



Do American Indians Govern Their Own Lands?

By Ben Nighthorse Campbell



Wounded Knee, North Dakota, part of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, was the site of confrontations between American Indians and the U.S. government in 1890 and 1973. Today, under a policy of self-determination, Indians have considerable power to govern themselves and their lands. ©AP Images

... 2 million Indians are sovereign over 2 percent of the U.S.

Before Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, the population of North America numbered in the tens of millions, perhaps more than 100 million. These residents had no concept of land “ownership.” Most believed the “Creator” provided the land for their survival, and in return for this gift they honored and cared for “Mother Earth.”

Having long fought wars over territory, Europeans had a different view. They sent expeditions to claim new lands in the names of

their governments without regard for the occupants of their “discoveries.” They brought weapons unfamiliar to these people and carried diseases to which they had no immunity.

Initially, the Indians — explorers named them after their intended destination — often were taken as slaves. They resisted, but were no match for the waves of settlers that came to the Creator’s lands, and they moved increasingly farther west.

After the U.S. Revolutionary War, in which many Indians fought, American Indian governments became one of the four sovereignties — along with U.S., state and foreign governments — that the U.S. Constitution acknowledges. Even so, the U.S. government eventually broke peace treaties signed with many Indian tribes.

As the new country’s population expanded, settlers moving west increasingly encroached on Indian hunting grounds. When tribes fought this, the government

sent the U.S. military to protect the settlers. Because they were U.S. citizens and voters, the settlers' influence carried more weight than paper treaties.

Eventually, wars, sickness and starvation reduced the American Indian population to less than 250,000. Tired, and with no hope of victory, most tribal leaders accepted conditions from the United States, and most tribes were placed on barren outposts of land with the guarantee that staying on these "reservations" would bring peace. Most reservations were not good for hunting or farming.

The government also took a "paternalistic" view that Indians were not competent to handle their affairs, so the U.S. accepted a "trust responsibility" to provide for them. The trust includes protecting tribal lands and guaranteeing the rights of tribes to use and govern the lands, as well as ensuring that tribes have food, medicine and access to education. Today, many of these responsibilities fall

on the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service.

Many Twists and Turns

In the late 1800s, the government changed direction with the Dawes Allotment Acts of 1887, which divided some reservations among individual Indians in hopes they would become farmers and ranchers and assimilate into society, relieving the government of trust responsibility. The lands were not ideal for farming, however, and by that time most Indians had little agricultural experience. Many sold their land to non-Indians for money to live on, and more Indian lands were lost.

In 1924, the United States granted citizenship to American Indians. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act — a "New Deal" for Indians — reversed the Dawes Acts, restored many tribal lands and allowed tribal governments more control over their assets.

In the 1950s, the Termination and Relocation Acts dissolved dozens of tribal governments and moved many tribal members to urban areas for job training. Many could not find jobs, however, and they were stranded in cities away from their relatives. As a result, some U.S. cities still have large Indian populations.

In the 1970s, after many failed policies, President Richard Nixon championed "self-determination," providing Indian governments more control over their affairs,

including the right to contract for services and form compacts.

Today, some tribes that received what appeared to be uninhabitable land, have found that parts of their lands contain resources such as oil and natural gas. Others, whose reservations are near urban areas, major highways or resorts, have been successful in the gaming industry. Indian populations have grown to more than 2 million people.

Despite many achievements, we have a long way to go. Economic success has come to only about 10 percent of Indian people. The other 90 percent live with substantial unemployment and high rates of diabetes and drug and alcohol abuse.

Despite the inequities, American Indians are fiercely patriotic, with higher rates of military service than any other ethnic group in this "melting pot" we call America.

One hundred million Indian people once were sovereign over 100 percent of what is now the United States. Today, 2 million Indians hold sovereignty over 2 percent of the land. This was a high price for the U.S. government's "use" of their lands.

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