

ASSOCIATION ON AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS, Inc.
President's Address, Annual Meeting, April 17, 1961

INDIANS ON THE NEW FRONTIER

Oliver La Farge

The title I have given to my talk was irresistible; also, it fits the existing situation nicely. On the old frontier, from the days of Jamestown and Plymouth Rock until now, Indians have fought to hold their lands and keep their rights. They fought first as independent nations, using the recourse to arms. They have fought more recently as American citizens, defending themselves within the law.

Fighting on that old frontier has not ended. It was vividly described to us at our last annual meeting when the chairman of the Northern Cheyennes told us of that tribe's struggle to hold its land intact and build a tolerable economy. The battle lines have become confused, for here was an Indian leader telling an audience composed mainly of non-Indians about a campaign in which the Indians' enemy is not the American nation, but a mere handful of pleasant-spoken bureaucrats.

Tribes are fighting for their assets, as, for example, in western Washington, where river and coastal fishing rights and timber, worth tens of millions of dollars, are under continuous, skillful, powerful attack. The acute struggle to keep the land never stops in the allotted areas.

They are struggling to preserve their treaty rights -- a struggle in which, it seems, the Iroquois are being tragically defeated. That is a wrong for which we must all feel ashamed, for it is not just one department, one bureau, or a local official that is tearing up the Pickering Treaty and burying the memory of George Washington, but the machinery of our government as a whole, the legislative, the judicial, and the executive. Yes, we must all take shame.

Tribes are fighting to retain the heart of their ancient culture, of their good way of life. You will hear about one such struggle shortly from the Governor of Taos.

As an extreme case of the old frontier I give you Alaska, where the natives --

Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts -- stand from day to day in danger of being stripped of all their land, of all their shore and fishing rights, of all the assets rightfully theirs except, perhaps, the plots of land on which their houses stand. At the moment, all is quiet in that vast, new state, but no one knows when the white man will strike.

The New Frontier, as it was spelled out to us during the last campaign, is very different. On the new frontier, Indians and non-Indians alike can hope for the better life of the American dream. There is no need to repeat the President's and his party's pledges before this audience. They mean clearly that Indians will no longer have to fight for the right to exist in their own communities and to continue their heritage, and that as they move to develop themselves, their tribes, bands, groups, to full participation in the American way of life, they will find solid help and encouragement.

Up to now, Indian individuals and communities have in theory had equality with other Americans; in practice this equality has largely been denied. One of our great hopes for the immediate future is that our Indians will be enabled to make greater strides towards true, functional equality than they have ever made before.

In the program of the New Frontier, we find that the President has strongly stressed this theme of equality, of Indians sharing in the opportunities, of Indian advancement as part and parcel of a program of national advancement. This is as it should be. It is for citizens' organizations, such as this Association, to be on the alert to cooperate, to inform, to aid, and to increase accurate, complete communication between Indians and government, to see to it that those opportunities, as they become available, are seen and grasped. Or more than that, as we have been doing, to assist the tribes, the communities, in creating their opportunities -- for the New Frontier is not a situation in which an able man can just sit and wait for the banana to fall into his hand.

In this Association we have become more and more concerned with violations of Indian civil rights and with such things as segregation of Indians. In recent

years, government has not shown much interest in this matter, at times the reverse. Now, we believe, we can work in the field of civil rights with a new assurance that government will be on our side.

Inevitably, I have referred to government a number of times in my talk so far. In this time of hope and newness, let us think about government itself a little and what a new administration faces. This new administration has come in with a policy we all applaud. As proof that this policy is no mere talk, we have the appointments to the top command of the Department of the Interior, men who are guarantees in themselves that the stated policies will be carried out. What do they confront?

What I have to say is old news to men experienced in government, but it is something we of this Association must bear in mind.

To qualify myself, let me say that the earliest Commissioner of Indian Affairs I have known was Charles Burke, who served under President Coolidge. Since then I have known them all, all the Secretaries of the Interior, and almost all the Assistant Secretaries who play so crucial a part in Indian affairs. Also, I have been in continuous contact, directly and personally, and indirectly through others, with the reservations, the schools, the Indian communities. As a result, I am a battered and cautious old optimist who profoundly believes that nothing good happens unless you keep helping it along.

Just to keep the record straight, I'll state one fundamental assumption to start with. We see no substitute for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Whatever its faults may be, it is the most effective agency for the benefit of the Indians that we could set up, and under good leadership, including leadership in the Department of the Interior above it, it is most effective.

In my time, the first reform Indian administration was under President Hoover, who, as a Quaker, felt a personal concern for Indians. One of the great achievements of that administration was to change the Indian boarding schools from penal institutions where Indian children were sent to expiate the crime of being their parents' children into genuine schools.

The new dispensation required entirely new methods of thought, which many old-timers found painful. Many could not believe that the little savages in their charge could be handled without the whip and the dark closets. Marching children in formation from place to place, with talking forbidden, was greatly easier than herding happy children who ran free. Many conscientiously believed that allowing Indian children to go home for vacations or to be visited at school by their parents was wrong, since it renewed their ties with the older, uncivilized generation.

As a result, this elementary reform encountered what I have come to call "the cotton-wool resistance" at which bureaucracy is expert. There is no outright defiance of orders, but delay, technical obedience without substance, and many other tricks. To my personal knowledge, at least one school was able to keep up the old ways for six years after the reforms had been instituted.

In those days, as now, the Indian Service was full of people of good will. The reaction to the reforms was mixed. For instance: Commissioner Rhoads ordered that every teacher, matron, and advisor in reservation schools should visit the home of at least one pupil during the summer vacation. At one school, I found one teacher who was furious that she should be asked to do such a thing and expose herself to the dirt of an Indian camp, another who described with delight the enlightening experience she had had and how the girl she had taught ran out to meet her.

Under the Roosevelt administration, Commissioner Collier and Secretary Ickes introduced yet more drastic reforms. Mr. Collier brought in many new, like-minded men to the Indian Office in Washington, but it was some years before he got around to seeding the field service with people who thought as he did. We witnessed a steady process of gentle sabotage that never did entirely stop, alongside the eager response, not only of new personnel, but of old personnel who had been longing for years for the kind of changes the New Deal introduced.

Since then we have gone almost full circle in many respects. In the last ten years or so there took place a reversal of policy, a retrogression to opposing the survival of Indian communities and Indian ways, allied to a renewed acquiescence

to the old process of liquidating the Indian estate. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has been seeded once again, with people who heartily disbelieve in the policies of the New Frontier. And always, as in every bureaucracy, there are those who prefer the easy, authoritarian way of operating or whose one aim is to play safe, resist change, and let the wheel spin as it may while they hold to the security of their positions. To your experienced bureaucrat, the high-ranking, Presidential appointee is but a cloud that will soon pass -- unless and until he discovers that the cloud has lightning in it.

We have a striking, recent example in the success of the Bureau, during the last three years, in nullifying the enlightened policies announced by Secretary of the Interior Seaton and in frustrating many of the attempts of his Assistant Secretary to put them into effect in specific instances. This we have discussed many times. It has been a shocking illustration of the futility of trying to make a clean sweep with very old brooms.

We can be sure that the top officials of the "Indian administration," the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Interior, are aware of this problem. We look to them for strong, clear-cut directives, closely followed up. They will need, also, in their turn, to seed the Bureau with strong officials who think as they do, in Washington and in the field. Many of these they will find within the Bureau, others they will have to bring in from outside.

To the Assistant Secretary who is listening to me talk, all this is old hat. I recite it because we should all have it in mind. We want to work closely with the new Indian administration; we cannot do so without understanding its difficulties as well as its aims.

This highlights, also, the proper role of this Association. Again, I delve into history.

Back as far as under President Coolidge, we went about working for improvement in the administration of Indian affairs through cooperation and consultation. The method is unspectacular, but it is creative. Under Hoover and Roosevelt both, we

functioned as consultants, cooperators, and advisors. From the field, we brought first-hand information to the authorities in Washington, unhampered by official channels. We brought the words of the Indians, and often we explained the problems that Indian Service employees on the distant reservations were up against. We performed a similar service in the other direction, helping to interpret Washington to the field people and the Indians. Many of the investigations we undertook were at the request of the administration, and if our findings were sometimes painful to high-ranking men in the field or even to Washington, they were nonetheless accepted and made use of.

We publicized what we had to. Our work of public education served to strengthen, not hamper, the Indian administration. The public revelation of bad situations made it easier for the top command to correct them.

That was how we worked for decades and that is how we hope to work once more. A decade ago the door was slammed in our faces, and we became outcasts. If we made a report, we were troublemakers. We were left no alternative but public opposition, which proved most effective, although the results were largely negative -- the stopping of bad policies rather than the initiation of good.

Now we hope that era is ended. The moment of opportunity is here, in which the New Frontier can be opened to Indians as well as to all others and progress can be made that no one, coming along later, can undo -- just as the progress of the 1930's and 1940's has never entirely been undone. To seize this opportunity, we hope for a period in which Indians, the Congress, the administration, and the citizens' organizations will work as a team. As for ourselves, we gladly offer all the resources of this Association to the common effort.