New Lives and Circumstances

The first half of the twentieth century is marked by major demographic, social, and cultural developments in American Indian life, as people sought to find a place for themselves in a continuously changing United States. The era presents two different tracks or strategies pursued by individuals. Some sought to accommodate themselves to American society or even completely assimilate, while others preferred to stay close to their tribal roots and identity, living within American society but not functioning as an essential part of it.

The Dawes Severalty Act (or General Allotment Act), although passed by Congress in 1887, was amended in 1891, 1906, and 1910. It authorized the parceling of tribal lands to individual members in tracts of 40, 80, or 160 acres (hence the term "allotments"). Despite the good intentions behind the law, it worked out badly in practice. Basically, it allowed whites to take over more Indian land. Tribal landholdings in 1887 stood at about 138 million acres. By 1934 they were only 48 million. The law was terminated at that time.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 not only ended the allotment system but authorized funds to purchase new lands for tribes, established federal loans for Indian business ventures and educational pursuits, and recognized Native people's right to self-determination. By then, all Indians were formally full citizens of the United States (by an act of 1924), but it was not until 1948 that the right to vote in local, state, and national elections was guaranteed to all Indians.

At the start of the twentieth century, the federal government was expending some $2.5 million annually on educational development, primarily through "English-only" Indian boarding and day schools. The atmosphere in these schools was bad, involving harsh punishments for minor infractions and a supercilious attitude on the part of most teachers. By 1950 the schools had begun to fade from the scene.

World War II benefited Indians seeking assimilation or at least improved relations with whites. About 25,000 Native Americans served in the armed forces, and many more were brought into industry as the demand for war labor increased. Members of the Navajo nation were used in secret communications missions, employing their native language to send and receive messages that were untranslatable by the enemy.

Still, during the Civil Rights era in the United States many Native groups spoke out against conditions on the reservations and discrimination against Indians generally. Among a number of such groups, the American Indian Movement (AIM) stood out for its comparatively radical stance. Although not a direct result of activism, two U.S. policy advances arrived in the mid- to late-1970s in the form of the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act (1975) and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978).