

To the Committee for the Second Chicago
Indian Conference - November, 85

Position Paper - Robert K. Thomas

The Chicago Indian Conference of 1961 culminated in a document called the Declaration of Purpose. This document was a summation of the "sense" of the Conference and was largely oriented toward influencing federal government Indian policy. My reading of the Declaration of Purpose indicates two specific concerns and another more general concern.

The two specific concerns were self-determination and economic development, and the more general concern was the issue of cultural preservation. However, one gets the impression that the framers of the Declaration of Purpose felt that if the Indian land base was made secure and tribes were given more decision-making power within a firm and lasting federal-Indian framework, then Indian cultural (and social?) survival was assured. More, throughout the document there is an implicit faith that a higher educational level for Indians is essential in the solving of all these "problems."

Let me very briefly evaluate these thrusts of the Declaration of Purpose, some twenty five years later. Tribal governments have indeed achieved some degree of self-determination in the last twenty five years. There has been no legal transfer of power from the federal government to tribes in this period, but the approval of the Secretary of Interior over the acts of tribal councils is now largely pro forma for all except very important issues. As the educational level of Indians has increased and as Indian politicians and administrators have come to share a common outlook (a common sense of problem and solutions) with federal administrators, the Department of Interior has come to trust the judgement of tribal governments.

Secondly, the federal policy of contracting services to tribal governments has given the "institution" of tribal government some clout, and has involved more local people in the political process because of now available political patronage. In some tribes, political machines have been built on this political patronage system.

There has been some modicum of economic development in the last twenty five years, particularly mineral resource development, (Presently, the competition between whites and Indians for resources-

minerals, water, land, space, clean air, etc. - is reaching a crisis point in parts of the southwest and northern plains.) However, the major source of rural Indian income has come to be employment in tribal programs, and the economy of most tribes has suffered recently due to federal budget cuts over the past few years.

It is in the area of cultural survival (and, perhaps, future social survival) that one sees the major problem for Indians in these days. The Chicago Indian Conference did not adequately assess the dangers to Indian culture in 1961, nor could the Conference foresee new forces which would appear on the Indian scene in the '60s and '70s; forces which would adversely affect Indian culture survival.

Some 50% of all American Indians now live in cities, and the majority of this present-day population are young people who were born and raised in the city. Many of them seem to me very much like other urban young people of a similar class level. Indians of the inner-city do associate much with other Indians and visit or spend long periods at "home." However, those Indians who live in mixed ethnic working class areas, at least 50% of city Indians, seem to me to be in the process of social absorption.

Some observers feel that urban Indians will, because of the heightened consciousness which develops from a city experience, spark off a cultural revival which will revitalize Indians as a whole. However, such efforts are yet in their infancy. More, Indians have as yet no intellectual "class" which could conceptualize and define such a movement.

Rural Indian communities, both those on and off reservations, vary considerably at present. On some reservations, most adults between 25 and 50 are away working in the city, leaving behind older people, children, and very young adults. Such communities may well be in the process of social absorption. Other Indian communities are more socially whole. But most evidence serious social ills - alcoholism, juvenile crime, etc.; plus, deteriorating health. And most importantly, nearly all tribes are showing considerable cultural and language loss.

It is my impression that most rural Indians under 40 are very different from those over 40 - more materialistic, more interested in acquiring social rank among both Indians and whites, more in-

dividuated and thus less committed to home and kin, more secular, more "impolite" (by Indian standards), etc. More, few Indians under 40 see themselves as members of distinct, unique, autonomous peoples who are surrounded by a more numerous and powerful society. They see themselves simply as an American variant with a special heritage. After two and one-half decades of integrated schools, head start programs, a high educational level, t.v., and social welfare programs (low-cost housing, A.D.C., etc) which have weakened the Indian family it is no surprise that these above changes have come about; nor that the vast majority of rural Indians under 40 are not teaching their children an Indian language.

Many tribes have no native curers, medicine men, at all now. In other tribes, young and middle-aged people are not becoming curers. The same is true of ceremonial leaders, as well. Indian religions in most tribes will dissappear when Indians who are now over 40 die off, if present trends continue.

A key factor in this cultural endangerment is language loss. Language loss has been massive in the last ten years - western Sioux, Cherokee, Oklahoma Choctaw, most Apache tribes, Navaho, Pima, Ute, etc. Tribes in which the native language is strong can be literally counted on one's fingers today. Perhaps, some very gross features of a tribal people's world view and perceptions can be transferred to English, but by and large the disappearance of a language means a major alteration in such a world view. More, it means in modern circumstances that such a people have surrendered their intellectual autonomy and independence to another society.

In many English speaking Indian communities there is a significant disparity between verbalized values and actual behavior. Parents in such communities will say such things as their children should "get an education and make something of them selves." Yet, when these children leave home for "better opportunities", these same parents will be shocked and hurt to the core of their being. It appears that such people have learned their behavior and unconscious values from their parents, but verbalize their life in terms of public school slogans.

At minimum, language loss means that a tribal people does not have an appropriate conceptual vehicle by which to examine, analyze, and talk about their own life.

In some sense, Indian tribes are becoming collections of generalized tribal personalities without a true native institutional structure nor a coherent culture, tradition, and language.

Perhaps, Indians could survive profound cultural loss, all other factors being equal, and continue as social groups if Indian tribes were not tiny minority peoples in a sea of powerful aliens. However, all of those minority peoples in the Old World who have survived in such circumstances have four features in common -

1. a distinct language, even if it simply functions as a holy language.
2. a unique religion, even if it is their own special version of a world religion.
3. a tie to a particular piece of land, a homeland and a holy land.
4. a sacred history which tells you who you are and why you must survive as a people.

Few Indian tribes show these four features, modernly.

Thus, it is my opinion that unless some revolutionary steps are taken Indian tribes will survive neither as distinct cultural nor social groups; revolutionary steps such as the development of Indian language school texts, the teaching of course content in Indian languages in local Indian schools, the revival of Indian religions, reform of the structure of tribal governments, and so on.

I think that we have five years before the dye is cast and it will be too late to take the needed steps to insure our cultural and social survival.

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