

■ Address of the Lake Mohonk Conference on Indian Affairs

Date: September 1884

Authors: Friends of the Indian members and others

Genre: Address

Summary Overview

The Lake Mohonk Conferences of the Friends of the Indian were annual meetings at which government Indian policy was discussed. The meetings were held at the Lake Mohonk resort near New Paltz, New York. Many prominent politicians, government officials, and clergymen interested in Indian affairs attended these meetings. Friends of the Indian was an informal movement rather than an actual organization. Among their goals were education for American Indians, US citizenship for tribal peoples, and the allotment of reservation land in individual homesteads to Indian families. In this report from the 1884 conference, there is strong emphasis on education and the extension of US law over the reservations, including extending citizenship to American Indians. The conference also supported an allotment bill proposed by Senator Richard Coke that was similar to the General Allotment Act eventually passed in 1887.

Defining Moment

In early American history, the general population's attitudes toward the American Indians was often one of fear and distrust, sometimes mingled with a paternalistic view of the Indians as a backward people needing to be "civilized." While this attitude persisted into the late nineteenth century, after the Civil War a more sympathetic view arose—perhaps first manifested in Helen Hunt Jackson's 1881 book, *A Century of Dishonor*, which chronicled the US government's mistreatment of the Indians. This changing sentiment can also be seen in the public backlash against violence toward the Indians involved in the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado in 1864 and in the Washita Massacre in Indian Territory in 1868. By the 1870s, the Friends of the Indian movement had developed, primarily among people in the urban areas of the Northeast. The Friends of the Indian was an amorphous movement made up of white reformers, politicians, government bureaucrats, journalists, and clergymen. There was a strong religious sentiment evi-

denced in the approach of the Friends, and for the most part they were fervent supporters of Christian missionary work among the Indians.

The Lake Mohonk Conferences, which were held annually from 1883 to 1916, were representative of the attitudes and approaches of the broader Friends of the Indian movement. The Lake Mohonk resort was owned by Quaker philanthropist Albert K. Smiley. In 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes had appointed Smiley to the Board of Indian Commissioners, a group of reformers that advised the government on Indian policy. Smiley began the Lake Mohonk Conferences in part because he believed the brief, infrequent meetings of the Board of Indian Commissioners offered little chance to deeply explore the issues that arose. Virtually everyone who was prominent in the movement for the reform of Indian policy was a regular participant at the Lake Mohonk Conferences. At the 1884 conference, retired general Clinton B. Fisk served as chairman of the meeting. He had been an abolitionist before the Civil War and was involved with the Freedmen's Bureau, working among the freed slaves in the South after the war. The conference's secretary in 1884 was Herbert Welsh, who was one of the founders of the Indian Rights Association.

While these reformers had a genuine interest in the welfare of the Indians, they held an approach to reform that was ethnocentric and dismissive of Indian culture. In the minds of these reformers, education and civilization should aim at "freeing" the Indian from his tribal background. Citizenship and individual land holding were also seen as important steps that would breakdown the tribal bonds and fit the Indian for assimilation into the general society.

Author Biography

The collective authors of the address are not named in the document, although it was signed by Fisk and Welsh. The address was a general statement of the interests

and concerns of those who were a regular part of the Lake Mohonk Conferences. Those who were considered members of the Conference are listed toward the end of the document (not shown here); the list includes most of the men and women in the nation who were prominently involved in Indian policy reform at that time. These people were part of a broader informal movement known as the Friends of the Indian. The Friends of the

Indian was not an organization one could join, although it included people who belonged to organizations, such as the Indian Rights Association. Many of the individuals who were part of the Board of Indian Commissioners, an unofficial advisory body formed by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869, were also part of the Friends of the Indian movement.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

...6th. *Resolved*, That from testimony laid before the Conference, our confidence in the good results flowing from the education of Indians has been confirmed, and that we regard with great satisfaction the increasing appropriations made by Congress for Indian schools, for instruction in farming and trades, for supplies of cattle, for irrigation, and for other means to promote self-supporting industries. That our conviction has been strengthened as to the importance of taking Indian youth from the reservations to be trained in industrial schools placed among communities of white citizens, and we favor the use of a larger proportion of the funds appropriated for Indian education for the maintenance of such schools. The placing of the pupils of these schools in the families of farmers or artisans where they may learn the trades and home habits of their employers has proved very useful and should be encouraged by the Government.

Resolved, That from evidence brought before the Conference it is apparent that the plan carried out to a small extent at Hampton and elsewhere, of bringing young men and their wives to industrial schools and there furnishing them with small houses so that they may be instructed in work and a proper home life, has been successful and should be carried out more largely.

Resolved, That while we approve the methods of Indian education pursued at Hampton and Carlisle, we do not fail to recognize that the schools and other methods of instruction, industrial, intellectual, moral, and religious, as carried on within or near the reservations by Christian missionaries for the last fifty years, have lifted up tribe after tribe to civilization and fitted them to take lands in severalty, and the good already achieved should stimulate and encourage Christian people to continued efforts in the same direction.

7th. *Resolved*, That education is essential to civilization. The Indian must have a knowledge of the English language, that he may associate with his white neighbors and transact business as they do. He must have practical industrial training to fit him to compete with others in the struggle for life. He must have a Christian education to enable him to perform duties of the family, the State, and the Church. Such an education can be best acquired apart from his reservation and amid the influences of Christian and civilized society. Such Government industrial training schools as those at Carlisle, Hampton, Forest Grove, Lawrence, Chilocco, and Genoa should be sustained and their number increased. The Government should continue to avail itself of institutions such as the training schools at Albuquerque, New Mexico; Lincoln Institute, Pennsylvania, and others conducted by religious or philanthropic associations, and promote the placing of pupils educated in all these schools in the families of farmers and artisans. But since the great majority of the Indians cannot be educated away from their homes, it is a matter of the highest importance that the Government should provide and liberally sustain good manual labor and day schools on the reservations. These should be established in sufficient number to accommodate all Indian children of school age. The Christian people of the country should exert through the Indian schools a strong moral and religious influence. This the Government cannot do, but without this the true civilization of the Indian is impossible.

HOW TO SECURE THESE THINGS.

- (a) Public sentiment.
- (b) Legislation.

8th. *Resolved*, That since legislation in Congress and the benevolent work of the Christian people on behalf

of the Indian is dependent upon public sentiment, every effort should be made to further the development of such sentiment. To this end we commend to the sympathy and support of the public the Indian Rights Association and the Woman's National Indian Association. We urge the organization of branches of these Societies in the principal cities and towns of the country. We think it extremely desirable that the press be enlisted in bringing the Indian cause to public attention, and we also rejoice in the efforts of the many benevolent societies belonging to the various religious bodies to diffuse information concerning the Indians and to arouse public interest in their behalf. . . .

10th. *Resolved*, That careful observation has conclusively proved that the removal of Indians from reservations which they have long occupied, to other reservations far distant from the former and possessing different soil and climate, is attended by great suffering and loss of life. Such removals destroy the fruits of past industry and discourage the Indians from further effort in the habits of civilized life. These removals are usually made, not for wise reasons, but are instigated by the covetousness of the whites, who desire possession of the Indian lands or wish to rid themselves of the Indians' presence. We, therefore, earnestly protest against such Indian removals in the future, excepting in those cases where they shall be justified by full and sufficient reasons, and shall not be detrimental to the welfare of the Indians. When the removal of an Indian tribe becomes a necessity, individual Indians belonging to the tribe who have formed settled homes should have the privilege of taking homesteads upon the lands they occupy prior to the opening of the reservation and before white men are permitted to make land-entries thereon. . . .

14th. *Resolved*, That immediate efforts should be made to place the Indian in the same position before the law as that held by the rest of the population, but that if it is not advisable, under existing circumstances, to subject the Indian at once to our entire body of law, the friends of the Indian should promptly endeavor: First, to provide for him some method of admission to citizenship so soon as he has prepared himself for its privileges and responsibilities; second, to give him at once the right to sue in our courts; and, third, to provide some system for the administration of certain laws on the reservations. We believe

that the laws relating to marriage and inheritance and the criminal law affecting person and property should be extended over the reservations immediately.

As may be seen from the above resolutions, the Conference unites in urging that plain and sensible policy the main points of which have been so long and patiently recommended to Congress by men of practical experience in Indian affairs. As these resolutions show, the Conference recognized that to permanently keep Indians as tribes, under the control of agents on reservations set apart for them, is both impossible and undesirable.

They recognized that the Indian must be forced out into the current of ordinary life; that to make him a citizen is the solution of the Indian problem.

Yet the resolutions express with equal strength the conviction that Indians should not be at once made citizens in a mass. The preparation for citizenship should be general, vigorous, and immediate. The Indian is to be prepared for citizenship by giving him his land in severalty in the manner provided for by the Coke Bill, by larger appropriations for Indian education and the careful use of such appropriations in the establishment and support of schools, industrial and otherwise, and by the education of the race in the broadest and largest sense of the word.

By adequate provision for the administration of law among the Indians, and by giving the Indian the right to sue.

By Christian teaching and the establishing and support of churches.

By the gradual reduction of rations given to Indians, the systematic instruction in farming, and the encouragement in self-support.

By the appointment and support of agents of ability and integrity, uninfluenced by political preference, the only standard being that of individual fitness.

By proper provision for the immediate admission to citizenship of such Indians as are fitted for its duties and responsibilities.

These are substantially the recommendations which the Conference respectfully urges upon Congress and the people of the United States, as the just, obvious, and practical answer to the Indian question.

Signed on behalf of the Conference.
 CLINTON B. FISK,
 President.

HERBERT WELSH,
 Secretary.

GLOSSARY

severalty: divided into separate, individually owned parcels—as opposed to being owned collectively by a tribe

Document Analysis

In these resolutions from the 1884 Lake Mohonk Conference, there is a strong emphasis on education for American Indians. The resolutions especially praise the industrial school model in which students were sent to off-reservation boarding schools where they received a rudimentary academic education and training either in agriculture or in some vocational trade. The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia, is mentioned specifically, as is the United States Indian Training School (also known as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School) at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Hampton Institute was originally founded by the American Missionary Association for the education of the freedmen after the Civil War, but beginning in 1878, Indian students were also taught there. The Carlisle School, founded by Captain Richard H. Pratt, was considered the pre-eminent government Indian school, and Pratt was widely considered the foremost expert on Indian education at that time. Both Pratt and General S. C. Armstrong, the founder of the Hampton Institute, attended the 1884 Lake Mohonk Conference. The address praises the work that had been carried on “within or near the reservations by Christian missionaries for the last fifty years.” The reformers tended to see both missionary work and education as necessary for the civilization of American Indians, and both would contribute to breaking down tribal customs and attachments and, ultimately, to assimilation of Indians into the general society.

The tenth resolution of the 1884 conference urges an end to the relocation of Indians from one reservation to another. As the government confronted the last military resistance by tribes in the American West in the late nineteenth century, these newly pacified tribes were sometimes settled on reservations carved out from existing reservations. Thus, some of the people already living on these reservations would be moved, causing disrup-

tion to their attempts to maintain a farm or homestead. In other cases, parts of reservations were being opened to settlement by whites, also disrupting their lives. The resolution notes that such removals were often made “not for wise reasons” and urges ending this practice.

The fourteenth resolution from this conference calls for placing Indians under the jurisdiction of state and territorial laws, and eventually making them US citizens. The reformers recognized that this would be best accomplished gradually, but they do urge that Indians be granted US citizenship as soon as they could be prepared for it. In connection with this, they favorably note a bill recently introduced by Texas senator Coke, which called for giving each Indian individual or family their own homestead, thus breaking up the communal landholding practices of the reservations. This policy became known as allotment in severalty. Coke’s bill provided that when an Indian accepted an allotment, the laws of the state or territory in which he or she lived would apply, rather than federal Indian law or tribal law. Coke’s bill was never passed, but in 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, which began allotment and granted US citizenship to those Indians who accepted an allotment. Over time, the three concepts of education, allotment in severalty, and Indian citizenship became hallmarks of the reforms advocated by the Lake Mohonk Conferences.

Essential Themes

The paternalism and ethnocentrism of the reformers are major themes evident in this address. These reformers were genuinely concerned with the needs of American Indians, but because they were convinced of the superiority of white American culture and American social, religious, and political institutions, they never believed it was necessary to ask what the Indian people themselves might want.

In the late nineteenth century, many Indian parents did want education for their children. However, when they came to realize that government schools were intent on destroying tribal cultures, education became a controversial issue. Eventually, beginning with the Indian New Deal in the 1930s, the government began to move away from a policy that virtually forced assimilation, and eventually many Indian students attended public schools or tribally run schools on reservations.

Initially, many American Indian peoples had little interest in U.S. citizenship. American law had originally considered the Indian tribes as sovereign foreign nations, and many Indian people would have preferred to maintain that standing. But federal legislation and court decisions eroded the concept of tribal sovereignty, and Indian people increasingly lived under the jurisdiction of state and federal law. Citizenship, however, gave American Indian peoples constitutionally protected rights and access to federal courts to see that these rights were respected.

Unlike education and citizenship, however, allotment in severalty was a clear example of good intentions gone awry. Many American Indian tribes and individuals opposed allotment, and it was never carried out on some

reservations. But in general, where it was applied, it eventually left a large number of Indian people landless. Some reservations disappeared completely because of allotment, and others were “honeycombed” with non-Indian settlement when Indian landowners sold their lands to white settlers.

In general, while the Friends of the Indian and the members of the Lake Mohonk Conferences had good intentions, their reform agenda exhibited the kinds of problems one might expect from externally derived reform, with little consideration for the self-determination of the people involved.

—Mark S. Joy, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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