Journalist Fergus Bordewich offers a tour of contemporary Native American communities as background to a discussion of tribal sovereignty. Taking us first to the Mississippi Choctaw reservation where an industrial park has made the tribe one of the largest employers in the state, Bordewich demonstrates how sovereignty can be the instrument of rebirth. But while Choctaw Chief Philip Martin was building a workforce to assemble circuit boards for Xerox machines, the author notes, Navajo Chairman Peter MacDonald was shaking down contractors and lining the pockets of his political cronies. Ironically, MacDonald attacked his critics as enemies of tribal sovereignty and declared that accepting gifts from business associates was consistent with Navajo tradition. Other examples stress Bordewich's fear—a fear that, as Ward Churchill argued, AIM leaders confronting Richard Wilson at Pine Ridge in the 1970s shared—that strong tribal governments can become dictatorial if allowed to function without federal restrictions or internal restraints. “The drive towards sovereign autonomy,” Bordewich declares, “is freighted with the seeds of potential disaster.” Bordewich’s essay challenges readers to think beyond the simple formulation that sees tribal sovereignty as the solution to problems afflicting Indians. Besides raising the question of how best to police corrupt tribal leaders; he asks what obligations those leaders have toward both Indians and non-Indians within their jurisdictions. Must tribes encourage a free press? Should they police and jail non-Indian people who cannot participate in their governments? Should tribes require more oversight than county or village governments in other parts of the country? Finally, Bordewich asks us to speculate about the direction of change within Native American governments. As they become more powerful, do they become more distinctively Indian? Or do they become more like their local and regional counterparts? The examples here could support several different answers to these pressing questions.

Philadelphia, Mississippi, is the kind of place that seemed to survive more from habit than reason after the timber economy that was its mainstay petered out in the 1950s. Mills closed, people drifted away, but the town somehow hung on. There is a scruffy, frayed-at-the-edges look to the empty storefronts and the discount stores where more vibrant businesses used to be, but by the standards of rural Mississippi, Philadelphia counts itself lucky. The mayor, an amiable former postman by the name of Harlan Majors, is not above boasting, "Kosciusko and Louisville, they have to wait to buy a tractor or, sometimes, even to meet their payrolls. And they don’t have a fire department worth a hoot. I have sixteen full-time firemen." Philadelphia’s trump, the thing that other towns will never have, is Indians. “Our best industry by far is the Choctaw Nation,” Majors says. “They’re our expansion and upkeep. They employ not only their own people but ours, too. It has never been as good as it is now for the last forty years. Our economy depends on them. If the tribe went bankrupt, we’d go into a depression.”

Until a generation ago, the Choctaws virtually defined the futility of reservation life. Over the last quarter century, however, they have defied even their own modest expectations by transforming themselves from a welfare culture into one of the largest employers in the state. Today, Choctaw factories assemble wire harnesses for Xerox and Navistar, telephones for AT&T, and audio speakers for Chrysler, Harley-Davidson, and Boeing. The tribal greeting card plant hand-finishes 83 million cards each year. Since 1992, the tribe has operated the largest printing plant for direct-mail advertising east of the Mississippi River. By 1995, sales from the tribe’s industries as a whole had increased to more than $100 million annually from less than $1 million in 1979. As recently as fifteen years ago, 80 percent of the tribe was unemployed; now, having achieved full employment for its own members, nearly half the tribe’s employees are white and black Mississippians. Says William Richardson, the tribe’s director of economic development, “We’re running out of Indians.”

The quality of life for the great majority of Choctaws has measurably improved. The average income of a family of four is now about $22,000 per year, a sevenfold increase since 1980. Brick ranch houses have largely supplanted the wood-frame huts and sagging government-built bungalows amid the jungle of kudzu-shrouded

Source: *Killing the White Man’s Indian*, by Fergus Bordewich. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.
oaks and pines that forms the heart of the seventeen-thousand-acre reservation in east-central Mississippi. The new Chocow Health Center is among the best hospitals in Mississippi, while teachers' salaries at the new tribal elementary school are 25 percent higher than at public schools in neighboring, non-Indian towns. "They're willing to buy the best," says a non-Indian teacher who formerly taught in Philadelphia. "I never heard of anyone being fired in the public schools. Here, they fire Indians and non-Indians alike in a heartbeat, if they don't do their job." The tribal television station, the primary local channel for the region, broadcasts an eclectic daily menu of shows that includes thrice-daily newscasts, Chocow-language public service shows on home financing and microwave cooking, and, on one recent day, reruns of The Cisco Kid, a British film with Dirk Bogarde, and Chocow-produced commercials for local food stores and for a quilting display sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The Chocows are also a national leader in transferring the administration of federal programs from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the tribes. Virtually everything once carried out by the bureau—law enforcement, schooling, health care, social services, forestry, credit, and finance—is now performed by Chocow tribal bureaucrats. "We're pretty well gone," says Robert Benn, a courts Chocow who is the BIA's local superintendent and whose sepulchral office is one of the last still occupied in the bureau's red-brick headquarters in Philadelphia. "We've seen our heyday. The tribe is doing an exemplary job. They're a more professional outfit than we ever were."

Some Chocow hold that their forebears arose pristine from the earth at Nanih Waiya, in present-day Winston County. "After coming forth from the mound, the freshly made Chocows were very wet and moist, and the Great Spirit stacked them along the rampart, as on a clothesline, so that the sun could dry them," as one story has it. Others say that they came from the West, carrying huge sacks filled with their ancestors' bones. Throughout historical times, the Chocows were mainly an agricultural people, raising corn, beans, pumpkins, and melons in little plots by their cabins. However, exhibiting an instinct for business that was probably far more prevalent among Native Americans than those who think of Indians only as innocent children of nature wish to believe, they raised more corn and beans than they needed for their own use and sold the surplus to their neighbors. During most of the eighteenth century, the Chocows were prominent allies of the French in their wars for influence over the tribes of the Southeast. Although they, like their neighbors the Creeks, were adapting rapidly to a modern way of life, the relentless pressure of settlement steadily whittled away at their lands until, in 1830, in the rather poignantly named Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, they relinquished what remained of their land in the East and agreed to remove themselves to the Indian Territory, where their descendants still inhabit the Chocow Nation of eastern Oklahoma.

There were, however, a few Chocows who remained behind, scattered through the familiar forests of oak and pine. Many more eventually drifted back from the West, disillusioned by the anarchy of tribal politics and the difficulties of life on the distant frontier. Ironically, the tripartite racial segregation that deepened as the century progressed only strengthened the Chocows in their traditions, language, and determination to be Indian in a part of America where, for all intents and purposes, Indians had simply ceased to exist. Rather than send their children to schools with blacks, the Chocows refused to send them to school at all. By the time the federal government winkled enough land from private owners to establish the present-day Chocow reservation in the 1920s, nearly 90 percent of the tribe were still full-bloods and most spoke no English at all.

Today it would be difficult to find a community anywhere in the United States that makes the case for tribal self-determination better than the Mississippi Band of Chocows. There is, in their story, no underlying irony, no tragic catch, no corrosive seed of failure. It is a success story, pure and simple, not by any means the only one in Indian Country, or even the most dramatic, but nonetheless one of the most important of all just because it was so improbable, so much against the odds. It is a story that also suggests that tribal sovereignty, far from being a universal threat to neighboring non-Indian communities, has the capacity to become an engine for rural revitalization. Says Mayor Harlan Majors, "All the little towns up and down the state look at me and say, 'How do you do it?' I say, 'Get yourself an Indian chief like Phillip Martin.'"

The story of the Chocow revival is inseparable from that of Phillip Martin, the remarkable chief who has guided the tribe's development for most of the past thirty years. Martin is a physically imposing man, short and thick-bodied, with small opaque eyes and thinning hair that he likes to wear slick and combed over his forehead. Beneath the grits-and-eggs plainness, he combines acute political instincts with unfailing tenacity of purpose and a devotion to the destiny of his people that is capable of disarming even his enemies. "He's like a bulldog at the postman, he just won't go away," says Lester Dalme, a former General Motors executive who has managed the tribe's flagship firm since 1979. "At the same time, he'll give you the shirt off his back whether you appreciate it or not. He truly loves his people. He can't stand even one of his enemies to be without a job." At 9:30 p.m., Martin is still at work in his office, reading and signing documents from the alp of folders stacked on his desk. "Folks elected me," he says, "and they expect me to do my job."

By all rights, Martin's fate should have been as gloomy as that of any Chocow born in the Mississippi of 1926. "Everybody was poor in those days. The Chocows were a bit worse," he recalls. As a boy, he cut pulpwood, herded cows, and chopped cotton for fifty cents per hundred pounds. In those days, Chocow homes had no windows, electricity, or running water. Alcoholism and tuberculosis were endemic. The Chocows' cultural isolation was intense. Few had traveled outside Neshoba County, and many had never even been to Philadelphia, only seven miles away. The etiquette of racial segregation was finely modulated. Although Chocows were not expected to address whites as "sir" or to step off the sidewalk when whites passed, they were required to sit with blacks in movie houses and restaurants. "But we never had enough money to eat in a restaurant anyway," Martin says in his porridge-thick drawl.

Martin, rare among Chocows of that time, earned a high school diploma at the BIA boarding school in Cherokee, North Carolina. His first experience of the larger world came in the Air Force at the end of World War II. Arriving in Europe in...
1946, he was stunned by the sight ofstarving French and Germans foraging in garbage cans for food. White people, he realized for the first time, could be as helpless as Indians. At the same time, he was profoundly impressed by their refusal to behave like defeated people and by their determination to rebuild their lives and nationsfrom the wreckage of war. He wondered, if Europeans could lift themselves back up out of poverty, why couldn't the Choctaws? After the war, he returned to Mississippi, but he soon learned that no one was willing to hire an Indian. Even on the reservation, the only jobs open to Indians were as maintenance workers for the BIA, and they were already filled. Martin recalls, "I saw that whoever had the jobs had the control, and I thought, if we want jobs here we're going to have to create them ourselves."

He eventually found work as a clerk at the Naval Air Station in Meridian. He began to take an interest in tribal affairs, and in 1962 he became chairman at a salary of $2.50 per hour. Although the tribe had elected its own nominal government since 1934, the tribal council had no offices, no budget, and little authority over anything. In keeping with the paternalistic style of the era, the BIA superintendent presided over the council's meetings. He also decided when tribal officials would travel to Washington and chaperoned their visits there, as Indian agents had since the early nineteenth century. Says Martin, "I finally said to myself, 'I've been all over the world. I guess I know how to go to Washington and back. From now on, we don't need the superintendent.' So after that we just up and went." Martin became a fixture in the Interior Department and the Halls of Congress, buttonholing agency heads and begging for money to replace obsolescent schools and decrepit homes and to pave the reservation's corrugated, red-dirt roads.

The tribe's first experience managing money came during the War on Poverty in the late 1960s, when the Office of Economic Opportunity allowed the Choctaws to supervise a unit of the Neighborhood Youth Corps that was assigned to build new homes on the reservation; soon afterward, the tribe obtained one of the first Community Action grants in Mississippi, for $15,000. "That $15,000 was the key to all the changes that came afterward," says Martin. "We used it to plan a management structure so that we could go after other federal agency programs. I felt that if we were going to handle money, we had to have a system of accountability and control, so we developed a finance office, and property and supply. Then we won another grant that enabled us to hire accountants, bookkeepers, personnel managers, and planners."

The Choctaws remained calculatedly aloof from both the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Indian radicalism of the 1970s. Martin says, "We didn't want to shake things up. Where does it get you to attack the system? It don't get the dollars rolling—it just gets you on welfare. Instead, I thought, we've got to find out how this system works." Eighty percent of the tribe's members were then on public assistance and receiving their food from government commodity lines. "It was just pathetic. By now we had all these federal programs, but that wasn't going to hold us together forever. I knew that we had better start looking for a more permanent source of income." It would have to be confined from thin air: the reservation was devoid of valuable natural resources, and casino gambling was an option that lay far in the future.

In key respects, Martin's plan resembled the approach to East Asian states that recognized, at a time when most of the third world was embracing socialism as the wave of the future, that corporate investment could serve as the driving force of economic development. Martin understood that corporations wanted cheap and reliable labor, low taxes, and honest and cooperative government. He was convinced that if the tribe constructed a modern industrial park, the Choctaws could join the international competition for low-skill manufacturing work. Says Martin, "We know who our competitors are: Taipei, Seoul, Singapore, Ciudad Juárez." In 1973, the tribe obtained $150,000 from the federal Economic Development Agency to install water, electricity, and sewer lines in a twenty-acre plot cut from the scrub just off Route 7. "It will attract somebody," Martin promised. For once he was dead wrong. The site sat vacant for five years.

With his characteristic tenacity, Martin began writing to manufacturers from one end of the United States to the other. He kept on writing, to 150 companies in all, until one, Packard Electric, a division of General Motors, offered to train Choctaws to assemble wired parts for its cars and trucks; Packard would sell the materials to Chahta Enterprises, as the tribe called its new company, and buy them back once they had been assembled. On the basis of Packard's commitment, the tribe obtained a $346,000 grant from the Economic Development Administration, and then used a Bureau of Indian Affairs loan guarantee to obtain $1 million from the Bank of Philadelphia.

It seemed, briefly, as if the Choctaws' problems had been solved. Within a year, however, Chahta Enterprises had a debt of $1 million and was near bankruptcy. Production was plagued by the kinds of problems that undermine tribal enterprises almost everywhere. Many of them were rooted in the basic fact that for most of the tribe, employment was an alien concept. Workers would abruptly take a day off for a family function, and not show up for a week. Some spoke no English. Others drank on the job. Many were unmarried women with small children, no one else to take care of them, and no reliable way to get to work. The tribe's accountants had already recommended selling everything off for ten cents on the dollar. But Martin knew that if the plant was sold, the tribe would never get a loan again.

The man to whom Martin turned was Lester Dalme, who was then a plant manager for GM and who had been raised in rural Louisiana with a virtually evangelical attitude toward work. "My mom taught us that God gave you life and that what you're supposed to do is give Him back your success," says Dalme, now a trim man of about fifty, whose office at Chahta Enterprises is as plain as his ethics. "If you don't, He's going to be very unhappy with you." Martin promised Dalme freedom from political interference and full control in the plant; there would be no pressure to hire relatives or to keep people who wouldn't work, problems that were well known to be common on other reservations. Dalme remembers facing the plant's demoralized workers. "They had no idea how a business was run, that loans had to be paid. None of them, none of their fathers, and none of their grandfather had ever worked in a factory before. They had no idea what quality control or on-time delivery meant. They thought there was a big funnel up there somewhere that money came down. They thought profit meant some kind of plunder, something someone was stealing."
Dalme told them, "Profit isn't a dirty word. The only way you stay in business and create jobs is to make a profit. Profit is what will finance your future."

Dalme cut back on waste, abolished the manager's golf club fee, and put supervisors to work on the assembly line. Baby-sitters were hired for workers with small children, and a pair of old diesel buses organized to pick up those without cars. Dalme told employees that he would tolerate no alcohol or hangovers in the plant. Anyone late or absent two times in the first ninety days would receive a warning; the third time would mean probation, the fourth extended probation, and the fifth immediate dismissal. He kept an average of three of every ten people he hired, but those who survived were dependable workers. Thirty days after Dalme took over, Chahita Enterprises turned its first profit.

Dalme saw people who had been totally destitute begin to show up in new shoes and clothes without holes, and then in a car. After six or seven months, he saw them begin to become hopeful and then self-confident. Workers speak with an almost redemptive thrill of meeting deadlines for the first time. Wayne Gibson, a Chocotaw in his mid-thirties who worked the assembly line for several years and is now in management training, recalls, "Factory work taught us the meaning of dependability and punctuality. You clock in, you clock out. It also instilled a consciousness of quality in people. You're proud of what you do. When I was on the production line and I had rejects, it really bothered me. I had to explain it the next day. We're proud of coming in here and getting that '100 percent zero defects' rating."

Chahita Enterprises grew steadily from fifty-seven employees in 1979 to more than nine hundred in the mid-1990s. Once the tribe had established a track record with lenders, financing for several more assembly plants and for a modern shopping center followed. In 1994, the Chocotaw inaugurated Mississippi's first inland casino as part of a resort complex that also included a golf course, conference center, and 314-room hotel. "Now we're more into profit centers," says William Richardson, a former oilman from Jackson who was hired by Martin to function as a sort of resident deal-maker for the tribe. "Our philosophy is, if it's good business, if it's legitimate, if it makes a profit, there ain't nothing wrong with it. That's what we're about. We're as aggressive as hell and we take risks." By the mid-1990s, the jobs that the tribe had to offer its members were increasing technically and intellectually, as engineers, business managers, teachers, and statisticians; it was, in short ready to create a middle class.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration hailed the Chocotaw as a model of entrepreneurship and self-reliance. It was a mantle that Martin accepted with considerable unease. "Some of the current administration's representatives are now touting us as an example of the kind of success that all tribal governments should be able to achieve, which is fine," he said in a speech to the Association on American Indian Affairs. "But it begs the question of how we got to the point of even being able to think of success in the first place. Though we are proud we have received considerable attention from the administration, we are somewhat uncomfortable with it."

He criticized what he called the administration's "Horatio Alger view" of reservation development and went on to emphasize that the foundation of the tribe's economic progress—a stable tribal government, efficiently managed and with centralized administration systems—lay upon federal programs that originated during the Great Society era of the 1960s. "Without the Office of Economic Opportunity and the philosophy of local control of policy by low-income people, we would never have had the chance to develop tribal governmental institutions to a point of sophistication at which the representatives of some of America's largest corporations would think of speaking with us." He might have added that the tribe's willingness to hire professional managers unencumbered by ties to tribal politics was also a contributing factor to its success.

Martin continues to call for unflagging federal investment in Indian tribes, the kind of commitment that is today increasingly out of fashion among Americans embittered at the perceived ineffectiveness of government and swollen budgets, not to mention the seemingly inexhaustible demands of aggrieved minorities. "We don't want anything more than what the U.S. gives the state governments," he says. "But you cannot bring people out of poverty with minimum wages and minimum budgets. When people control their own lives, you'll see better results. We are able to manage our own programs. Control by others kills initiative. Give tribes the responsibility for development and management and how they live their lives. If we screw up, let us deal with it."

The onus of history is inescapable wherever Indians have conspicuously disappeared from the American landscape. It is no great wonder that many Americans have for so long been reluctant to face the magnitude, or the moral implications, of the catastrophe that befell Indians during the settlement of the nation. The mind shrinks from the full impact of the deaths of so many men, women, and children from centuries of rampant disease, the damage done to so many cultures, the acts of deliberate genocide, the repeated removals, and the revolting-door policies that attempted, no matter what the human cost, to reinvent the Indian with each succeeding generation. Collectively, by anyone's measure, it is a history that constitutes one of the great long-lasting tragedies in human existence. It is as impossible to deny, should anyone wish to, the effects that such a history continues to exert on the hearts, minds, and politics of modern Indians, as it is painful to contemplate history's many missed opportunities, the many New Echotas that a more foresighted nation might have encouraged to rise on the American landscape.

Nevertheless, historical guilt, like romanticism or mindless pity, is a narrow and cloudy lens through which to view present-day realities, including that of Native Americans. It makes no more sense to hold white Americans forever guilty for the settling of the continent than it does to blame Muslims for conquering the Middle East, the Mongols for spreading the Black Plague to Europe, the British for colonizing Ireland, or, for that matter, the Sioux for overrunning the Great Plains. "If the Sioux keep demanding an apology from the U.S. government for what it did to them, we're going to demand one from the Sioux for what they did to us," the Omaha historian Dennis Hastings says with palpable bitterness.

It is also important to realize, without minimizing the degree of trauma that was suffered by virtually every Indian tribe in North America, that American history cannot be measured solely, or even mainly, by the plunder and cruelty that was committed against native peoples. More consistently than any other in the nation's
history, Indian policy has embodied the nation’s enduring struggle to apply moral standards to the conduct of public policy. Whatever the limitations of federal Indian schools, they represented a genuine commitment on the part of Americans to open up isolated and vulnerable native communities to a larger world. Allotment was originally conceived as a plan to make Indians free and independent participants in American society. And while many Indian land cessions were negotiated under pressure, and to Indians’ disadvantage, it is also true that, by the estimate of Felix Cohen, a profoundly sympathetic advocate for Indian interests as solicitor of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1930s and 1940s, the United States paid more than $800 million for the lands it purchased from tribes since 1790. Asked if that was an honest price, Cohen replied: “The only fair answer to that question is that except in a very few cases where military duress was present, the price paid was one that satisfied the Indians. Whether the Indians should have been satisfied and what the land would be worth now if it had never been sold are questions that lead us to ethereal realms of speculation.” Since the establishment of the Indian Claims Commission in 1946, an additional $818 million has been awarded to a number of tribes as reparation for “grossly inadequate and unconscionable” payment for lands that were ceded in the nineteenth century. The federal government has continued to provide substantial sums to ensure the survival of Indian communities; in the last twenty-five years alone it has appropriated roughly $50 billion for the nation’s tribes, quite apart from land claims settlements. It is a record that, though flawed, is unequaled by any other nation in its dealings with aboriginal peoples.

Charles Wilkinson, whose writings on Indian law are among the most trenchant since those of Cohen a half century ago, has pointed out that the recurring theme during the modern era is whether and to what extent old promises should be honored today. The essential promise made to tribes primarily in the nineteenth-century treaties was that they would be guaranteed a measured separatism on their reservation homelands, free to rule their affairs outside of state compulsion but subject to an overriding federal power and duty of protection. Although that promise has often been honored more in the breach than in the observance, it has never been abandoned. “For all its many flaws, the policy of the United States toward its native people is one of the most progressive of any nation,” writes Wilkinson. He adds:

The United States never disavowed its relationship with native tribes, has never abrogated its treaty commitments, nor withdrawn its recognition of Indians as distinct peoples with cultures, lands of their own. From even the earliest colonial times, settlers felt obliged to purchase Indian lands, and to make some kind of provision for displaced tribes. These facts set the United States above other nations in its treatment of native peoples, and provide a moral and legal setting from which a forward-looking policy of Federal-Indian relations must progress.

Seen in its most positive light, the deepening national commitment to tribal sovereignty thus reflects the latest phase in an ongoing, and today largely unchallenged, effort to accommodate what are perceived to be unique Indian rights and cultural values. “There is no reason for me or for any of you not to support the permanence of tribal sovereignty any more than we would be reluctant to support the permanence of federal or state sovereignty,” Ada Deer, a veteran Menominee activist from Wisconsin, and the first woman to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs, told the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs at her confirmation hearing in 1993, adding: “The role of the federal government should be to support and to implement tribally inspired solutions to tribally defined problems. The days of federal paternalism are over.”

On one plane, tribal sovereignty is simply a form of government decentralization, a pragmatic alternative to the federal micromanagement and failed social engineering of earlier generations. When Indian leaders speak of “sovereignty,” they are sometimes only claiming rights and powers that other American communities have always taken for granted. Even as many tribes seem to struggle to set themselves apart from the rest of the United States in the name of sovereign autonomy, in practice they do not usually behave much differently from ordinary county or state governments. Beleaguered in her café on the South Dakota prairie, Micki Hutchinson plaintively wonders aloud, “Why can’t they just be more like us?” In fact, for the most part, they are. What the Cherokees began at New Echota a century and a half ago has largely become the Native American norm. Indeed, when Indians speak of “national sovereignty,” they are, after all, espousing a European concept of the nation-state that never existed in pre-Columbian America and a modern government whose practical authority is expressed mainly by means of zoning, tax codes, and the American legal system. It is hard to refute Ivan Maki, the chairman of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Tribe, when he says, “Washington tells us that we can develop our land, establish businesses, govern our community, and make laws, but that we can’t enforce them on one group of people. Why is it that when we go to Phoenix or Scottsdale, we’re subject to their laws, but when they come here, they’re not subject to ours? It is basically a racist point of view.”

But the sovereignty movement also has other, more disturbing implications. While it is giving much-needed flexibility to tribes, it is also creating a hodgepodge of economically, and perhaps politically, unviable states whose role in the United States is glaringly undefined in the U.S. Constitution. Even more troubling, the ideology of separatism is partly rooted in the questionable premise that Indians will be better off if they are protected from contact with mainstream America. While it is probably true that tribal governments funded by federal tax dollars will serve the self-interest of their bureaucracies quite well even when they are protected from accountability by the principle of “sovereign immunity,” there is little evidence at all that sovereignty serves the rights of Indians as individuals. Tribal sovereignty, unfortunately, is not synonymous with democracy. Indeed, the continuing expansion of tribal powers has the potential to create governments that are, in effect, impervious to federal oversight, and where it may be possible to institutionalize discrimination and the abuse of civil rights against both Indians and others and to elevate racial separation into an ideology of government.

“Sovereignty is often just a mask for individuals who rob people of their rights as U.S. citizens,” says Ramon Roubideaux, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, who
has probably litigated more civil rights cases than any other lawyer in South Dakota over the last half century. Round-faced and owl-eyed, he speaks with ferocious intensity. “Tribes are able to deny fundamental rights in tribal court and then hide behind the principle of sovereignty. They have the power to do anything they want to do. Many tribal court decisions have nothing to do with fairness. Without the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers that exists everywhere else in the United States, we have no way to enforce justice on the reservation if the tribal council says no, irrespective of the lip service that may be paid to tribal and appellate courts. Otherwise, you will see a worsening of every aspect of life on the reservation, because there is no place we can go to get an appeal on a decision. We’ve got to live within the legal framework of the U.S. whether we like it or not. We’ve got to develop along those lines because at least it has the goal of honesty and fair dealing.”

No single event more vividly revealed the inherent weakness that characterizes many tribal governments than the crisis which led, in 1989, to the downfall of Peter MacDonald, the chairman of the Navajo Nation. The story of what some have called the “Navajo Watergate” is preserved on rolls of microfilm that may be found in the archives of the tribal government at Window Rock, its capital, in the ruddy desert of eastern Arizona. In contrast to most reservation towns, Window Rock truly feels like a seat of government. With signs pointing officiously to the “Supreme Court,” “Tribal Computer Center,” “Legal Aid,” and the like, and the stolid fieldstone office buildings clumped beneath the dramatic, punctured sandstone scarps that gives the place its name. Thanks to the policy of open government instituted by MacDonald’s successor, Peterson Zah, the microfilmed transcripts are available to anyone who asks for them and will be handed over by young women whose cheerful efficiency typifies the professionalism of Navajo administration. Within the whirring spools lies a tale of revolution.

Now picture the scene. It is a frigid day in February of 1989. MacDonald sits on the chairman’s raised dais, facing the epic murals of the sacred sandpainters and women grinding the maize that was the traditional Navajo staff of life. His craggy, thickening features are inscrutable. He wears the mantle of authority as naturally as his expensive Italian suits. As chairman of the Navajo Nation, MacDonald is the most powerful leader in Indian Country, presiding over a reservation larger than West Virginia, with a population of 125,000 and a budget of nearly $100 million per year. He surveys the tribal council that he has dominated for nearly a quarter of a century. What does he feel? Calm self-assurance? Imperious disdain? Well-concealed terror? Perhaps a little of each. Scores of councilmen are clamoring to be recognized. MacDonald knows by now that his fate hangs on the impending vote.

There is a tragic dimension to what is about to happen. There has always been something larger than life about MacDonald. He was born on the open range in the midst of a sheep drive; he enlisted in the Marines at the age of fifteen; having earned a degree in electrical engineering after World War II, he served on the team that designed the guidance system for the Polaris nuclear submarine for Hughes Aircraft. He had, in many ways, been a brilliant tribal chairman. He had successfully renegotiated mineral leases worth millions of dollars annually to the tribe. He founded the first tribal college in the United States as well as one of the first tribal forestry programs and was among the first chairmen in the country to assert the sovereign rights of tribes.

As time went on, however, MacDonald’s style of governing had become increasingly imperial. He told a local journalist, Bill Donovan, in 1982, “As long as you allow committees to run government, you’ll have five different opinions, and nothing will happen. You need someone to be very strong in power, to accomplish what he believes needs to be accomplished.” MacDonald showed, like that of many other tribes, was a mostly ad hoc arrangement in which political power went to the most aggressive bidder. There was a structural vagueness, an identification of powers that fairly invited strong-arm rule. There was no tribal constitutions and no statutory separation of powers. The chairman controlled who was allowed to speak from the council floor, what items could be listed for debate, and the length of time members were allowed to speak. Critics increasingly compared MacDonald to Manuel Noriega and Ferdinand Marcos.

There had been rumors for years of bribes and payoffs. Finally, in 1988, a U.S. Senate investigation prompted by revelations in the Arizona Republic (based mainly upon the work of a young Shoshone-Bannock reporter named Mark Trahant) revealed an appalling pattern of corruption. MacDonald had accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars in kickbacks from contractors, along with Christmas shopping expenses, money for his wife’s birthday party, all-expenses-paid trips to Hawaii and Las Vegas, and more than $20,000 for a private jet trip to the Orange Bowl. He had also managed to spend $650,000 to renovate his private office; Navajos called it “the palace.” MacDonald maintained power in the tribal council by spreading around the largesse, often in the form of loans that wound up as gifts, and by awarding consulting contracts to his supporters on the council. In the process, he had virtually bankrupted the tribal treasury.

“Big Bo” was the last straw. In the autumn of 1988, MacDonald had used his power as chairman to suppress debate over the purchase of the half-million-acre Big Boquillas ranch from an oil and gas company for $33.4 million. Earlier the same day, the oil company had bought the same property from a cattle company for only $26.2 million. Both the president of the gas company and the broker for the sale were longtime friends of MacDonald. In essence, MacDonald had helped them flip the ranch for an instant profit of $7.2 million. According to the Senate investigators, his share was to be $850,000 and a BMW.

MacDonald admitted taking the money but asserted, astonishingly enough, that his various benefactors were simply “showing appreciation” for his friendship and assistance. Accepting such gifts was a Navajo “tradition,” he cynically claimed, a form of politeness. He hadn’t wanted to insult anyone by saying no. With “Big Bo” he had finally overstepped the bounds that even the traditionally passive Navajo electorate could accept. Fewer and fewer Navajos believed him. Now, in February, the reservation was in political chaos, fueling fears that the tribe was headed for collapse. A petition drive calling for MacDonald’s removal had obtained more than forty thousand signatures. For the first time ever, Navajo demonstrators had taken to
the streets. Protesters crowded outside the council chamber, demanding the chairman's resignation. MacDonald's supporters retorted with shouted warnings that his defeat would lead to a takeover of the tribe by the BIA.

Inside, MacDonald repeatedly accused his opponents of trying to destroy tribal government, of overthrowing sovereignty, of playing into the hands of their "enemies."20 He blamed his troubles on the Senate, the FBI, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The tribal government would come to a standstill, he warned. "No one will want to do business with this tribe ever again without having weekly reports on the chairman's popularity."21

You can still hear, in the transcripts of the debate, the sour Nixonian blend of self-flattery and pain, the disbelief of a man who had accustomed himself to imperial power, who amazingly believed that it was he who was the real victim. He told the council, "Ronald Reagan had the Iran-Contra Affair, Jimmy Carter the hostage crisis, Lyndon Johnson the Vietnam situation."22

Never before had a Navajo council attempted to remove a sitting official. Many wondered whether they even had the right to try. Councilman Gilbert Roger, speaking in Navajo, said, "It hurts my heart very deeply. Are we in fact doing the right thing? Are we going in the right direction? Are we just throwing out our laws? What will the Navajo people say now? Will they say that we change the laws as we go along?"23

Councilman Leo Begay turned to James Stevens, the area director of the BIA, whom he humbly referred to as "our trustee," a revealing location that suggested how difficult it is to break ingrained habits of paternalism and deference. Begay asked plaintively, "Are we doing right? Are we having this meeting legally?"24

Stevens replied, "The Supreme Court has pretty well ruled that the Bureau of Indian Affairs has no part in these types of deliberations. In the Martinez case, they very carefully told us that we have no business there. I appreciate your consideration of my expertise, but there you are."

Eloquently expressing the sentiment of the majority, Councilman Morris Johnson said:

Our government is like a young, new concept that is developing, is struggling to grow, and I think that we should all be aware that it is a growing nation, and that there are still a lot of things that need to be changed about our government, making it so it's more responsive and receptive to the people in this nation of ours. I see this only as one stage of growth, maybe two or three stages. Perhaps it's too optimistic. And that's what we're going through. But I think it's essential, because we all talk about the need to develop a government that will be standing for the future of our kids, and I think this is only one step in that direction.25

In the end, the council voted to strip MacDonald of all executive and legislative power and to place him on leave. It did not end the crisis, however. Just days after MacDonald grudgingly stepped down, his supporters forcibly reoccupied the tribal offices. MacDonald, emboldened, then signed an executive order creating his own judges, one of whom immediately reinstated him as tribal chairman. Soon there were two courts, two chiefs of police, and two governments. At one point, there were even two different chairmen, one representing MacDonald and the other the tribal council, who sat side by side on the dais, each with his own gavel.

The three-member Navajo supreme court was faced with the most difficult decision in its history. Without a constitution or laws to guide it, the court had to determine whether the tribal council in fact had the authority to remove the tribal chairman. Intense political pressure was brought upon the members of the court to find in favor of MacDonald. MacDonald argued demagogically that his power came directly from the people and that since there was no established balance of powers, the legislature had no authority to remove him or to appoint a successor. In the end, seeking precedent, the court ruled that ultimate power must lie with the tribal council, because it had appointed the tribe's first modern chairman in the 1930s.26

In 1990, MacDonald was found guilty on forty-two counts of accepting fraud, bribes, conspiracy, and the violation of Navajo ethics. Two years later, he was convicted on sixteen federal charges of taking bribes and kickbacks. In February 1993, he was sentenced in federal court to fourteen and a half years in prison for conspiracy and burglary, stemming from a riot in 1989, along with a concurrent sentence of seven years for extortion, bribery, and fraud.

In subsequent months, profound structural reforms were undertaken. The tribal chairman was stripped of the power to preside over the council and to appoint committees, and legislative and executive powers were formally separated. The position of tribal chairman was replaced by that of a president with the authority to veto legislation, which the council could override by a two-thirds vote. Peterson Zah, a prominent reformer, was elected to fill the new office. In the course of the campaign to unseat MacDonald, a different, equally encouraging kind of transformation had also taken place: Navajos had discovered their own political voice. "It was a political awakening for a vast number of Navajos," says John Chapela, a Navajo civil rights lawyer who organized the petition drive for MacDonald's recall. "There was a real change in the way that Navajo people looked at their government. The recall drive, for the first time, gave them the idea that they didn't have to be servile to an individual or to a group of politicians any more. They realized that they had a right to be told why a politician had acted the way he did. They began to feel that government was answerable to them."

The "Navajo Watergate" demonstrated that with political will tribal institutions can be made to work successfully and democratically, and, perhaps most important, that even tribes with a legacy of corruption and passive voter involvement are capable of reforming their governments without federal help. It presented a new model for the expression of popular democracy as well as setting a new standard for judicial activism and probity; for the first time ever, tribal courts had resolved a constitutional crisis without resorting to the power of the BIA. However, the far-reaching influence that, in a more perfect world, MacDonald's ouster might have had was hampered by the isolation and diversity of the nation's tribes, for many of whom the Navajo revolution seemed as remote as if it had occurred on the other side of the world.

Even as Navajo democrats were struggling to reform the organs of their own government, all-too-typical reports of official corruption continued to seep out of Indian
ward, the husband murdered not only the wife but her sister and an uncle, as well. When she tried to dig deeper, she discovered an impenetrable layer of fear. “Everyone knew who did it, but no one was ever prosecuted for it. People were afraid to stand up and speak out. There was so much fear—fear of the authorities, fear of speaking the truth. I began to realize that’s just the way people live there.”

Increasingly, she began to feel that the tribal government itself was part of the problem. “Reservation politics was very corrupt. It’s dog eat dog. It was outrageous.” There were allegations that one councilman had built a commercial gym for himself with tribal funds so that he would have something to fall back on if he was defeated for reelection and that certain officials were able to walk into the tribal casino at any time and demand money. “There was no accountability. Everyone got money. It was a way of life.”

Like many tribal governments, the government of the Turtle Mountain Band had operated in virtual secrecy for as long as anyone could remember. When Powell sought statistics on drunken driving, both the police and courts simply refused. “I was told ‘Where is it written that you have a right to anything’? “Then she began requesting, and eventually demanding, copies of the minutes of council meetings. The council refused, without explanation. In an effort to force the council’s hand, Powell began printing a blank gray box in each issue of the paper: “Day 126,” it read, for instance, on March 21, 1994. “This space is still reserved for the tribal minutes.”

After only eight months on the job, Powell was fired, in April 1994, allegedly because of personality differences with members of her staff. “It’s not really a firing,” a spokesman for the tribe declared. “It’s a reduction in force.”20 In a letter to Powell confirming her dismissal, Chairman LaFramboise stated, “It is very disturbing to find people who are thinking they are professional and only have hidden agendas including manifestations of political grandeur.”21

“The issue here is not the fact the Turtle Mountain tribal council fired Ms. Powell; they have that right as an employer, in accordance with established personnel policies,” Elmer Savilla, a former director of the National Tribal Chairman’s Association, wrote in Indian Country Today. “The overriding issue is the responsibility of any tribal government to its people to inform them of its activities. Otherwise the democratic government perishes and is replaced by an autocracy, or worse, a dictatorship.”22

“In a city, they wouldn’t have been allowed to get away with this,” says Powell, who returned, if anything emboldened by her experiences at Turtle Mountain, to her graduate studies at the state university. “Too many people there are aware of their rights. A paper is supposed to contain news, to find out what people want to know and give them a voice, give them a sense of empowerment. But the council didn’t understand that. They thought it would just write good news about them.” Somewhat facetiously perhaps, she blames the failure of tribal government on the way in which Indians “were taught to copy white government, in all its corrupt, devious systems.” But in her determination there lies a kind of hope whose power cannot be underestimated. “People have been hurt so many times, they can’t trust any more. Every time a promise was made, it wasn’t kept. We live not as our ancestors had
planned, but as their worst nightmare, a nation of bureaucrats of the worst kind. We have become so imbalanced in our world that the chances of getting punished for doing a good job are higher than for doing a bad job. If each one should speak out, we could begin to trust each other once again and respect each other for having the courage to try and change."

Superficially, the May 1994 Albuquerque "Listening Conference," as it was rather self-consciously billed by its sponsors, the Departments of Justice and the Interior, provided a spectacle of enlightened official concern. Three members of the President's cabinet—Attorney General Janet Reno, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros—along with Commissioner of Indian Affairs Ada Deer sat side by side in a stylishly appointed meeting room at the Albuquerque Conference Center, cocking the ear of government both literally and symbolically to the oratory of a hundred or so assembled tribal leaders who had been invited to express their concerns. The conference differed from similar periodic gatherings that take place mostly in Washington only in the lofty credentials of the satraps on the dais, who were determined to show the depth of the new Democratic administration's interest in Indian problems.

For two days, the process of tribal leaders recited the incantatory formulas of the sovereignty movement. "Sovereignty is a nonnegotiable item," Wendell Chino of the Mescalero Apaches, the longest-serving tribal chairman in the country, declared. He then demanded that President Clinton issue an executive order "so that the whole U.S. knows that we are governments." A spokesman for the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux called for Indian affairs to be transferred to the State Department because "the Department of the Interior deals with wildlife, and State deals with governments." Appropriations to tribes, it was asserted by others, should be treated as foreign aid. State and federal courts were called upon to recognize Indian "national" courts for the "extradition" of convicted criminals. The establishment of gambling casinos was described repeatedly as "a fundamental sovereign right," while several speakers called upon the federal government to create an official Indians-only game of chance that would give tribes a permanent competitive edge in the gambling industry. Others demanded the complete ouster of state governments from regulatory oversight and all other aspects of tribal affairs. "Since tribes are governments," Joanne Jones of the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe said with breathtaking logic, "their activities are thus self-regulating."

There was a monotony to all this after a while, as the dialogue took on the strange, stylized quality that it always does at such affairs, as if Indians and officials had always been forever frozen like figures in a Babylonian frieze, facing each other in postures of complaints and defensiveness, rage and guilt, as if it were impossible to consider Indians as anything but beleaguered victims and government as anything but the culpable heir to an unbroken history of deceit and repression. Not a soul spoke about the need to protect the civil rights of individual Indians from their own governments or those of non-Indian residents of "sovereign" reservations No one spoke of the need to ensure a free press, free speech, and separation of powers. No one spoke of the futility of attracting investment to remote reservations without resources, trained workers, transportation, or nearby markets, or asked how Indian tribes might fit into the larger national and world economies. No one spoke of the bloated and expanding tribal bureaucracies or the inherent contradiction in proclaiming "national sovereignty" while relying on federal and state appropriations or about the urgency of finding common cause between tribes and their non-Indian neighbors. No one mentioned the catastrophic effects of alcoholism on Indian economies, governments, and families, or showed even the slightest grasp of the social consequences that may ensue from widespread tribally run gambling. Nor did anyone even hint at the long-term political implications that may one day result from the fact that, by any traditional measurement of ethnicity, Native Americans are rapidly becoming less "Indian" by the decade.

Behind the boilerplate rhetoric of tribal sovereignty, modern Indians are still as difficult to see clearly as the Wyots of Indian Island were for the nervous townsfolk of Eureka. (The Wyots were a California tribe who were attacked by their white neighbors.) For the past, their concerns still come to us like distant voices distorted by the lingering effects of guilt, arrogance, and wishful thinking. For much of American history, the national discourse about Indians has seemed like a kind of intellectual solipsism, a closed dialogue among popular fantasists about a people who are simultaneously "savage," "noble," and "pathetic" and who are forever said to be on the brink of vanishing from the earth. As a result, even the best intentioned efforts to create a place for Indians in American society have sometimes proved disastrous to the very people they were intended to help.

In an age when guilt and romantic fantasy masquerade as politics, tribal sovereignty seems like a panacea for the wounds of the past. However, like so many other hopeful policies that have gone before, along with the obvious benefits it brings tribes, the drive toward sovereign autonomy is freighted with the seeds of potential disaster. Profound questions that bear upon the very nature of the United States itself hovered glaringly unasked in the maw of the conference room at Albuquerque: What are the limits of federal powers? How can tribalism be squared with the legal and moral dictates of equal protection under the law? What is the role of the states in Indian Country and of the tribes in the constitutional democracy? What is the scope of tribal regulatory powers? What is the civil jurisdiction of tribal courts? How can the United States support tribal regimes that reject fundamental aspects of American democracy? What does it mean to be a citizen of a state and yet to be immune from its laws? What is the basis for asserting that reservation Indians shall have representation in state government but without taxation? On the other hand, what is the basis for asserting that non-Indian residents of Indian Country shall not be represented in tribal government yet be subject to tribal law, courts, and taxation. How can we, as Americans, tolerate double standards?

There is nothing abstract about such concerns in Glencross, South Dakota. Once, 150 people lived there. There was a railroad station, two schools, three lumberyards, two feed companies. Trucks used to line up twenty deep alongside the grain elevators. "The elevators were right over here, but they're gone now," Steve Aberle is saying in his softly modulated, lawyerly voice. His compact frame and pale, finely boned features accentuate the impression of a man who values efficiency and control; in his business suit and tie, he seems almost spectral amid the desolation. "There was
a real nice Catholic church. It's abandoned now. All around here there were dozens of houses. Over there”—pointing to a squat peak-roofed building—"that was a school. And here was the café. They sold up and moved to Texas." Aberle's clapboard house is one of the last three still occupied in Glencross. He likes the emptiness; in his spare time, he plants trees. "It's a good place for my kids. They can raise their own livestock. They get to see how things grow."

It is also an eerie place. Buffalo grass has reconquered the un-paved streets. Perfectly aligned tree belts mark the boundaries of farms that no longer exist. The decaying buildings seem too recent, too familiar to be ruins; there is an unsettling sense of witnessing the end of one's own world. How fast it all happened! In the span of a single lifetime a town was born, flourished, shrivered, and died, a monument to the demise, or at least to the ambiguous transformation, of the American West. Nothing breaks the silence, not even the B-1 bomber that streaks soundlessly high over the coppery green prairie toward some destination in another world.

Glencross suffered no special, violent fate. The Great Plains are filled with failed communities like this, which seem to drift like derelict ships upon the rolling hills, sinking before your eyes. Trail City has shrunk from a population of 350 to 30. Firesteel to a single general store. Landeau has disappeared completely. The entire region is hemorrhaging jobs and people. In Dewey County, the only labor market that is expanding is the bureaucracy of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. Six of the neighboring counties have lost half their population since 1930. Fifty of Nebraska's fifty-two Plains counties have lost population, thirty-eight of North Dakota's forty-one, twenty-two of Oklahoma's twenty-three. Entire towns have lost their doctors, banks, and schools. Dreamers speak seriously of returning vast tracts to the buffalo. From a certain angle of vision, Sioux demands for the restoration of the reservation to its original nineteenth-century limits are simply an anticlimax.

Every morning, Aberle drives to the storefront office that he shares with his father across the street from Pepsi's Cafe in Timber Lake, nine miles west of Glencross. The glory days when Indians pledged their allegiance here, as if Timber Lake were some capital city of the prairie, are long past. But there is nonetheless a certain suggestion of steadiness in the cottonwood-lined streets of frame cottages, Quonset huts, and trailers. Timber Lake is one of the lucky places: the presence of the Dewey County offices will keep it alive, along with the jobs at the rural electric co-op, the central school, the cheese factory. Even so, one hundred of the six hundred people who lived here a decade ago have moved away to places with better prospects and more hope.

The people of Timber Lake—the mechanics, the teachers, the co-op clerks, the men who work at the grain elevator, the retired farmers—are the human fruit of allotment, the flesh-and-blood culmination of the cultural blending that Senator Henry L. Dawes so ideistically envisioned a century ago. "Everyone here has got some relatives who are Indian, or a brother or a sister married to an Indian," says Aberle. There is the white nurse who just married a Sioux, and a few houses down from her the quarter-Indian school aide who married a white man; down the block lives Timber Lake's former mayor, who is married to a one-eighth Indian, and beyond him a farmer married to another one-eighth Indian.

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Aberle is one of the offspring of the Senator's dream, too. His paternal grandparents were ethnic Germans who fled Russia eighty years ago, family tradition holds, to escape some kind of now only vaguely remembered persecution. His father married a Ducheneaux, the descendant of a prominent clan of French trappers and traders who had intermarried with the Sioux and become powers in the tribe. Steve Aberle, who was born in 1960, is thus one-eighth Sioux; he is a voting member of the tribe and served for two and a half years as chairman of the tribal police commission. "Probably I associate myself more with the Indian quantum because people make more of it. But I don't deny that I'm Russian-German or that I'm part French."

There is little support in Timber Lake for the kind of blanket sovereignty that the tribal leaders in Eagle Butte now claim. Although Aberle is himself a tribe member, he shares the resentment of non-Indians who feel themselves slipping toward a kind of second-class citizenship within reservation boundaries. "It would be better to be in a situation where everybody works together and deals with people as people, but it's hard to do that when people know they pay taxes but are excluded from benefits and services. My grandparents were outcasts in Russia. The United States government told them that they would be full citizens if they moved out here. Now I see people being told that they can't even take part in a government that wants to regulate them. Something is inherently wrong when you can't be a citizen where you live because of your race. It just doesn't fit with the traditional notion of being a U.S. citizen. At some point, there has to be a collision between the notion of tribal sovereignty and the notion of being United States citizens. The people who settled here never had any idea that they would be living on an Indian reservation. The land was given to them fair and square by the government. These people have been here almost one hundred years themselves now. Then the rules were changed in midstream. Anytime you have a group not represented in the political process, they will be discriminated against. It's going to hurt these communities. People start looking for jobs elsewhere. You lose a business here, a business there. There's going to be more and more friction. People don't want to see their kids growing up feeling victimized by the Indians."

In 1994, the Supreme Court rejected the bar owners' last appeal against the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. By the following summer the tribe was earning between $15,000 and $17,000 a month in taxes on the sale of alcohol. "Every penny goes to our halfway house and our alcoholism treatment centers," says Gregg Bourland. There were vague though unsubstantiated rumors of Ku Klux Klan activity among disgruntled whites. "The rednecks haven't backed off completely, but they have to follow the law," Bourland says. "Basically, they don't have much choice. They're fully under our regulation."

The Lakotas were the victims of nineteenth-century social engineering that decimated their reservation. But the adventurous emigrants from Oslo and Odessa were also the victims of a terrible historical prank, the trick of the disappearing and now magically reappearing reservation. Their grandchildren are today discovering themselves in a strange new political world that was not of their making, hungry for protection and obliged to learn the new and difficult language of tribal power. It is a rhetoric that, reasonably enough, demands for tribes a degree of self-government
that is taken for granted by other Americans; it also asks non-Indians to live under tribal taxation, police, and courts of sometimes dubious reliability. Moreover, the achievement of a sovereignty that drives away taxpayers, consumers, and enterprise may be at best but a pyrrhic victory over wrenched communities that beg for cooperation and innovation if they are to survive at all.

On a deeper plane, the ideology of sovereignty seems to presume that racial separateness is a positive good, as if Indian bloodlines, economies, and histories were not already inextricably enmeshed with those of white, Hispanic, black, and Asian served. With little debate outside the parochial circles of Indian affairs, a generation positive good and replaced it with a doctrine that, seen from a more critical angle, an era that has made a secular religion of passionate ethnicity. As Arthur Schlesinger

Instead of a transformative nation with an identity all its own, America increasingly sees itself in this new light as a preservative of diverse alien identities. Instead of a nation composed of individuals making their own unhampered choices, America increasingly sees itself as composed of groups more or less ineradicable.

The belief that Indians are somehow fundamentally different from other Americans, however romantically the idea may be expressed in terms of native "tradition" or it leads inexorably toward moral acceptance of political entities defined on the basis of ologies of racial and ethnic separatism, it is potentially far more subversive, for Indian own and have at least the potential to transform not only their hopes and creativity moreover, be obvious to anyone that legitimizing segregation for Indians will set a

Such critical concerns will surely be further exacerbated in the years to come as acknowledge it or not, are moving along a continuum of biological fusion with other when it will no longer make sense to define American Indians in generic terms, only Cherokee anthropologist based at the University of California at Berkeley and a special Indians are marrying outside their ethnic group at a faster rate than any other twenty-first century only a minuscule percentage of Native Americans will have one-

half or more Indian blood. It is plain that the principle, or the pretense, that blood should be a central defining fact of being Indian will soon become untenable.

How much blending can occur before Indians finally cease to be Indians? Unfortunately, the implications of this dramatic demographic trend remain virtually unexamined. The question is sure to loom ever larger in the coming generations, as the United States increasingly finds itself in "government-to-government" relation ships with "Indian tribes" that are, in fact, becoming less ethnically Indian by the decade. Within two or three generations, the nation will possess hundreds of semi-independent "tribes" whose native heritage consists of a mix of autonomous governments and special privileges that are denied to other Americans. In the meantime, relations between Indian tribes and both the federal and state governments are likely to become more complicated. Increasing control over their sources of revenue will enable more and more tribes—primarily those with marketable natural resources, well-run tribal industries, and proximity to big cities—to achieve some degree of practical autonomy. However, without enlightened leadership and an educated and self-confident electorate, not to mention the collaboration of the federal government, political sovereignty is only a pipe dream. "There's no such thing as being half sovereign any more than there is being half pregnant," says Ramon Roubideaux. "We are only sovereign insofar as the U.S. allows us to be. Sovereignty can only be preserved as long as you have the force to protect it, not just brute force, but political force, too. So unless you have an army, you'd better get used to that. Indians who think differently are just kidding themselves."

The scene on the factory floor of the Choctaw Manufacturing Enterprise, just outside Carthage, Mississippi, is prosaic enough at first glance. Although the building itself is architecturally undistinguished, just a low, white-painted rectangle hard against the cow pastures and pine woods, it is modern and spacious, and well ventilated against the withering summer heat. Inside, workers perch at long worktables, weaving wires onto color-coded boards that will become part of Xerox photocopiers. It is slow work; as many as three hundred wires must go into some of the harnesses and be attached to up to fifty-seven different terminals. Painstakingly, in deft and efficient hands, the brown and green wires are made to join and bifurcate, recombine and intertwine again in ruin combinations that to the untutored eye seem as intricate and mysterious as the interwoven clays of the Lumbies. As they work, the long rows, mostly of women, listen like factory hands in similar plants most anywhere in America to the thumping heat of piped-in radio, and swap gossip, and news of children, and of planned trips to Jackson, and menus for dinner. Across the floor, at other similar tables, more women and men are weaving harnesses, assembling telephones, putting together circuit boards for computers, audio speakers, and motors for wind-turbine wipers.

In another sense entirely, the factory floor is remarkable and profound. The faces bent over the wires and phones and speakers record a transformation that no one in Mississippi could have envisioned forty years ago, when Phillip Martin came home from Europe looking for some kind of job. The faces are mostly Choctaw, but among them are white and black faces, too, scores of them, all side by side in what was once
one of the poorest backwaters of a state that was second to none in its determination to keep races and classes apart.

In 1989, there were four Choctaws in the plant's management; now there are twenty-five. "The next generation will be able to manage their own businesses," says Sam Schisler, the plant manager, a freckled Oklahoman in mauve trousers and a navy-blue polo shirt who joined the Choctaws after running plants for Packard Electric. "I'm happy to manage myself out of a job." There is also something more. The audio speakers whose parts have been imported from Thailand and the circuit boards that have come from Shreveport are not glamorous, but they are symbolic: the children of the sharecroppers for whom a visit to Philadelphia, Mississippi, was a major undertaking have begun to become part of the larger world. "We'll be building these ourselves at some point," Schisler says.

The plant, the humid pastures, and the pine woods lack the drama of the rolling prairie and the sagebrush desert that are the more familiar landscape of Indian Country. But the red clay of Neshoba County has endured the same trials as the soil of Pine Ridge, the Truckee basin, and the Little Big Horn. It has been equally warred over, and equally as stained with racism, ineradicably one might have said, until less than a generation ago. It is also a land of redemption; not the exotic redemption of evangelical traditionalists who would lead Indians in search of an ephemeral Golden Age that never was, but a more prosaic and sustainable redemption of a particularly American kind, which comes with the opportunity to work a decent job and know that one's children will be educated and that the future will, all things being equal, probably be better than the past. It is one culmination of a natural and perhaps inevitable human process of adaptation that Indians have been choosing to undertake ever since the arrival of Columbus.

History was, after all, not only a story of wars, removals, and death but also one of calculated compromises and deliberately chosen risks and of both Indian communities and individuals continually remaking themselves in order to survive. To see change as failure, as some kind of cultural corruption, is to condemn Indians to solitary confinement in a prison of myth that whites invented for them in the first place. In the course of the past five centuries, Indian life has been utterly transformed by the impact of European horses and firearms, by imported diseases and modern medicine, by missionary zeal and Christian morality, by iron cookware, shepherding, pickup trucks, rodeos and schools, by rum and welfare offices, and by elections, alphabets, and Jeffersonian idealism as well as by MTV, Dallas, and The Simpsons and by the rich mingling of native bloodlines with those of Europe, Africa, and the Hispanic Southwest. In many ways, the Indian revolution of the 1990s is itself a form of adaptation, as Indians, freed from the lockstep stewardship of Washington, search out new ways to live in the modern world.

“Our lives have been transmuted, changed forever,” Rayna Green, who is of mixed Cherokee extraction and director of the Native American Program at the Museum of American History, said in a speech at the New York Public Library in 1993.63 We live in a world where everything is mutable and fragile. But we are here, and we are not going to go away. Indians look around at the malls and stores of America, and say, 'None of this is ever going to be ours.' But none of it is going to go away either. This is still our home. We are all here willy-nilly together. Somehow we must face the consequences of history and live with it. We don't need only to remember the tragedy, but to also remember the gift, to live in this place, to know it gave us birth, to feel the responsibility we have for it. We have to sit down and figure out how to not hurt each other any more."

Self-determination gives Indian tribes the ability to manage the speed and style of integration, but not the power to stop it, at least for long. Integration may well mean the eventual diminishing of conventional notions of "tribal identity," but it must also bring many new individual opportunities along with membership in the larger human community. Those tribes that succumb to the impulse to exclude and to segregate, to build walls against the outside world, are likely to pay a high price. "People and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women, with man and woman of another culture, another creed, another race," the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes has written. Indians will continue to survive as people, although they will surely be much less recognizable as the white man's idea of "Indians" as time goes on. Tribes, too, will survive, if anything as stronger and more problematic entities than they have been for many generations. The question is whether they will attempt to survive as islands isolated from the American mainstream or as vital communities that recognize a commonality of interest and destiny with other Americans.

"I don't like what this country did to the Indians: it was all ignorance based on more ignorance based on greed," Phillip Martin is saying in his meditative drawl. It is now past 11:00 p.m. The night shift has begun at the plants down the hill from the tribal offices. Outside, in the humid moonlight of east Mississippi, the red earth is a landscape of shadows and the kudzu an eerie shroud over the pines. "But I don't believe that you have to do what others did to you. Ignorance is what kept us apart. But we'd never have accomplished what we did if we'd taken the same attitude. We only have a short time to live on this earth. Everybody has got to get along somehow. We live here surrounded by non-Indians. We have to live with our neighbors and with our community. I don't condemn anyone by race. What kept us down was our own lack of education, economy, health care—we had no way of making a living. At first, I never thought that Choctaws could fit into the larger society and remain Choctaw. But, in fact, we don't have to give up our language, our culture, or our traditions. I believe that if we're going to fit in this country, we'd better try our best to do it on our own terms. If we can help local non-Indian communities in the process, we do it. And when we do it, we build up a lot of political and social support. We all have a common cause here: the lack of jobs and opportunities has kept everyone poor and ignorant. The future is going to bring a lot of change for everyone. It's going to be very difficult for a tribe to isolate itself and develop its own economy. We all depend on one another, whether we realize it or not."