

Sen. Kennedy's Address on American Indian Day Sept. 26

AMERICAN INDIAN DAY
1969

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, today has been set aside by many States and a number of organizations as American Indian Day. It provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the important contributions of the American Indian to our society and pay tribute to the many accomplishments of the "first Americans."

Contrary to popular folklore, the American Indian is no longer the "vanishing American." There are now approximately 700,000 American Indians in the United States, and they are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the Nation. If we were to count all of the people with known Indian forebears, we could take pride in an "Indian population" of over 10,000,000. Despite tremendous odds and many misguided attempts by the dominant society to assimilate all Indians into the "mainstream," viable Indian communities can still be found in every state of the Union, in some cases fighting for survival, in other cases intact and flourishing. Despite the pressure to assimilate, the American Indian has retained much of his social and cultural identity. Nearly 300 Indian languages and dialects are still spoken in this country, and at least 45 of these languages are spoken by more than 1,000 Indians. At least 50 per cent of the Indian children of school age still speak their native language at home and in their communities.

The oldest continually inhabited community on the North American continent exists on the Hopi Reservation in Arizona. Old Oraibi's original inhabitants date back to 500 years before the first discovery of America by European explorers. It is a thriving Indian community today, and shows every sign of continuing on for centuries to come. From every point of view, the American Indian is the most unique of all of our citizens. He entered the New World over 25,000 years ago. Based on our present knowledge, he had populated all of the Western Hemisphere, with an extraordinary diversity of cultural groups, reaching the southern extreme of South America, more than 10,000 years ago. From the very first day of his arrival, the American Indian was confronted with the problem of adapting himself to a new and frequently hostile environment and supporting himself under these conditions. How this was accomplished has considerable relevance to our present Government policies, for the American Indian has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for

survival, adaptation, and change. Yet we tend to see Indian communities as static museum pieces, archaic anachronisms in our technological society, something for tourists to stare at and take pictures of, and as "Indian problems" for the Federal Government to solve.

Why is it that we only see poverty but fail to understand the wealth of a people who are still attuned to the beauty of nature and feel a rapport and spiritual attachment to the land they inhabit?

Why is it we only see the uncleanness of a dirt floor hogan but never the warmth or richness of the human relationships in an extended family?

Why is it we observe only the lack of material possessions which we prize so highly and fail to understand the sense of loyalty and generosity that permits an Indian community to survive on so very little?

Why is it we see only an overcrowded Indian home, when we could observe the presence of grandparents who are still revered and have an important role to play in the raising of children?

Why is it we see only idleness and despair while we fail to understand a fierce sense of individual pride and a strong expression of autonomy and freedom?

Indeed, we have much to learn from the American Indian and his cultural differences—an interest in people rather than things, a strong feeling of belonging, of a need to share with others, of dignity in harsh circumstances, of a love for nature which is not exploitative, and of measuring a man not by what he has or looks like or says, but by what he is. These values which we are so often blind to, make middle-class America look culturally deprived.

Perhaps we should begin by assessing how much the American Indian has contributed to our society. It is a sad commentary on our present state of affairs to find out that a thorough study of the impact of Indian cultures on American society is yet to be written. The material and institutional impact of Indian culture remains inadequately understood and largely underestimated.

Much of the impact of Indian cultures has blended into our natural environment and is simply taken for granted. More than half of our states have Indian names, as do thousands of cities, towns, rivers, lakes and mountains. Americans meet in a caucus, run the gauntlet, smoke the peace pipe, hold pow wows and bury the hatchet. Settlers trekking westward followed Indian trails, which have been developed into much of our present

system of national highways. In many subtle ways, Indian cultures have strongly influenced our national character—our love of athletics, our national worship of sun, air, and water, and the flowering of the Boy Scout movement.

The changes that American Indians wrought in the life of our pioneers were far more impressive and less destructive than any changes white teachers have yet brought to Indian life. The early colonists learned from the Indian how to hunt, how to farm, and ultimately how to survive in the New World. In less than a century, more than 50 new foods had been carried back to the Old World, including maize, potatoes, pumpkins, turkey, squash, and various kinds of beans. These agricultural products had a tremendous impact on the European and eventually on the world economy. Potatoes and maize now rank second and third in total tonnage of the world's crops. Considerably more than half of our national farm produce today consists of plants domesticated by Indian botanists long before Columbus landed. And it was not only the agricultural products that the American Indian gave to the white settlers—but also the procedures for planting, irrigation, fertilization, cultivation, storage, and utilization. This in itself was an enormous contribution and one which meant survival for the white man in the New World. But this is only part of our indebtedness.

In medicine, as in the production of food and textiles, the conventional picture of the Indian as an ignorant savage is far removed from the truth. Cocaine, quinine, novocain, witch hazel, and many other drugs were developed and used by the Indian before Columbus landed. In the 400 years that physicians and botanists have been examining and analyzing the flora of America, they have not yet discovered a medicinal herb unknown to the Indians.

The social significance of such material contributions is impressive, but the Indian gave more in the realm of the intangible. The distinctive political ideals of young America owed much to a rich Indian democratic tradition—a debt often recognized by statements of our leading colonists. The pattern of States within a State that we call federalism, the habit of treating chiefs as servants of the people instead of masters, the insistence that the community must respect the diversity of men and their dreams—all these things were part of the American way of life before 1492.

Franklin carried his admiration for the Iroquois Confederacy to the Albany Congress, and Jefferson made numerous references to the freedom and democracy of Indian society which achieved the maximum degree of coercion. The late Felix Cohen, noted legal scholar and Indian authority, remarked:

"Those accustomed to the histories of the conqueror will hardly be convinced, though example be piled on example, that American democracy, freedom, and tolerance are more American than European, and have deep aboriginal roots in our land.

One of the most remarkable examples of adaptation and accomplishment by any Indian tribe in the United States is that of the Cherokee. Anyone who doubts the capacity of Indian communities for constructive change and self-determination should take cognizance of this accomplishment.

In 1820, the Cherokee Nation

established a government of laws. They adopted a constitution, patterned after that of the United States, which provided for courts, representation, and jury trials. Their constitution gave the national council authority to remove the principal chief for disability and gave the vote to all those over 18 years of age.

They divided their nation into eight districts, and each district was entitled to send four representatives to New Echota, the capital of the nation. The national council served as an upper and lower house whose members were elected by their constituents. Each district had a judge, a marshal, and a council house where meetings were held twice a year. Laws were passed for the collection of taxes and debts, for repairs on roads, for licenses to white persons engaged in farming or other businesses in the nation, for the support of schools, and for the regulation of the liquor traffic. The system compared favorably with that of the Federal Government and any State government then existent. After the Cherokee institutions were destroyed and they were forcibly removed from Georgia and resettled west of the Mississippi, another national convention was called, and a new constitution adopted. The institutions were reestablished and flourished until Oklahoma became a State in 1906 when they were again abolished.

Equally as remarkable was the development of an extensive educational system of high quality and accomplishment. Funded largely by moneys received from the Federal Government as a result of ceding large tracts of land in 1819, 1828, 1835, and 1866, the school system flourished until 1903 when it was taken over by the Federal Government. It is estimated that the Cherokee Nation invested up to 50 per cent of its annual budget in operating its school system.

Two things were provided for in the treaty of 1828 which had tremendous implications for the development of the Cherokee school system and are unique in the history of Indian education in this country. The treaty provided \$500 for the use of George Guess, better known as Sequoyah or the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet and syllabary. In addition, \$1,000 was provided for the purchase of a printing press. The remarkable consequences of these two provisions was that the Cherokees were 90 per cent literate in their native language in a period of several years and in the late 1880's, had a much higher English literacy level than the white population of either Texas or Arkansas. Until the later 1890's, both the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations operated very extensive and highly successful school systems—sending numerous graduates to enter eastern colleges. These school systems, until they were abolished in 1906, were clearly the finest west of the Mississippi.

In addition the Cherokee published a bilingual newspaper beginning in 1828 and continuing until 1903. The paper was originally called the Cherokee Phoenix. The name had been carefully chosen to symbolize that day when according to the first editor:

All Indian tribes of America should arise, Phoenix-like, from their ashes, and when the terms "Indian deprivation," "war whoop," "scalping knife," and the like, shall become obsolete and forever be buried deep under the ground."

Unfortunately, as one surveys the present status of the Ameri-

can Indian, we have not yet arrived at a Federal Government policy enlightened enough to foster the regeneration of Indian communities, the elimination of Indian poverty, or a citizenry well enough informed to set aside the stereotypes and prejudices of the past.

For example, the Subcommittee on Indian Education visited the Cherokee in east Oklahoma in February of 1968. We found family after family with annual incomes of less than \$1,000. In Adair County, which has the largest Indian population, we found 90 per cent of the Cherokee families living on welfare. In McCurtain County, which has the largest Choctaw population, we found 99 per cent of the families living below the poverty line.

In subcommittee hearings, we were told that the dropout rate of Cherokee Indian children in public schools was running as high as 75 per cent. We were informed that the median number of school years completed by adult Cherokees was 5.5 and that 40 per cent of the adult Cherokees were functionally illiterate in English. Contrasted with the magnificent self-generated accomplishments of the previous century, the Cherokee have suffered a severe decline.

This example does not stand by itself, it is in fact typical of the poverty and educational failure that can be found in Indian communities across the country. The national statistics are well known and need not be repeated, but their implications are clear—the "first American" is the "last American" today in terms of housing, health, income, education, and an equal opportunity to share the material wealth of our nation. My brother, the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy, has called this a national tragedy and a national disgrace. Clearly, it can no longer be tolerated by the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, and the one most deeply devoted to cultural pluralism and individual freedom. Where have we failed?

The essential failure, I believe, has been a failure of national policy. Through all of our history, states as well as the Federal Government have been frustrated with respect to solving the problems of the American Indians. We have vacillated between: First, the policy of starving the Indians into throwing in the sponge and "getting lost" in the general population; and second a "kinder" policy of helping them to get themselves ready to leave Indian ways and get lost in the general population.

In either case, they would then be off our consciences and finally out of our pocketbooks. Both policies have failed.

It is a challenge which has never been met in the United States to help the Indians to adjust economically and socially to American life, so that they actually become financially independent. We cannot begin to solve the problem unless we first recognize that Indians have a right to make this adjustment as Indians. What folly it has been to demand that Indians cooperate in plans for making them some-

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thing other than they want to be. What an interesting experiment, on the other hand, once the block is removed, to develop with them ways toward that greatest freedom which comes with economic independence.

The present policy, aimed at the disappearance of the Indians, is a double-edged sword. On the one side there is a nauseating paternalism. Indians get help from the Government because, since we destroyed their means of livelihood, they need it; and it is our moral obligation to continue this help until we and they are wise enough to make them once again independent. But meanwhile, the Indian Bureau, like any overprotective parent, demands that the Indians manage their own affairs; but, on the grounds that they do not know how, never lets them try, and becomes sure more than ever that they are incompetent to do so. They say, in effect, that as long as we pay the bills, we shall manage your communities. If you are competent to manage your own affairs, then cut yourselves off from the financial assistance as well. Money to live on, or freedom; you cannot have both, so take your choice.

We need an entirely new approach. We need to separate the the two problems of the money which the Indians need for their community services from the way the money is used.

Nobody should ever again interpret our policy as one which is importantly influenced by a desire to save money to the detriment of Indians and in violation of our traditional and moral obligations. It has been and should be our policy to make it unnecessary to provide special services, hence to make Indians independent. But until this is accomplished, the money should be provided because it is needed and because it is right. But this money should be spent by the Indians, for themselves, rather than for the Indians by bureaucrats.

Throughout the 1960's we have been groping toward a more enlightened national policy, but the result can be measured largely in terms of words not action. Numerous studies, task force reports, and commissions have come forth with their "final solution" for the Indian problem, but the crucial ingredient that has always been missing is Indians

speaking for themselves about what is wrong, what they want and need, and what our policy should be. On numerous occasions, the Federal Government has suffered the embarrassment of putting forward grand schemes to solve the Indians problems without really permitting the Indian to determine these policies and programs for himself. This is not only a hypocritical national charade which breeds cynicism and frustration on both sides but also, more important, a perpetuation of our accumulative failures.

The question that needs to be answered is whether or not this Nation has reached a sufficient stage of maturity and self-awareness to recognize its failure and to call upon a strength of intellect, conscience, and vision, to permit the prophecy of the Cherokee Phoenix to come true.