

Surviving Letter

Confidential

December 18, 1982

Dear Friends,

After reading over my last letter to all of you, I decided that although I had outlined why I thought we needed to discuss direction and "tactics" at our next meeting I still had not laid out my general positioning on Indian affairs for you. I will do so now and I would hope that all of you would do the same at our next meeting or by mail. Let me start by giving you some personal intellectual history.

When I was growing up, Cherokee elders told me that we were a captive nation; living under the exploitative heel of the foreigners and having our lives regulated their harsh and ungodly "law" (culture). Our only recourse was to "lay quiet" until conditions changed and then opt for freedom and our own "law" (Independence). Cherokee elders would have, and most still do, viewed any accommodation between Cherokees and Whites as impossible and absurd on the face of it. I know that most tribes are not quite as separatist minded and nationalistic as Cherokees, but my experience is that traditional elders in most tribes hold the above position to some degree.

I went to college after World War II and learned then that most well-meaning whites interested in Indian affairs felt that Indian assimilation into American society was "inevitable". Such assimilation was felt to be unfortunate in that many beautiful cultures would be lost, but it was for the best in the long run that "we" all be one homogenous society. Even Indian "leaders" gave public lip service to this cliché at Indian conferences in the late '40s. It may very well be that death, as the Freudians say, reconciles all tensions, but I personally was not overjoyed by such a prospect. I was young then and overwhelmed by such an attitude as voiced by older, prestigious whites and Indians. Neither did I know how to articulate my disagreement, so I just avoided the "Indian AL fairs scene.

In the early '50s, in graduate school, I began to meet academics that felt that Indian assimilation into American society was not inevitable and further, that Indian societies given the opportunity could come to terms with American society. This was a new, powerful, and optimistic outlook. I did not see at the time that this view was based on little scientific evidence and was primarily a statement of faith in the general American society; in the American ideals, if

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you will. In any case, by the mid-fifties I was a "convert"; and for the next 10 years I was an active proponent of Indian "self-determination". The Indian workshops in Colorado, with which I was associated, became a center in the promulgation of these ideas.

By the mid-sixties, I was beginning to have grave doubts about this stance. My experience in running an action anthropology research project in eastern Oklahoma in this era had made me a little wiser about the nature of the American establishment. There was then, as you no doubt remember, a great optimism in many sectors of American society about the possibility of reform, particularly by "grass-roots" action and by protest. However, I was beginning to suspect that the "system" was much more rigid and power more centralized and self-protective than I had thought. Further, it appeared to me that Seeming attempts on the part Of the federal government to facilitate "self-determination" were simply a "fake-out". My association with Robert Kennedy convinced me of that, and later events in the early '70s confirmed my hunch. "Self-determination" turned out to be an arrangement whereby an Indian elite operates a structure created and enlarged by the federal government; a structure regulated by laws, rules, and guidelines set up by the federal government; and a structure which has no real power except what is allowed by the federal government. "Self-determination's" lineal descendent, "Indian sovereignty", has become primarily a plea for more control over Indians by the Indian elite.

On the basis of my rather unformulated unease in the mid-sixties, I began to withdraw from the self-determination arena and began to be involved in the Traditional Movement in 1967 and later in the Indian Ecumenical movement. I also began to try to help Indians with local "community development" attempts. I had decided at that point in time that we needed to strengthen our social cohesion internally and "preserve" our languages and cultures; and that working with the "system" was not only useless, but perhaps socially destructive. However, I was not exactly sure what it was about the system that made it so un-reformable and un-approachable. I concluded that greed and power were the villains in the piece, a rather over-simplified analysis, to say the least.

In 1968 I moved to the Detroit area. I had formerly lived in Detroit from 1959 to 1962. In that period Detroit was a city of real neighborhoods and form fairly "tight" ethnic groups. When I returned in 1968 all of that had virtually disappeared. At the same time, academics and intellectuals generally began to "discover" that ethnic groups were "alive and well" in American

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cities and that America, fortunately, was actually a pluralistic society and not a melting pot. I was almost sucked into that fantasy, but I had had enough of wish-fulfillment masquerading as social science so I began to look at the evidence.

Ethnic groups were still "alive" Al right, but they were far from "well". For instance, most middle class Italians had entered the middle class as nuclear family groups and had virtually demolished "la familiar". (The movie series on the Godfather illustrates this process only too well.) Working class Italians still held on to "la familiar", but they had lost their neighborhoods and organizations in most areas. (Now, in 1982, they are visually as massified as the middle class.) In 1970 the Jews, those most accomplished survivors in hostile civilization., had made it into the middle class survived as whole social groups, but were evidencing a 25% out-marriage rate and the bed-rock emphasis in Jewish culture on intellectuality and social justice had eroded considerably.

What cultural pluralism means in America is that if you are willing to live in isolated nuclear family groups, take your place in the corporate economic structure, keep up your property, do not object to your own powerlessness, and put aside those valued ways of being that make you who and what you are (like mainly honor, loyalty, Obedient children, etc.) then you can eat spaghetti in the home, go to the Catholic church on Sunday, and put on an ethnic costume and jump around at an ethnic festival once in a while. This is the future the system offers Indians as well.

I think that by the early 1970s I had figured out why I thought that it was useless to try to accommodate to or deal with the system; and more, why it might even be destructive to get too close and intermeshed in it. The American social system individuates and massifies. It is hostile to communities, to families, to those who live in a sacred world, and to any deviant culture in its midst. Further, special community rights, as in the case with Indians, are antithetical to every trend in American society. It is a big homogenization machine. Our situation is even more precarious than my elders imagined. As you know, the militant fever hit Indians in the early seventies. I was both pleased and appalled. I was pleased at the "feistiness" of our young people. On the other hand, I thought Indian protest was a little late, ill-timed, and misdirected. I was appalled by the lack of analysis behind actions and soon became tired of all the black and white student bromides from the sixties, dressed up in feathers, which were perpetually chanted by young militants. A Cherokee Chief once said, "what starts with noise usually ends up as

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noise. " And I am afraid, by and large, such was the outcome of Indian Militancy. However, it was a good educational experience for Many Young Indians.

Recently, the Pendulum has swung in the opposite direction and the Indian elite, at least, seems hung for a piece of the system now. At this point in history, I think our main job is to survive America; as we did the glaciers droughts, invasion, conquest, and so forth. If I am right, that means we must attend to the social and cultural Strength of our tribes, engage only in protective measures vis-a-vis the general society, and place Indians in key institutional niches of the system as "scouts". If this analysis is correct then an alliance must be forged between "intellectuals" and elders. I was very impressed by a meeting I attended in upper Michigan last summer on Ted Holappa's reservation. Perhaps, Ted will tell us about his efforts in this regard at our coming meeting. He tells me that he will be there.

As you know, I am the director of an Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona. I try to do a good job for the "institutions" that pays my salary, in its terms and in my students' terms. I try to impart some analytic ability to my students. I do not expect them to agree with my analyses, but I do expect them to be analytic. That is as much as I feel I can do to meet what I think are our needs, within the confines of a white institution. However, my job gives me time to do other things on the side. I am involved in promoting literacy in the Papago language; hopefully; this will strengthen the Papago language. I am promoting an informal Papago elders association; and encouraging some religious and community reconstitution. Next summer several knowledgeable men and I are taking the Cherokee wampum belts around to key Oklahoma Cherokee communities and to North Carolina, and "explaining" their message. I hope next year to reinstitute the Ecumenical movement, but on a more solid basis this time. And, of course, I am helping build our Intellectual "cadre".

There you have it! I have tried to spell out my sense of the Indian "problem" and what kind of tactics I, personally, opt for in dealing with the situation. At our coming meeting, I want very much to hear from you what you think is the central problem for Indians and how we, as intellectuals, might deal with that problem.

Hope to see you in January!

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