

■ A New Deal for American Indians

Date: November 30, 1934

Author: John Collier

Genre: report

Summary Overview

With the passage of one act on June 18, 1934, US government policy toward American Indians underwent one of the most fundamental changes in the history of Indian-white relations. Though it did not come close to solving all of the issues faced by American Indian peoples, the Indian Reorganization Act changed the entire goal of American Indian policy. Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier proposed a thorough reform of federal Indian policy, ending the allotment of tribal lands into individual parcels, consolidating Indian land holdings, creating tribal governments, and instituting Indian courts. Collier believed strongly in cultural pluralism rather than assimilation of American Indians into white society, and personally lobbied the act (also called the Wheeler-Howard Act) through Congress. In his portion of the Department of the Interior's annual report, Collier outlined the changes contained in the act and the intended effects of the act.

Defining Moment

For most of the 1920s, federal American Indian policy continued as it had since the Civil War, namely, the forced conversion, relocation, and assimilation of American Indians, as well as the acquisition of their lands. However, events began to occur during the 1920s that would be the beginning of massive changes in the way American Indians were viewed by the federal government. Business interests wanted to have unhindered access to mineral and petroleum resources on Indian lands and reservations and sought to force Indians to assimilate into white American society and break up the reservation system. But there were some new reform voices during the 1920s, among which John Collier's was perhaps the loudest. The influence of this reformist approach to American Indian policy can be seen in

a 1928 report titled *The Problem of Indian Administration*, also known as the Meriam Report, which outlined the directions federal Indian policy would eventually take under Collier, whom President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed commissioner of Indian affairs when he took office in 1933.

Under Collier, the role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) changed. The BIA now tried to help Indians retain their culture, and further, even commercialize it so that they could earn money through jewelry, pottery, baskets, blankets, and other items. Opposition to Collier's proposals was swift, vocal, and aggressive. Conservative white assimilationists said that the only future for the Indians was Christian assimilation into American life. Business interests that had leasing rights on the reservations opposed the land consolidation provisions. Some Indians themselves saw the tribal council system of government as another imposition from Washington that would displace traditional leaders and give an advantage to English-speaking, Christian Indians. Others saw Collier's concepts of cultural pluralism as naive and elitist. As a result of these discordant voices, the legislation that eventually passed, called the Indian Reorganization Act, was not the bill originally drafted. The Indian Reorganization Act did not fundamentally change the relationship between American Indians and larger American society, although it did curb some of the worst abuses. Its greater influence was the creation of Indian tribal governments with rights and responsibilities like the federal government.

The act gave tribes one year to hold a vote to decide if they wanted to adopt a constitution and set up tribal councils. Collier, sure of his goals and the means to achieve them, was confident that many tribes would see the benefits of the tribal council form of government. He concentrated on getting key reservations to

approve the act, in an attempt to create a bandwagon effect. The report filed in November 1934, almost six months after the passage of the act, reflects Collier's ideal vision of the act and its ramifications for Indian country.

Author Biography

John Collier was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1884. He had a long history of social reform activity by the time he was appointed commissioner of Indian affairs under President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. Collier, in reaction to a tragic childhood and home life—his mother died of drug addiction and his father committed suicide before he was sixteen—rejected material pursuits and became a social reformer, working to improve the lives

of immigrants in New York City during the early 1900s. He became civic secretary of the People's Institute, an organization set up to foster a sense of community among the city's immigrant population. Upon a visit to Taos, New Mexico, in 1920, Collier became aware of both the beauty of and problems facing American Indian cultures. He immediately became an advocate for the Pueblo tribes, who were facing legislation that would deprive them of much of their land. In 1923, he founded the American Indian Defense Association and was instrumental in the promotion of the findings of the Meriam Report, which brought Indian issues to public attention. He served as commissioner of Indian affairs from 1933 until 1945.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The Wheeler-Howard Act, the most important piece of Indian legislation since the eighties, not only ends the long, painful, futile effort to speed up the normal rate of Indian assimilation by individualizing tribal land and other capital assets, but it also endeavors to provide the means, statutory and financial, to repair as far as possible, the incalculable damage done by the allotment policy and its corollaries....

The repair work authorized by Congress... aims at both the economic and spiritual rehabilitation of the Indian race. Congress and the President recognized that the cumulative loss of land brought about by the allotment system, a loss reaching 90,000,000 acres—two-thirds of the land heritage of the Indian race in 1887—has robbed the Indians in large part of the necessary basis for self-support. They clearly saw that this loss and the companion effort to break up all Indian tribal relations had condemned large numbers of Indians to become chronic recipients of charity; that the system of leasing individualized holdings had created many thousands of petty landlords unfitted to support themselves when their rental income vanished; that a major propor-

tion of the red race was, therefore, ruined economically and pauperized spiritually....

Through 50 years of "individualization," coupled with an ever-increasing supervision over the affairs of individuals and tribes so long as these individuals and tribes had any assets left, the Indians have been robbed of initiative, their spirit has been broken, their health undermined, and their native pride ground into the dust. The efforts at economic rehabilitation cannot and will not be more than partially successful unless they are accompanied by a determined simultaneous effort to rebuild the shattered morale of a subjugated people that has been taught to believe in its racial inferiority.

The Wheeler-Howard Act provides the means of destroying this inferiority complex, through those features which authorize and legalize tribal organization and incorporation, which give these tribal organizations and corporations limited but real power, and authority over their own affairs, which broaden the educational opportunities for Indians, and which give Indians a better chance to enter the Indian Service.

Document Analysis

In his commissioner's report for the fiscal year 1934, John Collier sought to describe the situation in Indian country and what his signature piece of legislation, the Indian Reorganization Act, would do to improve the lives of American Indian people across the nation. Even before the IRA was passed, Collier was working to reform the BIA and federal Indian policy as a whole. He abolished the Board of Indian Commissioners, which sought to assimilate Indians into mainstream American life. He convinced Interior Secretary Harold Ickes to temporarily end the policy of allotting tribal land to individual Indians, which had resulted in the passage of two-thirds of tribal land into non-Indian hands, until he could get the IRA passed. He also cancelled the debts owed by many tribes to the federal government, a necessary precondition for any degree of tribal government autonomy.

Finally, in June 1934, the Wheeler-Howard Act was passed by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt. Though many BIA officials, attached to the agency's long-held goal of assimilation of American Indians, disagreed with Collier's reforms, Collier put the end of allotment and assimilation front-and-center in his description of the act. Not only was the policy of assimilation going to end, but means of repairing the damage to the Indian land base also became a priority. Cultural pluralism replaced assimilation as the aim of the BIA. Whereas individual land parcels encouraged assimilation, consolidating tribal land encouraged the revival of Indian cultures, as well as—it was hoped—providing the tribes with a means of self-support. Thanks to the policy of assimilation, Collier argues, "the Indians have been robbed of initiative, their spirit has been broken, their health undermined, and their native pride ground into the dust." Collier asserts that the act provides the means not only to provide for the tribes financially through giving them a degree of sovereignty and restoring as much land as possible, but even more importantly, that the act, by encouraging cultural pluralism, will restore the Indians' spirit and empower them to oversee their own affairs.

Essential Themes

After the IRA was passed, Collier worked to convince key reservations to approve the act. By the completion of the one-year voting period, 181 tribes had accepted the IRA and set up tribal councils, and seventy-seven tribes had rejected it, most notably the Navajo, who had

the largest reservation in the country. A few tribes, such as the Hopi, divided into factions over IRA reforms. Those Hopis who did go along with the IRA were led largely by progressive factions of the tribe, whereas many traditionalists opposed the IRA. This struggle between accepting a federally proposed government that gives a degree of sovereignty and holding to traditional tribal government forms continues in some tribes still.

In the end, the Indian Reorganization Act has had relatively positive effects, restoring lands that tribes had lost in 1920s, giving the tribes greater autonomy and authority, and ending assimilationist policies in place since the 1890s. In assessing the relative success or failure of the IRA, some have noted that the act failed to attain some of Collier's idealistic goals, which he set out in his commissioner's report. Perhaps this is understandable, considering the fact that some of the more controversial, sweeping aspects of Collier's reform platform were stricken from the proposed bill before it was passed by Congress.

But perhaps the most trenchant criticism is that it did not end the poverty many tribes experienced as a part of reservation life. The IRA's goals of economic development and the restoration of tribal self-determination were not met by the IRA itself. Economic development proceeded at a pace that was glacial at best, as Congress allocated little money to the effort. Collier's goal of self-determination for the tribes was short circuited as soon as he left office, as a new group of "reformers" sought once again to force assimilation of Indians into American society, this time by the disastrous "termination" policy. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the advent of the Red Power movement, that Indian self-determination would become a priority for the federal government. But none of these reforms dealt with one of the basic problems pointed out in the Meriam Report: the failure of the federal government to honor the treaties it had signed with the tribes.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

- Collier, John. *From Every Zenith: A Memoir; and Some Essays on Life and Thought*. Denver: Sage, 1963. Print.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr., & Clifford M. Lytle. *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*. New York: Pantheon, 1984. Print.
- Hauptman, Lawrence M. "The Indian Reorganization Act." *The Aggressions of Civilization: Federal Indian*

Policy since the 1980s. Ed. Sandra L. Cadwalader & Vine Deloria, Jr. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1984. 131–48. Print.

Kelly, Lawrence C. *The Assault on Assimilation: John Collier and the Origins of Indian Policy Reform*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1983. Print.

Philp, Kenneth R. *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920–1954*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1977. Print.