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In the 1950s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) managed the Navajo Reservation’s feral dog population by scheduling semi-annual “dog shoots.” After one gruesome dog shoot resulted in seventeen slaughtered dogs in Chinle, Arizona, community members pressed local BIA authorities to reform reservation dog control, an effort that pitted the interethnic community against an authoritarian form of settler-colonial governance. Because citizenship on the reservation—for Navajo and non-Navajo alike—was effectively rendered inferior to that of citizens outside the reservation, substantive changes to local BIA policies required an alliance with a constituency beyond the reservation’s borders, one with full access to state power—in this case, the National Dog Welfare Guild. This article thus demonstrates Native American grass-roots activism and boundary politics against oppressive federal authority.

Key words: Navajo Nation, activism, animal rights, settler colonialism, domesticity, Bureau of Indian Affairs

April 8, 1956, began like any other Sunday in Chinle, a small community in northeastern Arizona on the Navajo reservation. The bells at Annunciation Mission chimed in the crisp dawn. A dog plodded the streets in search of scraps. Protestants gathered to hear Reverend Joseph Gray’s sermon at the new Presbyterian church up the hill. And over at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding school, cafeteria workers prepared breakfast while drowsy schoolchildren

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slid down from bunks in the dormitory, shivering slightly as their feet struck the cold linoleum. 1

Then a police officer’s shotgun shattered the morning calm and distinguished this Sunday from the rest. The cry of a wounded animal pierced the gun’s reverberation. A dog lay in the street wailing, bleeding, dying. Dead.

Reservation authorities had designated this Sunday for “the control and disposition of wild, stray, and vicious dogs” in Chinle. By evening, over seventeen dogs would be killed, a bedroom window broken by buckshot, and the intestines of one dog strewn across the front door of a resident’s house, the latter “a joke” perpetrated by the Anglo police captain who oversaw the shootings. 2

Many residents found the shootings disturbing. But six months later, Chinle Subagency Superintendent Fred Maxwell ordered a second dog shoot to be held on Sunday, September 30. The Bureau of Indian Affairs provided a week’s notice, posting flyers in agency buildings and at local trading posts. This time some town residents balked.

Galvanized by the prospect of another shooting, Overton Love Turner, Jr.—whose house had fallen prey to the cruel “joke” that April—helped compose a petition against the order on September 23, 1956. A slight and unimposing figure, Overton Turner was blessed with a command of rhetoric. 3 The petition began, “We, the below signed Members of the Community of Chinle, Arizona, make

1. Chinle is seventy miles from Window Rock, which was home to both the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Navajo Agency Office as well as the Navajo tribal headquarters. Gallup, New Mexico, is the nearest city, located about ninety-one miles to the southeast. My description of 1950s Chinle is cobbled together from Rose Mitchell, Tall Woman: The Life Story of Rose Mitchell, a Navajo Woman, c. 1874–1977, ed. Charlotte J. Frisbie (Albuquerque, 2001), and Dorothy Cumming, Before the Roads were Paved: Living with the Navajos at Canyon de Chelly, 1950–1952 (Victoria, B.C., 2001), 21–25.

2. At the time, the Bureau of Indian Affairs administered police services on the reservation. See Robert Young to All Householders, Window Rock Community, Jan. 13, 1956, in 170 Law and Order—Dog Control 1958–1960, box 26, General Superintendent’s Central Classified Files (hereafter CCF), 1953–1973, Area Director, Navajo Area Office, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration Pacific Region, Riverside, Calif. (hereafter RG 75, NAPR). For police services, see Raymond D. Austin, Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law: A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance (Minneapolis, 2009), 28.

3. According to personnel records, Overton Love Turner was 5’8” and weighed 185 pounds when he entered the Indian Service. In high school, he was renowned for his oratory and skill at debate. See Certificate of Medical Examination, Oct. 22, 1954, Overton Love Turner, Jr., Official Personnel Folder, National Personnel Records Center Annex,
special request that no stray dogs or cats be shot or killed within the residential or campus areas of Chinle, Arizona, on September 30, 1956, or any date thereafter.” Fifty women and men signed their names in agreement.4

In the words of one petitioner, 1950s Chinle was “a small government settlement of less than two hundred people.”5 The town functioned as the administrative headquarters of Chinle subagency—one of five BIA administrative districts on the 27,500-square-mile reservation—and provided government services to approximately 6,000 Navajos within area. Anglos, African Americans, Native Americans, and other non-Navajos worked with and lived alongside the Navajo population, but, like other agency towns, Chinle divided along lines of class and race. As one study would remark a decade later, “There seems to be little sense of community in Chinle. BIA employees live in one block of houses, public school employees in another. Relatively small cliques carry on their separate social activities.” The report continued, “BIA personnel are reputed to stay aloof from local politics.”6 Most in Chinle worked for the BIA in the agency offices, public health clinic, or boarding school in town, the latter serving as home to some 249 Navajo children nine months a year.7

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5. The quote is from Rev. Joseph Gray, “Navajo Christmas Celebrations,” in J. Lawerence Driskill, ed. Christmas Stories from Around the World: Honoring Jesus in Many Lands (Carol Stream, Ill., 1997), 47. In his letter to Popular Dogs, Overton Turner described Chinle as a community of “about 50 families” and claimed that the petitioners represented “over three-fourths of the people here.” Hard demographic figures for the town are difficult to find, as Chinle was not a census-designated location.


7. Non-Navajos could not own property on the reservation, and most white people living on the reservation were federal employees, licensed traders, or anthropologists. See Adams interview. For population figures at Chinle Boarding School, see “Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations for 1960” (Washington, D.C., 1959), 807.
The fifty petitioners made up a diverse and unlikely coalition. Most were BIA personnel or their kin—teachers and engineers, cooks and relocation officers, dormitory matrons and social workers. Thirty-one women and nineteen men signed the petition. Entire families signed in a few cases. Franciscan Brother Maxim Lennert joined the petition. Reverend Gray joined too. The fifty petitioners split evenly along ethno-racial lines, with non-Navajos representing half the petitioners, Navajos the other half. For Anglos, work in the Indian Service offered a fair salary if little prestige. On the whole, most non-Navajo petitioners were well-intended and educated white people who moved to the reservation for a job with the BIA—people like Tula Detweiler, who taught at Chinle Boarding School and hailed from Parnell, Iowa, or Donavan Lyngholm, who moved to Chinle from Sidney, Nebraska, after studying forestry at Colorado State University. Some of the Navajo petitioners, like John D. Wallace, Guy Sebahe, or Joe Watson, Jr., had experienced life off the reservation, either through schooling, military service, or work in wartime industries. A few Navajo signatories had moved to Chinle from elsewhere on the reservation and lived in agency housing in town, while others, like Harry D. and Dorthy D. Begay, had lived most of their lives in hogans located in family settlements or “camps” in the surrounding area. Some petitioners held college

8. My assessment of the petitioners’ ethno-racial makeup is drawn from extensive research on Ancestry.com, Findagrave.com, genealogical message boards, and newspapers. Every effort was made to find definitive proof of Navajo ancestry, but in a few cases I have assumed ancestry based upon common Navajo surnames. In total, I identified twenty-four Navajo petitioners. Most of the other twenty-six petitioners I identified were white, although I use the term non-Navajo to indicate that there may have also been those who self-identified as Native, African American, or Latina/o. I also use the term “Anglo” throughout the text to refer to people of European descent, as commonly practiced in the Southwest.

9. For Tula Detweiler, see “Rev. and Mrs. Visser Greene Newcomers,” Williamsburg, Iowa, Journal-Tribune and Shipper Consolidated, Aug., 8, 1957, p. 2; for Donavan Lyngholm, see the Colorado State University yearbook, Silver Spruce (Fort Collins, Colo., 1950), 97, 272. The yearbook can also be accessed through the U.S. School Yearbooks database on Ancestry.com.

degrees while others possessed rudimentary formal schooling. Some lived on the edge of poverty, others in relative affluence. The petitioners did not represent the entire reservation, although they would eventually win the support of the Navajo Tribal Council chairman. Instead, they saw themselves as representative of a growing slice of reservation life, the agency town in microcosm.

The petitioners supported dog control efforts on the reservation. They agreed with reservation authorities that feral dogs and cats constituted “a safety and health threat to the community.” They even recognized the “necessity of disposing” of such animals. The issue at hand was the BIA’s approach to the problem, which the petitioners considered uncommon and inhumane. Why should reservation police shoot dogs in the streets and expose children to “unnecessary brutality” when “said animals could be captured and taken outside the community for destruction?” “Our American Towns outside the reservation have so resolved the problem,” the petition read, “and there is no reason why such [a] solution could not be reached for communities on the reservation.”

Collectively, the petitioners blurred the distinction between life “on” and “outside” the reservation by insisting that they lived on the reservation and in an “American town.” They stressed that they intended no disrespect to BIA authorities; they only wanted to be respected themselves.

On Monday, September 24, G. Warren Spaulding, the Navajo Agency’s general superintendent, received the petition at agency headquarters seventy miles southeast of Chinle in Window Rock, Arizona. The petitioners waited all week for a response. It arrived on Sunday when, in Turner’s words, “shotguns and screaming dogs could be heard all over this place.”

By ignoring the petition, Spaulding and Chinle Subagency Superintendent Fred Maxwell, both Anglos, inadvertently ignited a contest over community control in Chinle. The hierarchical organization of the BIA meant that the petitioners would have to develop tactics that would generate the political capital necessary to force change from the ground up. In the wake of the second dog shoot, two of the petitioners, Overton Turner and John D. Wallace, launched a campaign to


change the Navajo Agency’s policies. Wallace had grown up on the reservation and was Diné, the Navajos’ name for themselves, meaning “the People.” He was a BIA employee with thirteen years of service who sought remedy through Navajo national politics and the manipulation of BIA hierarchy. On the other hand, Turner, a non-Navajo teacher adviser from Oklahoma, looked beyond the boundaries of the reservation, appealing instead to a well-organized network of dog advocacy groups. The outcome of their efforts holds larger implications for BIA governance and reservation politics.

Maxwell and Spaulding saw no reason for dog control in Chinle to match the standards of towns off the reservation because the reservation’s border set Navajo country apart from the dominant U.S. polity. Created in 1868 through a treaty between the United States and the Navajo people after a decade of war, removal, and internment, the reservation protected a portion of Diné homelands but brought the Navajo people under the governance of the United States. Located at the geographic center of the reservation, Chinle had long been a Navajo agricultural center and trading ground. During the reservation era, these qualities made Chinle attractive to Anglo traders, missionaries, and federal authorities. When the U.S. government erected a boarding school there in 1910, it established a permanent presence in the community. The BIA effectively governed the town thereafter.13

Exercising the privilege of power, Spaulding did not dignify the petitioners with a proper reply before allowing the second shooting to proceed. As general superintendent, Spaulding occupied a prized position within the BIA. His career in the Indian Service had begun as a carpenter and shop instructor at Flandreau Indian School in South Dakota, but he possessed political acumen and the determination to climb beyond his lowly rank. Thirty-two years later he had attained the superintendence of the BIA’s largest and most demanding agency. In this position, he was responsible “only to his superiors in the hierarchy of the Indian Bureau.”14 He maintained regular contact with the reservation as well as the BIA central office. He measured their respective strengths and weaknesses and knew the

internal politics of each. Likewise, he had the authority and contacts in Washington, D.C., to bend the system to his advantage.\textsuperscript{15}

This sort of fiefdom drew criticism even from within BIA ranks. In 1948 Dr. George A. Boyce, who had served as Director of Navajo Education since 1941, and his wife Elizabeth called the administrative framework of the BIA “an evil that has no place in America” and compared the powers of BIA administrators to “the bureaucracy of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the BIA maintained a high


\textsuperscript{16} Dr. George A. Boyce and Elizabeth C. Boyce, “Can the Autocratic Indian Bureau Be Made Democratic?” folder 11, Letters and Documents, Jan.–Mar. 1948, box 3, George A. Boyce Papers, Special Collection 167, University of California, Riverside.
degree of authority over the reservation. In 1956 nearly all institutions on the reservation—tribal courts, police departments, health services, and community administration committees—operated under the authority of the BIA and federal government. The BIA appointed reservation superintendents, controlled the tribal budgets, and could strong-arm the tribal chairman by withholding federal funds for tribal programs. Ordinances passed by the Tribal Council required the final approval of Commissioner of Indian Affairs Glenn Emmons. Many Navajo people on the ground saw little distinction between the democratically elected Tribal Council and the federal government, since the Tribal Council tended to cave in to federal demands.  

Such restrictions on local governance elevated the importance of grass-roots political activism. Tribal Councils might not have had much power, but the BIA nonetheless expected them to mediate disputes and mollify residents. Navajo laypeople, however, frequently bypassed the Council and brought their concerns directly to

17. See Charles Wilkinson, Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations (New York, 2005), 21. According to Adams, “The great majority of Navajos that I knew as a trader made no real distinction between the Navajo government and the BIA. As far as they were concerned, the tribal government was just working for the BIA and enforcing government regulations, which was true.” Jennifer Nez Denetdale has drawn similar conclusions. Likewise, Thomas Biolsi has argued that Indian self-government was less a recognition of Native sovereignty and more a co-optation of Indian people, “a mechanism by which a bureaucracy—the BIA, in the present case—can both legitimize itself and secure access to the grassroots.” Adams interview; Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” Wicazo Sa Review, 21 (Spring 2006), 1; Thomas Biolsi, “‘Indian Self-Government’ as a Technique of Domination,” American Indian Quarterly, 15 (1991), 24.  

18. Daniel M. Cobb, Kevin Bruyneel, John Troutman, and Jessica R. Cattelino have begun to answer the call for, in the words of Frederick E. Hoxie, “a new, wider view of American Indian politics.” In Indian Blues, for instance, John Troutman locates Native music and dance as sites of early twentieth-century political discourse. Similarly, I take an expansive view of activism as simply “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change,” a common definition found in The New Oxford American Dictionary. I view the community’s petition and subsequent efforts by John Wallace and Overton Turner as evidence of such campaigning and use the term “grass-roots” to indicate that ordinary people at the most basic level of community organization acted as the agents of change. See Fred Hoxie, “Missing the Point: Academic Experts and American Indian Politics,” in Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler, eds., American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900 (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 2007), 26; Cobb, “Continuing Encounters: Historical Perspectives,” in ibid., 57–69; Cobb, Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty (Lawrence, Kans., 2008); Jessica R. Cattelino, High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty (Durham, N.C., 2008); and John W. Troutman, Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934 (Norman, Okla., 2009).
the BIA or other U.S. government agencies, skillfully navigating the federal bureaucracy in order to ensure their own interests. To this end, Navajo communities circulated petitions on issues of local concern, such as requests for a boarding school, calls for improved roads and infrastructure, or pleas for poverty assistance and wage labor. The petition, then, can be seen as a favored vehicle of protest and political expression, one that served as a local apparatus for tutoring the state in the concrete needs and politics of specific Navajo communities.

Living on the reservation in agency towns like Chinle also exposed non-Navajos to BIA governance. As the response to the dog shootings in Chinle indicates, non-Navajo BIA employees occasionally joined petitions or circulated their own. Unlike Navajos, who had access to tribal governmental institutions, non-Navajos living on the reservation could seek recourse for community issues only through the BIA’s bureaucratic channels. Moreover, the general superintendent’s autocratic powers extended to BIA employees as well. So argued George and Elizabeth Boyce, who claimed that the general superintendent imposed dramatic limits upon employees’ freedom of speech: “He can stop them from making any press release or public statement on conditions prevailing on the reservation. He can stop them on anything, period.” A petition to the general superintendent thus hinged upon strength in numbers, demonstrating that an issue represented a community of concerned employees, not solitary discontent.

Nevertheless, the balance of power on the reservation tended to favor white BIA employees, and non-Navajos living in towns like Chinle usually escaped the worst intrusions of the state into reservation life. For example, in 1938, forty-eight residents of Window Rock, nearly all of whom worked for the BIA, distributed a letter of protest expressing their dissatisfaction with the “deplorable” condition of the town’s tennis courts. A few Navajo individuals also joined the letter, yet most Navajos at the time were more likely to voice opposition to the federal government’s compulsory livestock reduction program than to petition for first-class recreational facilities. The chasm between government employees who felt entitled to better tennis courts and underfed herdsmen offended by the government’s

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20. Boyce and Boyce, “Can the Autocratic Indian Bureau Be Made Democratic?”
culling of their flocks created a scene, in one historian’s words, “reminiscent of the final days of the British Empire in India.”

The comparison to colonial India is apt. Cathleen Cahill’s social history of the BIA, Federal Fathers and Mothers, reveals a two-tiered labor force of white people and Native Americans at the heart of BIA operations that embodied the colonial schemes of the British Raj. Since the nineteenth century, the BIA had employed thousands of Native women and men, but as late as 1967 the BIA’s Native employees were concentrated in low-paying, wage-board positions. White employees, meanwhile, occupied most salaried and administrative positions. This distinction was by design. Early policymakers intended Native employment to undermine the authority of tribal leaders, particularly by encouraging intimate connections between white employees—the eponymous federal fathers and mothers—and their Native “wards.” Still, if the BIA’s presence on the Navajo reservation represented what an observer called “a colonial society, with a colonial mentality,” few Anglo BIA employees would have recognized the situation as such.

Unlike the British Colonial Service, the U.S. Indian Service was more civic duty than overt colonial venture. In job postings to

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21. Peter Iverson, Diné: A History of the Navajos (Albuquerque, 2002), 166–167. This sense of entitlement suggests a broader disconnection between BIA employees and the Navajo majority. As Adams informed me, many BIA employees “had the people’s best interest at heart, and yet it is surprising how little they really knew the people”; Adams interview.


24. Dr. Charles T. Loram, formerly of the Native Affairs Commission for British South Africa and later head of Yale University’s Department of Race Relations, found that Indian Service personnel “don’t ‘stack up’ with people found in the British [Colonial]
potential applicants, for instance, the BIA described an objective of Indian schools as teaching "students, through their own participation in school and government, to become constructive citizens of their communities." During one staff meeting, Lee Payton, Chinle Sub-agency’s superintendent of schools, spoke of the BIA’s obligation to "perform for an underprivileged class of people." That Payton spoke these words in September 1953, one month after the U.S. Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108, the so-called "termination" policy intended to promote the rapid assimilation of American Indians, indicates the degree to which the good intentions of BIA employees could work in concert with the aims of the state. Even as Superintendent Payton implored teachers to maintain compassion, his vision of the BIA’s aim was transparent: “Ours is a great opportunity in that we are assisting in the changing of a people’s culture to that of our own.”

The effort to assimilate the Navajo people, which had begun in the 1860s, intensified in the years following World War II. Lobbying by the Navajo Tribal Council and its allies led to the U.S. Congress enacting the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act in 1950, which authorized $88,750,000 to be allocated over ten years for...
“resettlement of Navajos,” school facilities, and other development measures. Twenty-five million dollars funded education initiatives like the Navajo Special Education Program, targeting some 4,300 Navajo adolescents who lacked primary schooling with vocational instruction, literacy, and indoctrination in white domestic habits. Despite pleas from the Navajo Tribal Council for their children to be provided with an education on a par with their Anglo peers, the BIA’s brand of education typically prepared Navajo men for field labor and Navajo women for domestic service in white homes. Navajo students would thus be able to compete with white people for low-wage work off the reservation. In tandem with these educational efforts, the BIA also inaugurated a program to relocate Navajos from the reservation to urban areas. Notions of the suburban ideal permeated this scheme. On the reservation, relocation officers distributed brochures featuring photos of Native nuclear families in suburban settings to entice Navajos to the “beautiful houses” and “happy homes” that the BIA promised in cities such as Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago. Promises of “steady employment at good wages,” “a good place to live,” and “good schools for your children” proved effective. Between 1952 and 1960, the Bureau

27. Hildegard Thompson, *The Navajos’ Long Walk for Education: A History of Navajo Education* (Tsaile, Ariz., 1975), 119; Margaret Connell Szasz, *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination Since 1928* (Albuquerque, 1999), 116; Iverson, *Diné*, 191. William Zimmerman, former Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote to Hildegard Thompson, then Director of Indian Education, of the Navajo Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination Since 1928 Special Program regarding the domestic training of Navajo girls at the Chemewa Indian School in Oregon. “I am sure that you know... girls who lived for many years in domestic service... but no where in your letter do I find any suggestion that these girls are being prepared for any other kind of employment nor do I find any hint that any of them are being prepared for working in Indian service or for a return to the reservation.... Are you really trying to say that your objective is to train these girls, whether at Chemawa or elsewhere, so that they will not go home but will be satisfied to accept domestic service.” See Zimmerman to Thompson, Nov. 15, 1956, Education Related Matters (1953–1956), folder 1, box 7, Series II: Official Correspondence, William Zimmerman, Jr., Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

relocated 3,273 people from the Navajo reservation, with 445 women, men, and children drawn from the Chinle Subagency; one-third of them later returned to the reservation. 29

Relocation and education had the unintended effect of making domesticity and the suburban ideal a kind of lingua franca between Navajo and white petitioners who aspired to beautiful, happy homes on the reservation. The petitioners, despite their diversity, believed that if men outside the reservation should not prowl residential streets shooting dogs, they should not do so on the reservation. Yet dog shootings did occasionally occur in suburban and urban areas well beyond the reservation when an animal control officer or neighborhood vigilante fired at a vicious or wayward dog. These events, however, were rare enough to make news, and such cases were often met with protests by local humane societies. The shooters could also find themselves in court facing criminal charges or civil lawsuits from upset dog owners. 30 The situation in Chinle, where the police shot seventeen dogs in the street and then smeared canine innards across someone’s home, stood in stark contrast to national trends in dog control. Non-Navajo petitioners had not joined the Indian Service with the intention of becoming participants in such “unnecessary brutality.”

The petitioners may have shared a vision of “happy homes,” but, after the gory dog shoot on April 8, they all shared the experience of


state violence.\footnote{“Come to Denver: The Chance of a Lifetime!”} Most Anglo employees had never experienced violence of this nature, but such displays of authority structured Navajo life on and off the reservation. In a 1954 speech, for instance, the secretary-treasurer of the Navajo Tribal Council, Maurice McCabe, railed against the “flagrant abuse of the civil rights” that Navajos experienced off the reservation in Gallup, New Mexico. Speaking before a delegation of local businessmen, McCabe asked: “Where else is a citizen shackled to a lamp post by the arresting officer in the middle of town in the middle of the day for all passers-by to see, when the culprit had done nothing worse than perhaps double park his truck?” This abuse of police power, he argued, would never happen to the white men seated before him.\footnote{Maurice McCabe, “Statement Presented by Tribe at Advisory Committee Meeting with Gallup Town Officials, Feb. 3, 1954,” Gallup 1952–1953, box 17, Subject Files, Navajo Area Office, RG 75, NAPR.}

Yet in Chinle, the community’s mutual subjection to the performance of state violence highlighted the authoritarian powers that the BIA held over the reservation, creating a unique opportunity for political collaboration.

Each petitioner hoped that an appeal to General Superintendent Spaulding’s domestic sentiments would end the wanton killing of dogs in front of their children. After all, if the Navajo petitioners did not fully accept notions such as the “American way of life” and the suburban ideal, they knew that reservation authorities did. With so little power within the BIA hierarchy, they used the rhetoric of domesticity to legitimate their claims to reservation authorities. United in opposition to the BIA’s dog control policy and its effect on their families, the fifty petitioners insisted that a home on the reservation should guarantee that they did not live beyond the pale of what made a happy home outside the reservation’s borders.

**A brief history of dogs among the Navajo**

For the Diné, dogs were one component of a mixed pastoral-agricultural economy, and the Navajo traditionally used dogs to guard their sheep and goats from predators.\footnote{Hal L. Black, “Navajo Sheep and Goat Guarding Dogs: A New World Solution to the Coyote Problem,” *Rangelands*, 3 (1981), 235–237.} Diné subsistence patterns and mobility positioned them on the periphery of Spanish, Mexican, and eventually U.S. authority. Situated at the edge of empires, Navajo people could govern themselves, resist the state, and
Figure 2. Bureau of Indian Affairs employee housing. Temporary trailers often served as permanent residences (handwritten caption on the back showing through). Source: Chinle folder, box 17, Office Files of Commissioner Philleo Nash, 1961–1966, Records of the Office of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Figure 3. A family in the interior of one Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) residence. Drafty and cramped, employee housing fell short of the standards for “beautiful homes” that the BIA promoted off the reservation (handwritten caption on the back showing through). Source: Chinle folder, box 17, Office Files of Commissioner Philleo Nash, 1961–1966, Records of the Office of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
exploit fixed settlements by extracting valuable resources through raids.  

During the 1860s, however, the United States commenced a scorched earth campaign to end these raids and starve the Diné into submission. In addition to destroying nearly 2 million pounds of crops, U.S. troops slaughtered all the sheep, goats, horses, and dogs they could find as they marched through Canyon De Chelly, just a few miles away from Chinle.  

The U.S. government defeated the Diné militarily in 1864 and forced them from their homeland to Bosque Redondo, a squalid internment camp-cum-reservation in eastern New Mexico. Gen. James H. Carleton, governor and commander of New Mexico Territory, believed internment would tame Navajo savagery. The “purpose now,” he wrote in the autumn of 1863, “is never to relax the application of force with a people that can be no more trusted than you can trust the wolves that run through their mountains.” Carleton’s designs found skeptics. “You might as well make a hyena adopt the habits of a poodle dog,” scoffed one critic. Equating the Diné with dogs apparently came easily.  

The four years of internment are among the most tragic in Navajo history. A generation later, Frank Mitchell, a Navajo Blessingway singer, heard stories from elders of the internment and war with the United States. “The people must have gone through some very hard times,” he recalled, adding, “They even used to eat dog meat.” Still, through daily resistance and political maneuvering by Diné leaders, the Navajo secured a treaty with the federal government in 1868 that returned them to their homeland, Diné Bikéyah.  


36. Quoted in Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 70.

37. Iverson, *Diné*, 47. Such comparisons underscored the stereotype of the Navajo as an “aggressive nomadic people.” Denetdale argues that such discursive practices have been deployed to subjugate and control Navajo people and used to “justify the historical treatment of them by a host of federal officials, missionaries, health officials, scholars, educators, traders, and so forth.” See Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 18.

The Navajo reservation’s dog problem, while complex, developed from social and economic factors in which federal policies played no small role. The United States carried efforts to transform the Navajo into more governable subjects into the twentieth century, a pursuit that bore little fruit until the 1930s when the Great Depression, drought, and a livestock reduction program combined to shift the Navajo from a pastoral-agricultural economy to wage labor. The U.S. government served as the reservation’s largest employer. Following World War II, the expansion of federal services and infrastructure through the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act nurtured the development of small towns capable of supporting population densities previously unknown in Dinétah. Agency towns like Window Rock, Fort Defiance, Tuba City, Crownpoint, and Chinle grew due to the sizable number of non-Navajo federal employees living there. In rural areas, Navajos continued to keep sheep, but others moved to towns for employment or trade and brought their dogs along; John Wallace, for instance, owned both a dog and a cat. Moreover, many non-Navajo BIA employees brought pets to the reservation and bred dogs for surplus income. Most dogs were neither spayed nor neutered, and Navajo Agency officials doubted that the BIA would release the resources necessary to hire a veterinarian for the purpose of dog control, especially since key officials believed that such a program would entail an uphill battle at public education. Absent an enforceable leash law, almost all of the reservation’s dogs roamed and bred freely. The population density in communities like Chinle created breeding conditions for dogs comparable to those in large cities like Baltimore or St. Louis. The dog population skyrocketed.


42. Spaulding, for one, believed that spay and neuter programs would be difficult to implement; such programs also often met resistance in communities off the reservation.
Both petitioners and reservation authorities agreed that the dog population on the reservation presented a significant threat to health and safety. “There are dogs every place you look out here,” recalled one Chinle resident; “Dogs in the Indians’ sheep camp, dogs running up and down the street, and dogs and coyotes, too, attacking our garbage cans every night.” While there is no mention of rabies outbreaks in the archival record, dogs did form packs, kill sheep, and attack other dogs. Aggressive dogs attacked people as well. Children were the most vulnerable. As recently as 1982, the Navajo Area Indian Health Service saw as many as 1,037 cases of dog bites a year. No one, not even the petitioners, viewed aggressive dog packs roaming the streets as good for reservation life.

Post-World War II efforts at controlling the dog population initially resembled measures under way in towns across the United States and appear to have been community-driven and included a formal endorsement from the tribe. Representing the Fort Defiance community and the Window Rock safety committee, Ed Turner appeared before Judge Jim Shirley in the Navajo Tribal Court on July 7, 1950, to request that stray and “untagged” dogs be destroyed. The Navajo judge issued the following ruling: “Since these animals are considered a nuisance among the populated area of these two villages, therefore, it is the order of the court that any dog straying within these areas, not properly tagged or ownership not properly established, should be disposed in the most humane manner.” Officials in Window Rock soon put Judge Shirley’s ruling into effect in order “to eliminate the nightly serenade.” Yet the problem continued unabated. In 1952, the Fort Defiance committee


43. Cumming, Before the Roads were Paved, 59. The first mention of rabies occurred after the Chinle protests in Spaulding to Eilers, Nov. 14, 1956. He wrote, “[I]n the interest of safeguarding our school children and our own pets, and we must take every measure to prevent the outbreak and spread of rabies on the Reservation. A heavy outbreak could have tragic results.” Outside Fort Defiance in 1956, a pack reportedly invaded a corral and killed over fifty sheep. W. Barton Greenwood to James H Cruikshank, Dec. 14, 1956, in 170 Law and Order—Dog Disposal 1956–1957. Daniels, “A Study of Dog Bites on the Navajo Reservation.”

came to the conclusion that the “dog problem” could be solved “by bringing the subject right before the people who are owners of dogs, and plans can be promulgated to handle this vital problem for future control of dogs.” Subsequent regulations in Fort Defiance added a nightly curfew for dogs and attempted to make department heads responsible for the dogs belonging to their employees.

A reservation-wide dog control policy arrived on Valentine’s Day in 1955 when General Superintendent Spaulding issued Navajo Agency Order No. 19 regarding the “Control and Disposition of Wild, Stray and Vicious Dogs in Communities on the Reservation.” The order required strays to be captured and impounded on a date determined by the superintendent of the local subagency. On the appointed day, owners should keep their dogs confined and bring any unwanted dogs to the Branch of Law and Order. Impounded dogs would be kept for a period of five days, after which the unclaimed would be “destroyed and disposed of.” The order also stated that “all dogs which are running loose and cannot be captured after reasonable time will be destroyed by designated local representatives of the Branch of Law and Order. Shotguns only, utilizing No. 00 buckshot, will be used.”

Contrary to the way events unfolded in Chinle, Navajo Area officials had considered the safety of both its employees and community members. The goal of Order No. 19 was to catch and euthanize dogs, not to shoot them in the streets. Shotguns would be a measure of last resort, to be used only against vicious dogs or those too elusive to catch safely. Moreover, officials considered shotguns to be relatively safe among people. Unlike a .30 caliber rifle, for instance, the charge of No. 00 buckshot is short, effective, and unlikely to ricochet.

Clearly something went awry. Judge Shirley’s order to destroy dogs in “the most humane manner” had been lost in the translation of local measures to reservation-wide policy. What accounts for the carnage of April 8, 1956—the broken windows, the seventeen dead dogs, the grotesque display of intestines on Overton Turner’s home? Fred Maxwell, the Chinle Subagency superintendent, pinned the
event on a rogue employee, Capt. William T. Carolin of the Fort Defiance Police Department. According to Maxwell, Carolin “was intoxicated at the time he proceeded to Chinle, a fact which explained the mishandling of his assignments there.” But Carolin was acting under the influence of a cocktail more potent than spirits. His behavior fit into a broader pattern of civil rights abuses and police brutality toward Navajos at the time. History influenced his actions as well. The heavy-handed and violent implementation of Navajo Agency Order No. 19 recalled an older era that continued to shape Navajo life. Ninety-two years earlier, when Gen. Carleton learned that dogs had become a nuisance at Bosque Redondo, he had ordered that “all dogs found at large will be shot.”

The top dog

“I have often asked myself the question as to whether a stray dog is more dangerous than a stray bullet.” John D. Wallace typed those words onto Department of the Interior stationery in his office at Chinle’s Branch of Relocation Services. Eight days had passed since the September 30 dog shoot. Having been subjected to the violence a second time, the original petitioners rallied to prevent a third shooting. Wallace wrote to Spaulding to present his opinion of the reservation’s dog-control policy. Although eager to find a more humane method of controlling the stray dog population, he cared more about the human costs of Spaulding’s policy. The

48. Young to Area Director W. Wade Head, Nov. 26, 1956.
49. The BIA and the Justice Department conducted numerous investigations into police brutality toward Navajos in the 1940s and 1950s. See folder 34094–47 Navajo 150, box 59, Navajo, BIA Agencies Central Classified Files (CCF), 1940–1957, RG 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. The Secretary-Treasurer of the Navajo Tribal Council, Maurice McCabe, understood the civil rights abuses that Navajos experienced in Gallup as an extension of frontier-era violence: “[T]here are accounts from the old folks about mistreatment and murder of Navajos who strayed into town. If anyone felt like shooting at a Navajo he did so without any worry about the consequences.” As historian Patrick Wolfe has written, “When invasion is recognized as a structure rather than an event, its history does not stop—or, more to the point, become relatively trivial—when it moves on from the era of frontier homicide.” See McCabe, “Statement Presented by Tribe at Advisory Committee Meeting with Gallup Town Officials, Feb. 3, 1954,” Gallup 1952–1953; Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 402.
50. Quoted in Sides, Blood and Thunder, 381.
risk of physical harm from a vicious dog, if more immediately pal-
pable, did not outweigh the severe psychological toll that dog shoots
imposed upon his community.

Authority within the BIA flowed from the top down. To write to
a superior expressing annoyance with policy risked admonishment
or worse. But Wallace knew how to make non-conformity palat-
able.52 Born at Fort Defiance, Arizona, in 1912, he had grown up
on the reservation and was the product of a lifelong education in all
things BIA. At age fourteen, upon learning that he was to be bused
to a distant boarding school, he marched into the Indian agent’s
office and asked to attend the local public school so he could remain
near his family and home community. The agent denied his request:
The public school was for whites only. Wallace knew this, but chal-
lenging racism must have bolstered his resolve because he made it a
practice. After attending the University of New Mexico, he returned
to the reservation as a BIA employee, working variously as a teacher,
manual training instructor, boys’ counselor, and welfare worker
during his thirteen years with the Bureau. He learned how to survive
within the organization’s constraints while advocating for his own
interests and those of his people.53

Wallace’s letter to Spaulding provided three accounts of the
dog shoots focused on domestic scenes that contrasted sharply with
the “happy homes” ideal. During one shooting, he watched as an
elderly Navajo woman walked through town, pet dog in tow. A vehi-
cle carrying “a couple of the shooters” approached. “They shot the
lady’s dog,” he wrote. “She was so overcome [that she] did not know
what to say nor do.” The police tossed the carcass into the car and
told the woman that prior notice of the dog shoot had been posted
about town. The woman, according to Wallace, “did not know a word
of English to speak or read.”54

On another shooting day, Wallace happened to be visited by
a young Navajo World War II veteran. In addition to receiving “sev-
eral severe wounds” during the war, the vet also bore the emotional
scars of battle. “When the high powered rifles began to roar near the
house the young man became very much disturbed,” Wallace wrote.

“Attendance at Navaho Museum Tops 1000.”
The stress proved too great, forcing the veteran’s brother to run out and plead with the police to stop the shooting.\textsuperscript{55}

Wallace saved the most personal account for last. During the September 30 dog shoot, Wallace’s daughter stepped out onto their front porch and heard a shot whistle past. She had recently fallen into a deep manhole on the school campus, which caused her to become “very sensitive, emotionally.” As the shots rang out, his daughter “went out of her head” with fear. She fled inside, slumped on the couch, and spoke quietly to herself for some time. “Please don’t shoot, please don’t shoot,” she repeated. It was more than her father could stomach. He vowed that, should the dog shoots continue, he would move his family as far away as he could on every scheduled shooting day. Then, he informed Spaulding, “I will be saddened only by the stories that other Navajos tell me about the shootings.”\textsuperscript{56}

At a time when most Navajo men wore Levi’s, boots, and cowboy hats, John Wallace donned a suit and tie. Thick-rimmed glasses framed his round face, and he favored short hair over a chongo knot. He wore the uniform of a bureaucrat, not a rancher. Working for the BIA allowed him to earn a living without leaving his community and to put his college education to use helping his people. And, like many of the Native BIA employees who founded the National Congress of American Indians in 1944, he worked the system from the inside, cloaking activism in conformity.\textsuperscript{57}

Wallace was a subordinate with little line authority beyond his own office, so his appeal to Spaulding could be dismissed easily. After all, he had signed the petition two weeks earlier and seen how little that accomplished. For his letter to be effective, he needed an ally from outside the BIA, someone who could apply external pressure on Spaulding regarding the dog-control situation. He had to choose carefully. Forwarding his letter to the \textit{Gallup Independent}, for instance, would grab Superintendent Spaulding’s attention, yet such a public act of dissent would be viewed as a direct attack against the

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}
Bureau. It might not cost Wallace his job—Civil Service regulations made adverse disciplinary actions so thorny that firing someone was generally not worth the effort—but Spaulding possessed an arsenal of informal, coercive measures and could squeeze Wallace out if he liked. So Wallace kept the issue on the reservation and decided to put Navajo self-government to the test by sending a copy of his letter to the chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, Paul Jones.

Although he assumed office the same year that Navajo Agency Order No. 19 went into effect, Chairman Jones had been unaware of the Bureau’s dog-control policies until he received Wallace’s letter. As the democratically elected head of a domestically dependent sovereign nation, Jones held powers akin to those of a governor. He typically dealt with issues of national concern. Local issues came under the purview of Tribal Council delegates and community chapter houses, a system of municipal governance that the Tribal Council formally recognized and incorporated into national government in 1955. Dog control, moreover, was a matter of “law and order” assigned to the police. While the tribe operated its own courts, the BIA administered police services on the reservation in 1956, as it had since 1868. By bringing the Bureau’s dog-control policies to the tribal chairman’s attention, John Wallace elevated the issue to the arena of Navajo national politics.

Chairman Jones found the BIA’s dog shoots “hard to believe” and wrote to Spaulding personally on October 16, expressing his strong opposition. He concluded, “It has been mentioned in the letter that they shot the old lady’s dog on sight. I request that you look into this matter that a better method to rid the area of stray dogs be undertaken as a measure of safeguard to people and animals in the Chinle area.”

Spaulding understood that the Navajo Tribe was in a period of profound transition during Paul Jones’s chairmanship, as the Tribal Council struggled to combat federal termination policy. In August 1953, Congress had passed two of the most damaging laws in Indian history: House Concurrent Resolution 180 and Public Law 280. A one-two punch aimed at destroying Indian nations, the former threatened


to sell off tribal lands and withdraw all federal support, while the latter
gave states unilateral authority to extend their power over Indian
reservations, essentially allowing the states to usurp Native sover-
eignty.\(^{60}\) In the face of these threats, the Tribal Council called for the
“strengthening, rather than the abandonment, of the Bureau of
Indian Affairs” and “localization of MORE authority at the AREA
LEVEL to expedite Tribal industrial development and Tribal author-
ity.”\(^{61}\) Although the Tribal Council and its chairman could lobby
Washington and request his dismissal, Spaulding likely reasoned that,
as long as he remained a strategic ally in the termination struggle,
Chairman Jones would be in no position to battle over a few dog
shoots on the reservation.

Spaulding responded immediately, acknowledging that he had
received “a number of complaints regarding the manner which
wild, stray and vicious dogs are being disposed of in Chinle.” He
stressed that the Navajo Agency did not intend to endanger anyone
with the use of firearms. Both he and Subagency Superintendent
Maxwell took the issue seriously, he assured Jones, and were consid-
ering the possibility of trapping stray animals as an alternative. The
time had come to try another approach, Spaulding conceded, as
“the community is up in arms about it.”\(^{62}\)

While Wallace worked within a Navajo nationalist path of influ-
ence, Overton Turner was seeking help from outside the reservation
by appealing to dog lovers. Turner was new to the reservation and its
politics. He had moved to Chinle in 1954 after becoming a teacher
adviser with the Bureau, since his previous jobs had proved inade-
quate to support his wife, Nancy Pearl, and their four young chil-
dren. The BIA position offered the highest salary he could find
while also allowing him to perform good works among an impover-
ished people. Born in Sherman, Texas, in 1920, Turner spent much
of his peripatetic youth across the border in Oklahoma, where his
family’s roots stretched back to an earlier era of removal, relocation,
and settlement. His grandfather had moved to the Chickasaw
Nation from Arkansas sometime in the 1870s, naming his ninth
child after a prominent Chickasaw judge, Overton Love, who had

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\(^{61}\) “Thank You, Mr. President, Thank You, Mr. Secretary” *Gallup Independent*, July
15, 1953, p. 5; emphasis in original. See also Austin, *Navajo Courts*, 27.

\(^{62}\) Spaulding to Jones, Oct. 17, 1956, 136 Chinle Subagency 1955–1958, box 17,
offered the family land in exchange for a namesake. If the younger Overton Turner identified as Indian, however, he did not emphasize the matter. He considered himself white, American, and, above all, Christian. A patriot and a minister in the Church of Christ, he had faith in America’s exceptional democracy.63

In two years, he had made friends at the boarding school and enjoyed working with the dormitory children, but he experienced difficulty in adjusting to problems in managing the dormitory. His supervisor, Cleveland Miller, expected him to be both an administrator and a “servant to the organization.” Still, he struggled to accept his place within the line of authority and had received two admonishments regarding his performance of duty in as many years.64

Perhaps his faith in democracy and unease with the BIA hierarchy help explain why, on October 11, 1956—three days after Wallace wrote to Spaulding—Overton Turner contacted Walter Kendall, president of the National Dog Welfare Guild. With the opening lines of his letter, Turner secured a powerful ally: “We have a situation here in Chinle, Arizona that I feel you could help us with. I refer to the ‘dog shoot’ that happens about every six months.” The letter recounted the gory details of the April 8 dog shoot, the petition on September 23, and the subsequent dog shoot on September 30. Speaking for the petitioners, he wrote, “We feel a letter from you to Commissioner Emmons, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C., under whom we work, could help us in our effort to get the shooting stopped.”65 In the weeks and months that followed, he would get what he asked for and more.


An exuberant, mustached man in his late sixties, Kendall had devoted his life to dogs, abandoning a career in finance during the Depression in order to start his own dog food business, which he continued to run in addition to conducting his duties as the dog guild president. Since 1930 he had bred some 500 Scottish terriers, including 1955’s “best of winners” at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Kendall’s devotion to animals, his ties to finance and the pet food industry, and his prominence among dog breeders and lovers combined to make him a consummate spokesperson for the guild. Beyond sponsoring National Dog Week, the guild encouraged the adoption of homeless dogs and advocated for, as Kendall put it, “good laws for dogs.” He had a great deal of national influence and a built-in constituency. The shootings in Chinle turned his stomach.

Meanwhile, responding to the influence of Chairman Jones on General Superintendent Spaulding, the Chinle Community Administration Committee (CAC) met on November 2 to devise a response to those in the community who “still object strenuously to the destruction, within the community limits, of dogs which could not be safely captured.” The Chinle CAC consisted of six appointed BIA employees charged with facilitating the daily operations of the community and with advising the subagency superintendent on local issues. In contrast to the Navajo government’s chapter house system, CACs functioned as a non-representative form of colonial governance. Because CACs drew their membership from subagency department heads, most agency towns tended to be governed by a handful of unelected white men. In fact, the Chinle CAC’s only non-white member was Cleveland Miller, principal of Chinle Boarding School and one of the 122 African American educators who migrated to the Navajo reservation during the 1950s.

With the problem thrown back in their laps, the six members of the Chinle CAC determined that their chairman, A. J. Freeman, should appoint a “Dog Committee” formed of local residents who

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would gather and impound all stray dogs found within the community. Impounded dogs would be “disposed of” and buried under supervision of sanitarians and with the assistance of the Branch of Law and Order. Additionally, the dog committee would issue a report on its progress every two weeks, indicating the number of dogs caught and killed. The CAC promised to consult with the dog committee should the need arise.  

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It seemed then that John Wallace’s strategy had been successful. Before they ever heard from national dog activists, the Chinle CAC’s resolution took into consideration both the need for increased community involvement as well as Spaulding’s suggestion that trapping dogs might offer a more appealing solution. In fact, Spaulding had decided to create the dog committee before he heard from Wallace or Jones. When he had received the original petition back on September 23, “it was returned to the Chinle CAC with instructions to organize the petitioners to dispose of excess and wild vicious dogs.” 69 In other words, Spaulding actually had responded to the original petition, but the local CAC members had done nothing until after the second shooting. They would eventually have to do something. As subordinates to the general superintendent, the CAC had little discretion to act otherwise. Still, because the September 30 dog shoot had thinned the feral dog population, the directive lacked urgency. With the letters from Wallace and Jones to Spaulding, the issue went from an administrative one to a political one, making the formation of the dog committee a necessity.  

The stakes rose again when Overton Turner’s letter persuaded Walter Kendall to take up the Chinle cause. On November 2, the same day the Chinle CAC met to authorize the dog committee, Kendall wrote to BIA Commissioner Glenn L. Emmons. His letter warned that the Navajo Agency’s dog disposal policy would soon become a matter of concern for the nation’s dog-loving public. By the time the letter reached Emmons’s desk, Kendall had already activated a network of dog advocacy groups. If Emmons had been unaware of the National Dog Welfare Guild, he would soon learn that it “include[d] some of the biggest as well as finest persons in

69. Maxwell to Young, Nov. 9, 1956.
this country," as one letter noted. The guild counted Eleanor Roose-
velt among its thousands of members. Celebrities like Ed Sullivan, Bob Hope, and Guy Lombardo had each served as the honorary chairman. And, like other animal rights associations, the bulk of the guild’s membership was white, affluent, and educated. By bringing the Bureau’s dog-control polices to the attention of the National Dog Welfare Guild, Turner had brought the issue into the arena of U.S. politics. The Chinle petitioners had thus gained a constituency that the BIA could not easily ignore or control.

Over the course of two weeks in November, Commissioner Em-
mons’s office would hear from several concerned citizens regarding the dog-control policies of its Navajo Area’s office. Most of the letters were like Alice Scott’s, who wrote to the commissioner as soon as she heard of the “atrocities being perpetrated on the stray dogs in Chinle, Arizona.” The “Blue Ribbon Dog” columnist for the Los Angeles Times, Scott pleaded for Emmons to intervene in the situation, stop the “mass brutality,” and hold responsible those who had harmed dogs in the past. Other letters expressed the same ideas but even more passionately. As Jack Baird told the commissioner, “Having been an old Marine, and also having lived through 29 operations and a 25 year running fight with cancer, I don’t get my innards upset easily. Well, today I get them turned upside down.” He assured Emmons that, when news of the “damnably brutal” events in Chinle reached the rest of the nation’s 17 million dog owners, it would have a similar effect.

It was a cold November in Navajo country. Soft snow fell occa-
sionally, dusting the mesas and arroyos. But officials in the Navajo Area Office could feel the heat radiating from the commissioner’s office in Washington. Appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953, Glenn Emmons had made raising the standard of living on the Navajo reservation a cornerstone of his policies. Before accept-
ing the position, he had served as president of the First State Bank of Gallup, New Mexico, just outside the Navajo reservation, and he was

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considered an acclaimed friend of the Indians. Indeed, the Navajo Tribal Council had lobbied feverishly for Emmons to head the BIA and proclaimed his appointment as “the best news the Navajo Tribe has received since the Army announced that our people were to be released from captivity at Fort Sumner.” A hyperbole for sure, but the Tribal Council felt it now had a friend in Washington. Emmons’s success was intertwined with that of the Navajo Nation.

With his letter, Turner had struck a weak spot. The hierarchical organization of the BIA made Emmons vulnerable to attack from outside pressure groups. In other words, the buck stopped with Emmons. Unlike the area offices, which were less subject to public scrutiny, the commissioner was the face of the Bureau, his actions “constantly monitored by the Administration, Congress, the press, and the major Indian organizations.” He felt the sting of each complaint that reached his desk. The wrath of dog activists was the last thing he needed. Hailing from the sports-analogy school of management, Emmons thought of supervisors “as being about the same as a quarterback on a football team.” Clearly someone had fumbled the ball regarding this dog situation.

If John Wallace’s letter made the dog committee a necessity, Turner’s letter made the situation an emergency. When the CAC met again on November 26 to appoint members to the dog committee, it followed Spaulding’s orders exactly. All seven men appointed to the dog committee had signed the original petition—including Wallace and Turner.

General Superintendent Spaulding sought to craft a solution within the power structure of the Bureau so that the BIA could retain maximum control of the situation. As he understood it, the solution to morale troubles among the rank and file was to have employees

73. Nickeson, “The Structure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs,” 64.
74. “Management Notes for the Supervisor, Volume II, Number 4, October 1953,” Management Notes, box 24, entry 759 E, Office of Education Programs, Division of Instructional Services, Instructive Services Subject Files, 1910–1969, RG 75.
“clear down the line feel that they are a part of the organization.”

Chairman Jones controlled only the Tribal Council and its executive committee, but the entire reservation fell under Spaulding’s authority. He needed to maintain order and obedience even if he felt the concerns of the Chinle petitioners were valid. The creation of the dog committee clarified the line of authority for the appointed members and brought a dissident group under the control of Superintendent Maxwell and the CAC. Further, the bi-weekly reports offered a means to monitor the group itself while also giving committee members an opportunity to express themselves knowing that their supervisors might take action. Any militancy—brining in more dog activists, for example—could be kept in check. Not least of all, the creation of the committee shifted a contentious and bothersome issue away from reservation authorities. Should the dog committee succeed, the Chinle CAC and Spaulding could claim credit, thereby reaffirming the necessity of hierarchical control. On the other hand, if the residents of Chinle continued to protest the dog situation, then Wallace, Turner, and the rest of the dog committee would be held responsible, not the CAC or anyone else higher up in the chain of command.

While the creation of the dog committee accomplished several goals for Spaulding, it did very little for the issue of dog control on the reservation. Indeed, by charging the dog committee with solving the problem, the Navajo Agency appears to have sought retribution, not resolution. After all, Agency Order No. 19 permitted the use of shotguns because many dogs were indeed “wild” and “vicious.” Maxwell, who oversaw the Chinle CAC, argued in favor of the dog shoots because “the risk of being bitten is much too great in some cases to justify an attempt at capture of wild dogs.”

The notion that six untrained, white-collar professionals and one Presbyterian minister could successfully “gather” and impound reservation dogs was laughable. To do so on a weekly basis, without anyone sustaining injury, would have been ludicrous.

Despite the fact that Spaulding had received a petition signed by fifty Anglo and Navajo community members, an impassioned letter from a well-regarded Navajo employee, and a personal appeal.


from the Navajo Tribal Council chairman regarding the issue of dog control in Chinle, all he did was authorize the dog committee. What other “American town” addressed dog control by appointing a committee of laypeople? Spaulding had dismissed their concerns because he could afford to. Like the Navajo Tribal chairman, the general superintendent of the Navajo Reservation also possessed powers akin to a governor. But, unlike Chairman Jones, who was democratically elected, Spaulding was appointed to office and had neither term limits nor constituents to consider. Jones represented the Navajo people, but Spaulding represented the world’s top dog: the dominant sovereignty of the U.S. government.

Upon receiving Kendall’s letter and other threats from around the nation, Spaulding’s superior, Navajo Area Director Wade Head, needed to know exactly what had happened in Chinle—and fast—so he could prepare a response to Commissioner Emmons. He placed Robert Young, assistant general superintendent and one of Navajo service’s most capable employees, in charge of the investigation. On November 14, Young presented Chinle Subagency Superintendent Maxwell with three questions: Who was Overton L. Turner? What was the Bureau’s account of police Captain Carolin’s actions on April 8? And what action had the Chinle CAC taken in response to petitions from the Chinle Community?78

Maxwell responded defensively. The CAC considered dog disposal as a measure to prevent an outbreak of rabies but had encountered “very poor cooperation from the dog owning families or persons feeding the stray and vicious dogs.” While he admitted that Carolin “did some reckless shooting on the Chinle campus of which the CAC Committee did not approve,” all of the other dog disposals had closely followed Agency Order No. 19, including the disposal on September 30. As for Overton Turner, Maxwell and a majority of the CAC felt that Turner’s letter exaggerated conditions and had given the false impression that dogs were shot every Sunday. He insisted that the CAC had not “ignored” Turner’s petition, although he used a circumscribed definition of the word. He explained that Turner’s “petition was carried into the office of the General Superintendent and it was sent back to the Chinle CAC Committee for action,” meaning the creation of the dog committee.79 The embarrassment that

79. Ibid.
Overton Turner brought to the Chinle Subagency ensured that when the CAC met the following week to select members of the dog committee, he would be appointed its chairman.80

Young’s final report included the petition in full. He noted that fifty people had signed the resolution, whom he described as “wives of employees, and other members of the community.” Of the petitioners, 62 percent were women, and Young’s patronizing characterization dismissed their activism as insignificant. Within BIA ranks, however, the categories “wives” and “employees” were not mutually exclusive. The BIA had a long-standing policy of hiring married couples.81 Two petitioners, Margaret Rixford and Margaret B. Wilde, were married to CAC members and signed their names in public opposition to their spouses’ policies. While their voices are absent from the archival record, these women surely exerted considerable political and domestic pressure within their constricted sphere of authority. As evidence, when the Chinle CAC met again on November 27, Raymond Rixford, presumably under pressure from his wife, Margaret, requested “that a motion of the last meeting concerning disposal of dogs, which read, ‘all were in favor’ be changed to read, ‘five were in favor,’ one abstained.”82

If reservation authorities hoped that the dog committee would solve their problems and the issue of dog control would blow over, they were sorely disappointed in December when Turner’s letter appeared in Popular Dogs under the heading “An Open Appeal.” Alice Wagner, the editor, told readers that “this ill-considered treatment of strays should be protested at once,” directing readers to write the Commissioner of Indian Affairs or directly to reservation officials in Chinle. Commissioner Emmons’s office was “flooded with letters of complaints from individuals, as well as dog protective societies, from all parts of the United States,” he later recalled. In the face of this public relations fiasco, the BIA had no choice but to rectify the situation. “Poor strays,” wrote Marguerite Jones to reservation officials, “cannot help their condition,” but the residents of Chinle certainly could.83

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81. Young to Head, Nov. 26, 1956; Cahill, Federal Fathers and Mothers, 6 and chap. 4.
The BIA sent an inspection team from Washington to the Navajo Agency to investigate the matter and develop an alternative to the reservation’s dog-control policies. Meanwhile on the ground in Chinle, Spaulding and Maxwell tried to get out ahead of the fact-finding committee. To do so, they replaced the dog committee with a professional trapper named Casey Jones.

When Jones arrived in Chinle on Monday morning, December 17, 1956, a large dog trap and gas chamber awaited him. The equipment had been shipped from the Fort Defiance agency at Maxwell’s request, indicating to those opposing the dog shoots that Spaulding and Maxwell could have employed it before. After repairing and baiting the trap, he went from house to house in Chinle, informing all residents that he planned to catch stray and vicious dogs and requesting that dog owners keep their pets leashed. If their dog got trapped, all they would have to do is contact him and he would release it, but he would catch and impound any remaining dogs. After keeping dogs impounded for five days, Jones loaded them in the back of his pickup truck and drove them away to the gas chamber, which was placed outside the community. He gassed the dogs. It took three to five minutes apiece. He hauled the bodies into the hills and buried them. He did not relish the work, but it was his responsibility and he performed it well.

Still dealing with the dog lobby’s pressure on Washington, and despite the fact that Casey Jones’s work had succeeded the previous month, on January 14, 1957, Spaulding ordered a halt to all dog disposal programs on the reservation until Navajo Agency Order No. 19 could be revised to include “a humane method of putting ownerless dogs to death.” The order came three months and nineteen days after Chinle community members had presented Spaulding with their petition. The fifty women and men who signed their names against the BIA’s actions could declare victory.

Turner must have felt nothing short of elation. For two months he had faced the ire of BIA administrators, with little open support from his peers. When the investigating staff members arrived from

86. Spaulding to All Subagency Superintendents RE Elimination of Stray, Vicious, and Wild Dogs, Jan. 14, 1957, in ibid.
the central office in Washington, D.C., they spoke to him, confiding that they “knew this whole affair needed to be settled.” The investigators talked to nearly everyone in Chinle, taking notes for their report to Commissioner Emmons. “It was my letter to you,” Turner told Kendall, “and your letters to other organizations and to the commissioner that did the job. Otherwise I am sure that it would still be on a local level here and on a local level not much can be done.”

Consequences and conclusions

On February 21, 1957, Commissioner Glenn Emmons composed three letters regarding the Chinle dog situation. First, he addressed his most pressing problem, Alice Wagner at Popular Dogs. The letter, which appeared in the magazine’s May 1957 edition, provided background on the severity of the Navajo reservation’s dog problem and assured readers that the letter from Overton Turner described an isolated event. As a person who was “extremely fond of pets,” the commissioner regretted that such a distasteful incident had occurred and promised that the Navajo Agency had revised its policies, adopting a more humane measure of animal control.

Next he wrote to G. Warren Spaulding, expressing his deep regret that the superintendent, upon receiving the Chinle petition, had not considered the situation in a “more serious light.” He instructed Spaulding to review the overall operation of his administration to insure that such an incident would not be repeated. Spaulding got the message. His power had been checked by the petitioners, who, in order to claim their rights as U.S. and Navajo citizens, could take an issue as seemingly trivial as dog catching up to the Tribal Council chairman or head off the reservation to outside advocacy groups.

Finally, Emmons wrote to Overton Turner. He understood Turner’s position and that his previous complaints had gone unanswered. However, in contacting Walter Kendall, Turner had “failed to exhaust all the administrative remedies available through an appeal

87. Turner, “Reservation Shoots.”
89. Ibid.
to the Area Director or directly to this Office.” In the future, the commissioner concluded, “We will expect you to resort to proper channels of communication.”

In this third and final letter, Emmons asserted the power of his office and that of the BIA, even when Turner had proven its limitations.

Turner remained at Chinle Boarding School through the school year, but his letter had created too much heat for a career in Indian Service. On May 19, 1957, he tendered his resignation, informing his supervisors that he was taking a position as pastor at a Presbyterian church in Tishomingo, Oklahoma. “I leave the service of the Department of Interior,” he wrote, “without prejudice and with respect for its policies and personnel.” Most on the reservation associated the entire affair with Turner, yet a few suspected the involvement of others who had “not come out in the open like Mr. Overton Turner did.”

Thus, John Wallace’s relative anonymity and adherence to line authority allowed him to remain with the Bureau. He eventually put his political skills to work for his community as a member of the Chinle CAC and later as Tribal Council delegate. After his letter and appointment to the dog committee, Wallace does not reappear in the annals of dog control—that is, except for a curious incident in which his own dog was fatally poisoned.

Although chastened and embarrassed, G. Warren Spaulding survived the Chinle affair. In March 1957, before retiring honorably and on his own terms a year later, he submitted Navajo Agency Order No. 23, rescinding Order No. 19 and instituting a new dog-control policy that included an annual rabies vaccination program to be administered through the U.S. Public Health Service. The Navajo Tribal Council backed the order and passed a resolution authorizing the chairman and the general superintendent jointly to devise a program for the humane destruction of wild dogs in

90. Ibid.


communities across the reservation. Using a method patterned after that of Phoenix, Arizona, or what the petitioners would have called one of “our American Towns,” reservation dogs would be trapped and any unclaimed dogs would be disposed of via gas chamber.  

Casey Jones renewed his career as the reservation’s dog trapper, traveling with a custom-built mobile gas chamber. He found the gas chamber to be “first class for disposing of dogs, but too heavy for a light pickup on rough roads.” He managed despite the encumbrance. In three months, he gassed 139 dogs. When he fell ill a year later and could work no longer, no other agency employee was found capable of assuming his responsibility. Remarking upon Jones’s departure, Fred Maxwell wrote: “From past experiences with the dog problems at this Subagency, it is my firm belief we should take the dog problem in a manner which will not kick back as far as the Central Office as it did some two years ago.” Maxwell suggested a number of revisions to Order No. 23, which could have provided a sustainable solution to reservation dog control if they had not been deemed too costly.

In October 1960, reservation authorities admitted that the procedures outlined in Navajo Agency Order No. 23 “proved not workable.” The order was rescinded and replaced with an emergency resolution authorizing “the restriction, control, and elimination of wild, stray, ownerless, unclaimed, unvaccinated and potentially dangerous or vicious dogs or other animals.” The feral dog problem continues to this day.

Writing in 1962, anthropologist Edward Spicer observed that, on American Indian reservations, “every agency town resembled


every other agency town as a symbol to Indians of lost political autonomy.” The story of the Chinle dog shoots suggests that, when at odds with BIA policy, the agency town could be a symbol of lost political autonomy to non-Indians as well. The administrative structure of the reservation, with its roots in the colonial era, meant that the spatial boundaries of the Navajo reservation effectively rendered citizenship as something distinct from and inferior to that of citizens outside the reservation, placing both Navajo residents and non-Navajo BIA employees under the dominion of an authoritarian government. In other words, the BIA could dismiss the petitioners’ appeal for parity with communities outside the reservation because the Bureau effectively controlled all forms of governance on the reservation. Substantive changes to BIA dog-control policy therefore required a constituency beyond the reservation’s borders, in this case, affluent white dog lovers. In the end, the political clout of dogs and their advocates in “American Towns outside the reservation” yielded far greater political power than twenty-four Navajo community members, non-Navajo BIA employees, or even Chairman Paul Jones, the elected representative of the Navajo people.

Yet the petitioners were not toothless. They forced policy changes by practicing what political scientist Kevin Bruyneel has called “postcolonial politics on the boundaries,” defined as a mode of political activism that “generates its power by moving back and forth across the institutional and discursive boundaries of settler-states,” in this case the United States. John Wallace moved between institutions on the reservation, appealing to line authority within the BIA while pitting the Tribal Council chairman against the general superintendent. Overton Turner’s letter carried the issue outside the reservation’s borders, making the shootings in Chinle a matter of U.S. politics and transferring political power back to the petitioners. And, when the fifty petitioners claimed Chinle as an “American Town,” they erased the discursive boundaries separating the reservation from the rest of the nation and thereby exposed contradictions inherent in BIA governance. At the same time, the petitioners’ post-colonial political maneuvers could also be seen as old-school Americanism. After all, the U.S. Declaration of Independence was as much a statement of

96. Spicer, Cycles of Conquest 354.
political autonomy as it was a letter of protest to a colonial authority. “Our repeated Petitions,” wrote the founders, “have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.” Surely the Chinle petitioners would have agreed.

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98. The Declaration of Independence, online at www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.