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THE "INDIAN QUESTION"

From Reservation to Reorganization

Wounded Knee: The Significance of the Frontier in Indian History

IN 1890, three years before Frederick Jackson Turner presented his seminal paper on the end of the frontier, a voice came from the shores of Pyramid Lake in Nevada. Claiming he was the messiah, Wovoka of the Paiutes called for Indians everywhere to dance the Ghost Dance, for Christ had returned to earth as an Indian. As they danced, Wovoka's followers wore muslin "ghost shirts," decorated with sacred symbols of blue and yellow lines. They believed that the garments would protect them against bullets. Wovoka's message promised the restoration of Indian ways as well as their land and the buffalo:

> All Indians must dance, everywhere, keep on dancing. Pretty soon in next spring Big Man [Great Spirit] come. He bring back all game of every kind. The game be thick everywhere. All dead Indians come back and live again. . . . When Old Man [God] comes this way, then all the Indians go to mountains, high up away from whites. Whites can't hurt Indians then. Then while Indians way up high, big flood comes like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that water go away and then nobody but Indians everywhere and game all kinds thick.[1]

Wovoka's vision of a world without whites spread like prairie fire through Indian country. On Sioux reservations, Ghost Dancing became the rage, seizing Indian imaginations and mobilizing their frustrations. "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy," a nervous agent at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota reported in a telegram to Washington. "We need protection and we need it now. The leaders should be arrested and confined at some military post until the matter is quieted, and this should be done at once."[2]

The Indian Bureau in Washington quickly identified the Ghost Dance "fomenters of disturbances" and ordered the army to arrest them, including chiefs Sitting Bull and Big Foot. Sent to Pine Ridge to help resolve the crisis, former Indian agent Dr. Valentine McGillycuddy advised Washington to pull back the soldiers: "I should let the dance continue. The coming of the troops has frightened the Indians. If the Seventh-Day Adventists prepare their ascension robes for the second coming of the Savior, the United States Army is not put in motion to prevent them. Why should not the Indians have the same privilege? If the troops remain, trouble is sure to come."[3]

But Washington pursued the Ghost Dance leaders. Indian policemen were sent to Sitting Bull's cabin; after arresting him, they were confronted by angry and armed Sioux. During an exchange of gunfire, the police shot and killed the chief. The news of Sitting Bull's murder alarmed Big Foot, chief of another group of Sioux. While trying to escape, Big Foot and his people, mostly women and children, were intercepted by the cavalry. They surrendered and were escorted to a camp near a frozen creek called Wounded Knee.

As the Indians set up their tepees for the night, they saw two manned Hotchkiss guns on the ridge above them. "That evening I noticed that they were erecting cannons up [there]," Wasu Maza recalled, "also hauling up quite a lot of ammunition." The guns were trained on the Indian camps, and the scene seemed terribly ominous. In the morning, under a clear blue sky, the Indians heard a bugle call. Surrounded by mounted soldiers, they were told that all of their men should assemble at the center of camp. Suffering from pneumonia, Big Foot was carried to the meeting.[4]

The captives were ordered to turn over their weapons. "They called for guns and arms," White Lance recounted, "so all of us gave the guns and they were stacked up in the center." But the soldiers thought there were more arms hidden in the tepees and began a search. The situation became tense, volatile, and the Indians sensed the danger. Medicine man

Yellow Bird began dancing the Ghost Dance to reassure the worried Indians. He urged them to wear their sacred shirts: "The bullets will not hurt you." Suddenly, a shot rang out. Instantly, the troops began shooting indiscriminately at the Indians. "There were only about a hundred warriors and there were nearly five hundred soldiers," Black Elk reported. "The warriors rushed to where they had piled their guns and knives."[5]

The Indians tried to defend themselves, but then they heard an "awful roar," the death sounds of the Hotchkiss guns. Shells hailed down upon them, at the rate of fifty per minute, each missile carrying a two-pound charge that exploded into thousands of shrapnel. The smoke was so dense it was like fog, blinding the Indians. "My father ran and fell down and the blood came out of his mouth [he was shot through the head]," recalled Yellow Bird's son, who was four years old at the time. Blue Whirlwind received fourteen wounds, while her two children running at her sides were also shot. "We tried to run, but they shot us like we were buffalo," said Louise Weasel Bear. "I know there are some good white people, but the soldiers must be mean to shoot children and women."[6]

Fleeing the camp, the Indians were pursued by the soldiers. "I saw some of the other Indians running up the coulee so I ran with them, but the soldiers kept shooting at us and the bullets flew all around us," reported Mrs. Rough Feathers. "My father, my grandmother, my older brother and my younger brother were all killed. My son who was two years old was shot in the mouth that later caused his death." Trails marked by blood and bodies radiated outward from the camp. "Dead and wounded women and children and little babies were scattered all along there where they had been trying to run away," Black Elk reported. "The soldiers had followed them along the gulch, as they ran, and murdered them in there." There were also some dead soldiers, Black Elk noted. In one of the gulches, "two little boys" had guns, and "they had been killing soldiers all by themselves."[7]

When the Hotchkiss guns stopped spewing their deadly charges, a terrible silence descended on the bloody scene. Hundreds of Indians lay dead or wounded on the icy ground, along with scores of soldiers, most of them hit by their own fire. Shortly afterward, clouds rolled across the sky and "a heavy snow began to fall," covering the corpses like a white blanket as if Nature were trying to shroud or cleanse the gore and blood. After the storm passed, the soldiers threw the dead Indians into a long trench, their frozen bodies "piled one upon another like so much

cordwood, until the pit was full." Many of the corpses were naked: the "ghost shirts" had been stripped from the dead as souvenirs. A photograph of Big Foot lying in the snow showed the contorted body of the chief, his hands still trying to shield himself and his face fixed in a grotesque grimace by the horror he had witnessed. For Indian America, Wounded Knee violently symbolized the end of the frontier.[8]

The Father of the Reservation System

As commissioner of Indian affairs during the 1870s, Francis Amasa Walker had tried to avoid the use of armed force against Indians. American soldiers, he recommended, should not surprise Indian "camps on winter nights" and shoot down "men, women, and children together in the snow." Instead, Walker believed the government should pursue a "Peace Policy" — buy off and feed the Indians in order to avoid violent conflict. Whites did not have to be concerned about maintaining their manhood in dealings with Indians, Walker explained. "There can be no question of national dignity involved in the treatment of savages by a civilized power. The proudest Anglo-Saxon will climb a tree with a bear behind him, and deem not his honor, but his safety, compromised by the situation. With wild men, as with wild beasts, the question whether to fight, coax, or run, is a question merely of what is easiest or safest in the situation given. Points of dignity only arise between those who are, or assume to be, equals."[9]

Though Walker was the commissioner of Indian affairs, he had very limited personal contact with Indians. He made only one visit of inquiry and inspection to the agencies of the Sioux in the Wyoming and Nebraska territories. During this tour, he had an unforgettable experience:

> The day and the hour of the feast came. We met in a great tepee; and I sat, as was proper, on the right of Swift Bear. The chiefs and braves, with the agent and the interpreter, sat around in a circle. Soon some young men entered, bearing the steaming food. . . . Under my eyes, under my nose, was set down one of those bowls, which contained a quarter of puppy, with leg lifting itself towards me in a very tempting way. I think I could have stood even that, had it not been for the little velvet mats, where the claws were, or should have been. The Indian cook had been too realistic in his desire to give the fullest possible effect to nature. I looked down and felt myself growing white.

Except for this one visit, Walker learned about Indians from government reports and novels such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans.*[10]

But Walker did not allow his superficial knowledge of Indians to inhibit him from making policy for them. Like Prospero, he identified himself as mind, capable of caring for these Calibans called Indians. What gave Commissioner Walker such confidence was his belief in technology and the market as the great forces of civilization. Like Jefferson, Walker saw progress unfolding in America. "The labor that is made free by discoveries and inventions," he observed, "is applied to overcome the difficulties which withstand the gratification of newly-felt desires. The hut is pulled down to make room for the cottage; the cottage gives way to the mansion, the mansion to the palace. The rude covering of skins is replaced by the comely garment of woven stuffs; and these, in the progress of luxury, by the most splendid fabrics of human skill. In a thousand forms wealth is created by the whole energy of the community, quickened by a zeal greater than that which animated the exertions of their rude forefathers to obtain a scanty and squalid subsistence."[11]

This very progress was bringing an end to the frontier and the Indian way of life. The railroad — "the great plough of industrial civilization" — had drawn its "deep furrow" across America, Walker explained, and whites were now migrating west, "creeping along the course of every stream, seeking out every habitable valley, following up every indication of gold among the ravines and mountains . . . and even making lodgment at a hundred points on lands secured by treaty to the Indians." Indians faced a grim future in this rapidly changing world. Thus the "friends of humanity should exert themselves in this juncture, and lose not time" in order to save the Indians. For Walker, the "Indian Question" had become urgent: what should be done to ensure the survival of the Plains Indians?[12]

As the commissioner of Indian affairs, Walker believed in social engineering: government should scientifically manage the affairs and welfare of Indians. Since industrial "progress" had cut them off from their traditional means of livelihood, Indians should be given temporary support to help them make the necessary adjustment for entering civilization. To accomplish this transition, Walker decided, Indians should be located on reservations. During the colonial period, native peoples had been placed on specially designated reserved lands; in the 1850s, the federal government began establishing reservations for Plains Indians.

Now Commissioner Walker was actively promoting the relocation of tribes on reservations. A theoretician, he created a rationale for the reservation system. According to his plan, warlike tribes would be corraled onto reservations, and all Indian bands outside their boundaries would be "liable to be struck by the military at any time, without warning." Such areas would be, in effect, free fire zones. Indian tribes would be consolidated into one or two "grand reservations" with railroads cutting through them here and there, leaving the rest of the territory open for white settlement, free from Indian "obstruction or molestation."[13]

The ultimate goal, Walker explained, was the eventual assimilation of Indians. On the reservations, the government would subject them to "a rigid reformatory discipline." Not allowed to "escape work," they would be "required" to acquire industrial skills until at least one generation had been placed on a course of "self-improvement." This program was necessary because Indians were "unused to manual labor." Accustomed to "the habits of the chase," they lacked "forethought," "intellectual tastes," and self-discipline. They were unable to control their "strong animal appetites." Unless the government planned their education, Walker predicted, the "now roving Indians" would become "vagabonds" and "festering sores" upon civilization.[14]

Relocated within the borders of the reservations, Indians would not be permitted to leave, except by permission. "We mean by this," Walker stated, "something more than that a 'pass system' should be created for every tribe under the control of the government, to prevent individual Indians from straying away for an occasional debauch at the settlements." Authorities would have the power to confine Indians on the reservations and to "arrest" and return those who wandered away. Seclusion was necessary, Walker explained, because Indians were disposed toward the "lower and baser elements of civilization," and whenever they became "restive under compulsion to labor," they were inclined to break away and resume their "old roving spirit." Trained and reformed on the reservations, Indians were to be prepared to enter civilized society.[15]

What he hoped his reservation system would do, Walker insisted, was to help the Indians over the rough places on "the white man's road." He believed he knew, from his own experience, what was required. He once told a friend that Indians were like "children" who disliked school and preferred to "play truant at pleasure." Then he added: "I used to have to be whipped myself to get me to school and keep me there, yet

I always liked to study when once within the school-room walls." Grateful for the "whipping" he had received as a child and the self-discipline he had developed, Walker was certain "wild Indians" would become "industrious" and "frugal" through "a severe course of industrial instruction and exercise under restraint." Indian life must be regulated by the federal government. Indians should not be left alone, "letting such as will, go to the dogs, letting such as can, find a place for themselves in the social and industrial order." In Walker's view, Indians could not remain Indians. There was no longer a West, no longer the boundlessness of "vacant lands" on the other side of the frontier. Indians everywhere would eventually have to settle down to farming and urban labor.[16]

Allotment and Assimilation

Other white reformers had a different solution to the "Indian Question," however. Regarding themselves as "friends" of the Indians, they believed that the reservations only served to segregate native peoples from white society and postpone their assimilation. Their viewpoint became policy in 1887 when Congress passed the Dawes Act. Hailed by the reformers as the "Indian Emancipation Act," the law reversed Walker's strategy, seeking instead to break up the reservations and accelerate the transformation of Indians into property owners and U.S. citizens. Under the Dawes Act, the president was granted the power, at his discretion and without the Indians' consent, to allot reservation lands to individual heads of families in the amount of 160 acres. These lands would be ineligible for sale, or "inalienable," for twenty-five years. This would protect the Indians from land-grabbers and also give them time to become farmers. The federal government was authorized to sell "surplus" reservation land — land that remained after allotment — to white settlers in 160-acre tracts. Such transactions required tribal consent, and money derived from the sales would be held in trust for the Indians to be used for their "education and civilization." Citizenship would be conferred upon the allotees and any other Indians who agreed to abandon their tribal affiliation and adopt the "habits of civilized life."[17]

During the debate over the bill, a senator from Texas declared his opposition to Indian citizenship: "Look at your Chinamen, are they not specifically excepted from the naturalization laws?" But Indians, unlike the Chinese, were generally seen as capable of assimilation. "The new law," observed historian Frederick Hoxie, "was made possible by the belief that Indians did not have the 'deficiencies' of other groups: they

were fewer in number, the beneficiaries of a public sympathy and pity, and capable of advancement."[18]

To advance and civilize the Indians, the white reformers argued, the tribal system had to be destroyed, for it was perpetuating "habits of nomadic barbarism" and "savagery." As long as Indians lived in tribes, they would continue to live in idleness, frivolity, and debauchery. The key to civilizing Indians was to convert them into individual landowners. As long as Indians owned their lands in common, Senator Henry Dawes contended, they would lack "selfishness," which was "at the bottom of civilization." Unless Indians divided the land among themselves as individuals, they would not make much progress. In her eloquent protest against "a century of dishonor," liberal reformer Helen Hunt Jackson urged the government to parcel out tribal lands: "Instead of a liberal and far-sighted policy looking to the education and civilization and possible citizenship of the Indian tribes, we have suffered these people to remain as savages. . . ." They should be "entirely changed," made to "feel both the incentives and the restraints" of private landownership.[19]

Repeatedly, these "friends" of the Indians declared that allotment was designed to make them more independent and self-reliant. With the breakup of the reservations and the sale of "surplus" lands to whites, they would learn the "habits of thrift and industry" from their white neighbors. "The aggressive and enterprising Anglo-Saxons" would set up their farms "side by side" with Indian farms, and "in a little while contact alone" would lead Indians to emulate the work ethic of their white neighbors. "With white settlers on every alternative section of Indian lands," allotment supporters predicted, "there will be a schoolhouse built, with Indian children and white children together; there will be churches at which there will be an attendance of Indian and white people alike. They will readily learn the tongue of the white race. They will for a while speak their own language, but they will readily learn the ways of civilization."[20]

This conversion of Indians into individual landowners was ceremonialized at "last-arrow" pageants. On these occasions, the Indians were ordered by the government to attend a large assembly on the reservation. Dressed in traditional costume and carrying a bow and arrow, each Indian was individually summoned from a tepee and told to shoot an arrow. He then retreated to the tepee and reemerged wearing "civilized" clothing, symbolizing a crossing from the primitive to the modern world. Standing before a plow, the Indian was told: "Take the handle of this plow, this act means that you have chosen to live the life of the white

man — and the white man lives by work." At the close of the ceremony, each allottee was given an American flag and a purse with the instruction: "This purse will always say to you that the money you gain from your labor must be wisely kept."[21]

While giving Indians what they already owned, their land, the Dawes Act also took lands away from them. White farmers and business interests were well aware of the economic advantages that the allotment program offered. In 1880, secretary of the interior Carl Schurz predicted that allotment would "eventually open to settlement by white men the large tracts of land now belonging to the reservations, but not used by the Indians." Shortly after Congress passed the bill, Senator Dawes recounted an experience he had had while traveling by train on a recently completed railroad track across five hundred miles of Indian territory. The potential of the terrain impressed Dawes. "The land I passed through was as fine a wheat-growing country as it could be. The railroad has gone through there, and it was black with emigrants ready to take advantage of it." In his recommendation for allotment on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, a government official pointed out that the present Chippewa lands were "valuable for the pine timber growing thereon, for which, if the Indian title should be extinguished, a ready sale could be found."[22]

Legislation which granted railroad corporations right-of-way through Indian lands coincided with the enactment of the Dawes law: in 1886–87, Congress made six land grants to railroad interests. "The past year," the Indian affairs commissioner observed that September, "has been one of unusual activity in the projection and building of numerous additional railroads through Indian lands." During the next two sessions, Congress enacted twenty-three laws granting railroad rights-of-way through Indian territories.[23]

Four years after the passage of the Dawes Act, Indian affairs commissioner Thomas Morgan calculated that Indian land reductions for the year 1891 alone totaled 17,400,000 acres, or one-seventh of all Indian lands. "This might seem like a somewhat rapid reduction of the land estate of the Indians," he noted. But the Indians were not "using" most of the relinquished land "for any purpose whatever" and had "scarcely any of it . . . in cultivation," and therefore they "did not need it." Moreover, they had been "reasonably well paid" for the land. "The sooner the tribal relations are broken up and the reservation system done away with," Morgan added, "the better it will be for all concerned. If there were no other reason for this change, the fact that individual

ownership of property is the universal custom among civilized people of this country would be a sufficient reason for urging the handful of Indians to adopt it."[24]

In 1902, Congress accelerated the transfer of lands from Indians to whites: a new law required that all allotted lands, upon the death of the owners, be sold at public auctions by the heirs. Unless they were able to purchase their own family lands, Indians would lose what had been their property. "Under the present system," a government official informed President Theodore Roosevelt, "every Indian's land comes into the market at his death, so that it will be but a few years at most before all the Indians' land will have passed into the possession of the settlers." Four years later, Congress passed the Burke Act, which nullified the twenty-five-year trust provision in the Dawes Act and granted the secretary of the interior the power to issue fee-simple title to any allottee "competent and capable of managing his or her affairs." Thus, Indian allotments were no longer protected from white land purchasers.[25]

Native Americans resisted these efforts to usurp their lands. Chief Lone Wolf of the Kiowas, for example, insisted in court that the 1868 Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek had provided for tribal approval of all land cessions. But in 1903, the Supreme Court decided that the federal government had the power to abrogate the provisions of an Indian treaty. An official of the Indian affairs bureau welcomed the *Lone Wolf* decision, for it allowed the government to dispose of Indian land without the consent of the Indians. If their consent were required, he asserted, it would take fifty years to eliminate the reservations. Now the government had the power to allot reservation lands and sell "the balance" of reservation lands in order to make "homes for white farmers."[26]

What would be the future for the Indians if they no longer had their lands? "When the last acre and last dollar are gone," Indian affairs commissioner Francis Leupp answered, "the Indians will be where the Negro freedmen started thirty-five years ago." Therefore, it was the government's duty to transform Indians into wage-earners. In order to train Indians to become agricultural workers, Leupp arranged for the leasing of tribal lands to sugar beet companies willing to employ Indians. As a field laborer, the commissioner explained, the Indian would acquire valuable work habits. "In this process the sensible course is to tempt him to the pursuit of a gainful occupation by choosing for him at the outset the sort of work which he finds the pleasantest; and the Indian takes to beet farming as naturally as the Italian takes to art or the German to science. . . . Even the little papoose can be taught to weed the rows

just as the pickaninny in the South can be used as a cotton picker."[27]

But allotment led neither to self-sufficient Indian farmers nor to wage-earners. Most reservations were located in the Plains region where land could be effectively used only for ranching or large-scale farming. One-hundred-and-sixty-acre plots were hardly realistic. What happened to the Cheyennes and Arapahoes illustrated a general pattern of dispossession and pauperization. The reservation lands of both tribes had been allotted in 1891, and the "surplus" lands sold to whites. Sixteen years later, the combined income of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes totaled $217,312. About two-thirds of this revenue came from the sale of inherited lands and the remainder from leasing allotments; only $5,312 came from farming. Per capita tribal income for that year was only seventy-eight dollars.[28]

Forty years after the Dawes Act, the Brookings Institute reported that 55 percent of all Indians had a per capita annual income of less than two hundred dollars, and that only 2 percent had incomes of more than five hundred dollars per year. In 1933, the federal government found that almost half of the Indians living on reservations that had been subject to allotment were landless. By then, the Indians had lost about 60 percent of the 138,000,000-acre land base they had owned at the time of the Dawes Act. Allotment had been transforming Indians into a landless people.[29]

The Indian New Deal: The Remaking of Native America

But the allotment program was suddenly halted in 1934 by the Indian Reorganization Act, a policy devised by John Collier. As the Indian affairs commissioner appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he offered Indians a "New Deal."

A critic of individualism, Collier admired the sense of community he found among the Indians of New Mexico. "Only the Indians," he observed, ". . . were still the possessors and users of the fundamental secret of human life — the secret of building great personality through the instrumentality of social institutions." This valuable knowledge should be preserved. Defining "the individual and his society as wholly reciprocal," the Indian way of life had much to teach whites and should be appreciated "as a gift for us all." Allow Indians to remain Indians, Collier insisted. "*Assimilation*, not into our culture but into modern life, and *preservation and intensification of heritage* are not hostile choices, excluding one another, but are interdependent through and through." Collier's philosophy called for cultural pluralism: "Modernity and white Americanism are not identical. If the Indian life is a good life, then we should be proud and glad to have this different and native culture going on by the side of ours. . . . America is coming to understand this, and to know that in helping the Indian to save himself, we are helping to save something that is precious to us as well as to him."[30]

In Collier's view, allotment was destroying the Indian communal way of life. By breaking the tribal domain into individual holdings, allotment had been "much more than just a huge white land grab; it was a blow, meant to be fatal, at Indian tribal existence." The goal of government policy, Collier contended, should not be the absorption of Indians into the white population, but the maintenance of Indian cultures on their communally owned lands. Thus, as the architect of the Indian reorganization bill, Collier proposed the abolition of allotment and the establishment of Indian self-government as well as the preservation of "Indian civilization," including their arts, crafts, and traditions.[31]

After reading a draft of the bill, President Franklin D. Roosevelt noted on the margin: "Great stuff." On June 18, 1934, he signed the Indian Reorganization Act. While the final version of the law did not include a provision for the preservation of Indian culture, it abolished the allotment program and authorized funding for tribal land acquisition, reversing policy dating back not only to 1887 but to 1607. Indians on reservations would be allowed to establish local self-governments. Reorganization, however, would apply only to those tribes in which a majority of members had voted to accept it. "This was . . . a further means of throwing back upon the tribes the control over their own destinies — of placing Indian salvation firmly in Indian hands," Collier explained. "The role of government was to help, but not coerce, the tribal efforts." The following year, 172 tribes representing 132,426 people voted in favor of the law, while 73 tribes with a combined population of 63,467 chose to be excluded.[32]

One of the tribes that turned down the Indian Reorganization Act was the Navajos. The Navajos' negative vote reflected their opposition to Collier and the Indian New Deal. To them, Collier belonged to a tradition reaching back to Jefferson and Walker: though he was articulating a philosophy of Indian autonomy, Collier seemed to be telling the Navajos what was good for them.[33]

Navajos remembered how whites had been telling them what to do for a long time. Since the seventeenth century, when they acquired sheep from the Spanish, Navajos had been herders. After the war against

Mexico and the American annexation of the Southwest, they encountered white intruders. In 1863, they surrendered to Kit Carson after his troops destroyed their orchards and sheep herds. According to a Navajo account, "those who escaped were driven to the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert, where they hid in the rocks like wild animals, but all except a few were rounded up and caught and taken away to Hwalte [Bosque Redondo]." The captives were instructed to migrate from their homeland to an area in southern New Mexico where they would be allowed to live in peace. Navajos have remembered this march as the "Long Walk."[34]

"A majority of the Navajos," according to a member of the tribe, "didn't know the reason why they were being rounded up and different stories went around among the people." Many feared that they "would be put to death eventually." When they arrived at Bosque Redondo, they were told by the government to irrigate the land and become farmers. The general in charge of removal explained that the Navajos had to be taken away from "the haunts and hills and hiding places of their country" in order to teach them "the art of peace" and "the truths of Christianity." On their new lands, they would acquire "new habits, new ideas, new modes of life" as they ceased to be "nomads" and became "an agricultural people." The experiment failed; in 1868, the government changed its policy and informed the Navajos that they were to be resettled on a reservation in their original homeland and issued sheep to replace the stock Kit Carson's forces had destroyed.[35]

Now in the 1930s, their instructions were coming, not from a conquering Kit Carson, but from a liberal government administrator. Although Collier was proposing to give Indians self-rule, he was also trying to socially engineer the Indian world — what he called an "ethnic laboratory." Collier's policy reflected the broad philosophy of the New Deal with its faith in government planning and participation in economic development. "To this extent," observed historian Graham D. Taylor, "it resembled earlier Indian policies in that it proposed to manipulate Indian behavior in ways which their white 'guardians' thought best for them."[36]

In 1933, Collier decided that it was best for the Navajos to reduce their stock. Government studies had determined that the Navajo reservation had half a million more livestock than their range could support, and that this excess had produced overgrazing and severe soil erosion. Unless the problem of erosion were controlled soon, Collier feared, the sheep-raising Navajos would experience great hardship and suffering.

The government had to intervene for the sake of the tribe's survival. "The future of the Navajo is in our hands," stated an official. "His very economy is dependent upon our successful solution of his land problems. . . . We believe that we have found that solution." Using a revealing metaphor to describe the relationship between the government and the Navajos, he explained: "When formerly the parents placated the children with a stick of candy when it cried, now the parents are attempting to find the cause of the tears and to take such corrective measures as are necessary. . . . The youngster will not always understand a dose of castor oil may sometimes be more efficacious than a stick of candy."[37]

While Collier was concerned about Navajo survival, he was also worried about white interests. He had received reports that silt from erosion on Navajo land was filling the Colorado River and threatening to clog Boulder Dam. Under construction during the early 1930s, the dam was designed to supply water to California's Imperial Valley and electricity to Los Angeles. The United States Geological Survey had studied the silt problem and located its origin on the Navajo reservation: "Briefly, in the main Colorado system, the Little Colorado and the San Juan are major silt problems, while within each of these basins the Navajo Reservation's tributaries are the major silt problem. The fact is the . . . Navajo Reservation is practically 'Public Enemy No. 1' in causing the Colorado Silt problem." Unless Navajo sheep overgrazing, and hence erosion, were controlled, the silt would block economic development in the Southwest. Collier told the Navajo council:

> Down there on the Colorado River is the biggest, most expensive dam in the world, the Boulder Dam now being built which will furnish all Southern California with water and with electric power, and the Boulder Dam will be filled up with your fine agricultural soil in no great number of years if we do not stop erosion on the Navajo reservation. This reservation, along with the other Indian reservations on the Colorado River, is supplying much more than half of all the silt that goes down the Colorado River, which will in the course of a comparatively few years render the Boulder Dam useless and thereby injure the population of all Southern California and a good deal of Arizona too.[38]

Driven by concerns for Navajo survival and the need to protect Boulder Dam, Collier initiated a stock reduction program on the Navajo reservation. The federal government would purchase 400,000 sheep and

goats, and wages from employment on federal projects would compensate for any loss of income resulting from this stock reduction. Collier flew to the Navajo reservation seventeen times over the next five years to explain and promote the program. But the Navajos were not receptive. "The Council members, and hundreds, even thousands, of Navajos listened and answered back," Collier recalled. "In my long life of social effort and struggle, I have not experienced among any other Indian group, or any group whatsoever, an anxiety-ridden and anguished hostility even approaching that which the Navajos were undergoing."[39]

Determined to have his way, Collier brought in a federal government expert to explain to the Navajos how less was actually more, or how herd reduction would actually mean increased livelihood. Using a chart to present his ideas, A. C. Cooley showed a blue line for the number of stock, a yellow line for wages from federal projects, and a red line for income derived from stock. He then argued that as the blue and yellow lines fell over the next few years, the red line would rise with improved grazing conditions, livestock breeding, and management. The Navajos in the audience were not impressed. One of them asked Cooley why all three lines could not rise together.[40]

Collier kept pushing his agenda for stock reduction and finally managed to secure the support of the Navajo tribal council. But the Navajos themselves, Collier found, "resisted with a bitterness sometimes sad, sometimes wild, but always angry." Indeed, many Navajos felt Collier had manipulated the council. "We elected the council, but they couldn't do anything," a Navajo complained, "and we think they are just put in to try to get us to listen to Collier."[41]

What worried the Navajos was the fact that they depended on sheep for their livelihood. For them, sheep and survival were the same. "Remember what I've told you," a Navajo father instructed his son, "you must not lose, kill or give away young ewes, young mares and cows, because . . . there's a million in one of those." He warned: "So with anyone who comes to you and tells you to let the herd go. You mustn't let the herd go, because as soon as you do there'll be nothing left of them. . . . The herd is money. It gives you clothing and different kinds of food. . . . Everything comes from the sheep."[42]

Raising sheep was a way of life for the Navajos. The animals were a part of their world. "When the sheep are grazing," said Haske Chamiso, "I always walked right in the middle of the sheep. I didn't turn the sheep back. I just go along with the sheep. When I get tired, I just lay down in the middle of the sheep and go to sleep and finally my sister would find me." Navajo boys grew up caring for the flocks. "The only thing I

did was herding sheep," recounted Yazi Begay. "When I was a little boy, I was herding sheep all of my life. I didn't like to herd sheep. I was really lazy. The way I think I don't see why I am herding sheep. Finally, I grew up to be a big tall boy, but at that time I was still herding sheep." Herding represented family and the teaching of values. "All I was doing was herding sheep all the time," explained Ted Chamiso. "I was raised right there at my home . . . with my mother and father all the time. . . . Then my father used to teach me once in a while. Told me never to steal anything. So I never steal horses, sheep, or goats that don't belong to me. So I never steal all my life since I know myself. I never do any of those bad things my father told me not to do. Not to laugh or make fun of people."[43]

Now the government was ordering the Navajos to reduce their stock. In a letter to Navajo minister Jacob C. Morgan, a group of Navajos denounced Collier and his administrative approach:

> He wanted to make us vote for the [Indian Reorganization] bill and govern ourselves, and when we refused . . . he got very angry at us. He started a lot of new things; and now, when we want to do something like handling our own affairs and advising him what we want, he said, "No; but you got to take my advice." If he thinks we can be our own boss, why does he tell us what to do.
>
> John Collier promised to help us more than any other white man, but before he made these promises he forced us to agree to some hard things that we didn't like. We tried it out, but Collier just fooled us. He only did some of the stock reduction. We know how many sheep we have now and how much our country will take care of, and we don't think we are overgrazed.

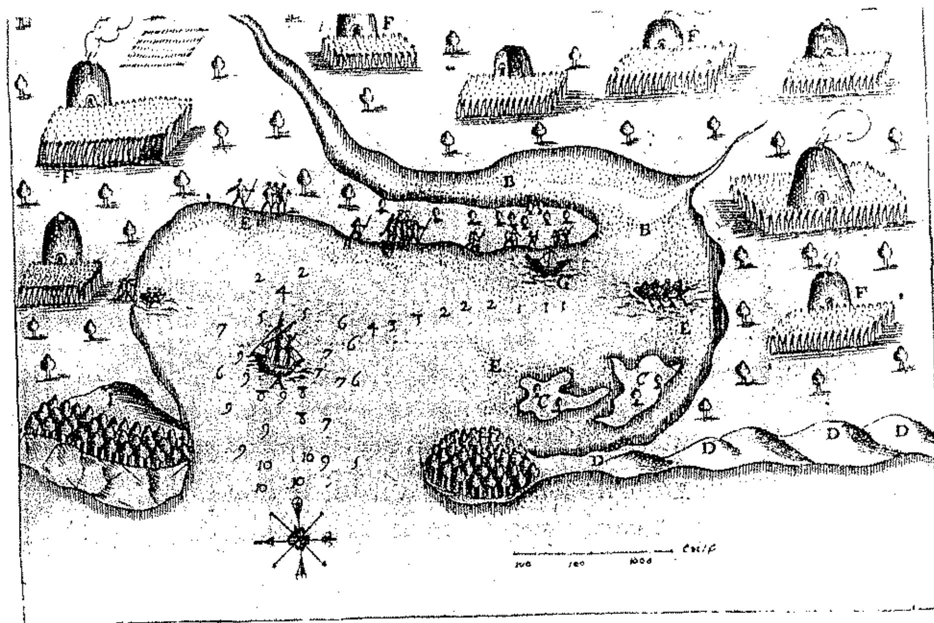
The disgruntled Navajos concluded critically: "We Indians don't think it is right for Collier to tell us we should govern ourselves, and then tell us how to do it. Why does he want to fool us that way and make us believe we are running our country, when he makes us do what he wants."[44]

The Navajos tried to resist the stock reduction program, but Collier and his experts would not let them do much talking at the meetings and would not listen to them. Instead, the government proceeded to carry out the policy. "No Washington people came here to reduce the goats," a Navajo reported. "But policemen told us those were orders from Washington and we had to be rid of the goats. The poorest people were scared and they just reduced the goats and sheep."[45]

As they watched the agents take their animals, the Navajos anxiously wondered how they would live without their stock. They especially resented the loss of their goats. "The poorest people owned goats — the easiest people to take away from," a Navajo protested. "The pressure was so great the little fellow sold, everyone sold. A goat sold for one dollar. The money doesn't mean half so much to the family as having the goat to kill and eat for several days." One herder saw Collier's program as a "war" against the Navajos. "I sure don't understand why he wants us to be poor. They reduce all sheep. They say they only goin' to let Indians have five sheep, three goats, one cattle, and one horse." Another Navajo recalled bitterly: "A great number of the people's livestock was taken away. Although we were told that it was to restore the land, the fact remains that hunger and poverty stood with their mouths wide open to devour us." After his sheep had been taken away from him, a Navajo herder cursed the officials: "You people are indeed heartless. You have now killed me. You have cut off my arms. You have cut off my legs. You have taken my head off. There is nothing left for me. This is the end of the trail."[46]

By 1935, the stock had been reduced by 400,000 sheep and goats; still Collier was not satisfied. Noting that 1,269,910 animals were still grazing on land capable of supporting only 560,000, he impatiently stated: "This means that a further reduction of 56 percent would be necessary in order to reduce the stock to the carrying capacity of the range." A Navajo complained: "The sheep business . . . gives us the only decent living. When we have no more sheep then Mr. Collier will dance the jig and be happy." Meanwhile, Navajos found themselves becoming increasingly dependent on wage income: nearly 40 percent of their annual per capita income of $128 came from wage earnings, mostly from temporary government employment. The stock reduction program had reduced many Navajos to dependency on the federal government as employees in New Deal work programs. They denounced Collier's project as "the most devastating experience in Navaho history" since the imprisonment at Bosque Redondo in the 1860s.[47]

Tragically, the stock reduction program was unnecessary as an erosion control program. Actually, overgrazing proved to be a secondary cause of erosion. Scientists would do further research on silt settlement and determine that overgrazing was not the source of the problem. "By the 1950s, although 5 percent of the Lake Mead reservoir had already silted up," according to historian Richard White, "scientists were far more hesitant in attributing blame for the situation than their colleagues in the 1930s."[48]



A map of Wampanoag villages and corn fields on Cape Cod drawn by Samuel de Champlain. (Des Sauvages: ou Voyage de Samuel de Champlain de Brouage faict en la France Novelle *[Paris, 1604]*)

Irish immigrants boarding ships at Queenstown, Cork, 1851. (Illustrated London News, *May 10, 1851*)

But the Navajos had been telling this to the New Dealers all along. They argued that erosion had been reported as early as the 1890s and was related more to drought than to overgrazing. Trying to explain this cycle of dry weather and subsequent erosion to the government experts, Navajos had pointed out that the 1930s were also years with little rain and predicted that the range would recover when the drought ended. They reminded the government bureaucrats: "We know something about that by nature because we were born here and raised here and we knew about the processes of nature on our range." One of their ancient songs told them about their land's dependency on rain:

House made of dawn,
House made of evening light,
House made of the dark cloud . . .
Dark cloud is at the house's door,
The trail out of it is dark cloud,
The zigzag lightning stands high upon it . . .
Happily may I walk.
Happily, with abundant showers, may I walk.
Happily, with abundant plants, may I walk.

Grass had always returned along with the rain, Navajos knew as they searched the skies for dark clouds in the dawn and evening, hopeful that showers would bless the land and their people.[49]