

We Are Not Free

Clyde Warrior

1967

Native Americans were for a long time excluded from mainstream American society. From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century they were hounded off their homelands and pushed first westward, and then onto reservations where, nominally under the protection and tutelage of the federal government, their tribal societies deteriorated despite an intense struggle to maintain them in the face of insurmountable odds. Although a few tribes like the Hopi and Navaho did succeed in preserving much of their heritage, in many instances Indian children were taken from their parents and sent to white schools in an effort to "civilize" them. The results were disastrous, producing people who could never be white and yet had lost touch with their tribal roots.

In 1961 more than 400 members of 67 tribes met in Chicago to discuss ways to bring all Indians together in an effort to redress their grievances. The manifesto they issued reflected many of the themes and ideas of the Declaration of Independence, and stressed "the right to choose [their] own way of life" and the "responsibility of preserving [their] ancient heritage."

The Chicago conference was but one example of a growing self-consciousness among American Indians, who would soon choose to be called by the title of Native Americans. Native authors such as Vine DeLoria, Jr., and Dee Brown began writing books drawing renewed attention to the wrongs that whites had inflicted on the tribes over the centuries. By 1968, the militant American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed.

The new activism brought some government attention, and some efforts to change the old policies, but as with many excluded groups, the level of discrimination was so high that token efforts led to greater levels of frustration and demands for even more redress. While there were some violent episodes, such as AIM members seizing Wounded Knee, South Dakota (the site of the 1890 massacre of Sioux by federal troops), the tribes soon learned to use sophisticated techniques of legislative lobbying and litigation to win rights and resources owed to them under federal treaties that had been ignored for decades.

Native Americans did not so much demand inclusion in the sense of being absorbed into the greater society as they did the right to be different without being penalized for it. The National Indian Youth Council, for example, created in the aftermath of the 1961 Chicago conference, became an important agency working for Indian nationalism and intertribal unity. Younger leaders, such as Clyde Warrior, the president of the Council, were also impatient with the older generation's efforts to win benefits by appearing reasonable.

On February 2, 1967, the same day that older Indians were tentatively telling President Johnson that his proposed bill to reform federal oversight of Indian affairs was inadequate, Warrior, a Ponca Indian from eastern Oklahoma, testified at a hearing of the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. His statement is an eloquent plea for Indian freedom, and at its heart is the linking of the problems of Indian poverty with the white man's refusal to allow Indians to run their own affairs. What the Indians wanted was the right, given to all other groups in America, to determine their own destiny.