed them the most nearly worthless scraps of a continent that had once been wholly theirs. But we did not liquidate their spirit. The vital spark which kept them alive was hardy. So hardy, indeed, that we now face an astounding, heartening fact.

Actually, the Indians, on the evidence of federal census rolls of the past eight years, are increasing at almost twice the rate of the population as a whole.

With this fact before us, our whole attitude toward the Indians has necessarily undergone a profound change.
Dead is the centuries-old notion that the sooner we eliminated this doomed race, preferably humanely, the better. No longer can we, with even the most generous intentions, pour millions of dollars and vast reservoirs of energy, sympathy, and effort into any unproductive attempts at some single, artificial permanent solution of the Indian problem. No longer can we naively talk of or think of the “Indian problem.” Our task is to help Indians meet the myriad of complex, interrelated, mutually dependent situations which develop among them according to the very best light we can get on those happenings—much as we deal with our own perplexities and opportunities.

We, therefore, define our Indian policy somewhat as follows: So productively to use the moneys appropriated by the Congress for Indians as to enable them, on good, adequate lands of their own, to earn decent livelihoods and lead self-respecting, organized lives in harmony with their own aims and ideals, as an integral part of American life. Under such a policy, the ideal end result will be the ultimate disappearance of any need for government aid or supervision. This will not happen tomorrow; perhaps not in our lifetime; but with the revitalization of Indian hope due to the actions and attitudes of this government during the last few years, that aim is a probability, and a real one.

In looking at the Indian picture as a social whole, we will consider certain broad phases—land use and industrial enterprises, health and education, roads and rehabilitation, political organization—which touch Indian life everywhere, including the 30,000 natives of Alaska for whose health, education, and social and economic advancement the Indian Service is responsible. Lastly, this report will tell wherein the Indian Service, or the government’s effort as a whole for the Indians, still falls short.

So intimately is all of Indian life tied up with the land and its utilization that to think of Indians is to think of land. The two are inseparable. Upon the land and its intelligent use depends the main future of the American Indian.

The Indian feels toward his land, not a mere ownership sense but a devotion and veneration befitting what is not only a home but a refuge. At least nine out of ten Indians remain on or near the land. When times are good, a certain number drift away to town or city to work for wages. When times become bad, home to the reservation the Indian comes, and to the comparative security which he knows is waiting for him. The Indian still has much to learn in adjusting himself to the strains of competition amid an acquisitive society; but he long ago learned how to contend with the stresses of nature. Not only does the Indian’s major source of livelihood derive from the land but his social and political organizations are rooted in the soil.

A major aim, then, of the Indian Service is to help the Indians to keep and consolidate what lands they now have and to provide more and better lands upon which they may effectively carry on their lives. Just as important is the task of helping the Indian make such use of his land as will conserve the land, insure Indian self-support, and safeguard or build up the Indian’s social life.

In 1887, the General Allotment Act was passed, providing that after a certain trust period, fee simple title to parcels of land should be given to individual Indians. Individual proprietorship meant loss—a paradox in view of the Indian’s love for the land, yet an inevitable result, when it is understood that the Indian by tradition was not concerned with possession, did not worry about titles or recordings, but regarded the land as a fisherman might regard the sea, as a gift of nature, to be loved and feared, to be fought and revered, and to be drawn on by all as an inexhaustible source of life and strength.

The Indian let the ownership of his allotted lands slip from him. The job of taking the Indian’s lands away, begun by the white man through military expeditions and treaty commissions, was completed by cash purchase—always of course, of the best lands which the Indian had left. In 1887, the Indian had remaining 130 million acres. In 1933, the Indian had left only 49 million acres, much of it waste and desert.

Since 1933, the Indian Service has made a concerted effort—an effort which is as yet but a mere
beginning—to help the Indian to build back his landholdings to a point where they will provide an adequate basis for a self-sustaining economy, a self-satisfying social organization.


See Also:"A Bill of Rights for the Indians": John Collier Envisions an Indian New Deal