Talking the Language of the Larger World
Politics in Cold War (Native) America

Daniel M. Cobb

The decade of the 1960s is often seen as a nebulous midway point between the termination era of the 1950s and the self-determination era that came into its own during the 1970s. Scholars acknowledge the role that the War on Poverty played in strengthening tribal institutions and fostering an acceptance of self-governance in Washington DC, even as local communities encountered problems with implementation (see table 4). In the past, however, they have focused on policymakers or individual communities. Meanwhile, studies of activism continue to focus primarily on the militancy of the late 1960s and after. In this chapter, Dan Cobb takes a different approach. He explores a diverse array of Indian and non-Indian reformers, youths, social scientists, and tribal leaders whose ideas and actions were deeply influenced by the struggle for black equality, the youth movement, decolonization, and the Cold War. By locating them as, at once, influenced by and shapers of the larger domestic and international histories of which they were a part, he shows how attending to Native people’s experiences can contribute to a fuller understanding of politics in Cold War America. Finally, by de-emphasizing militancy, he provides a more complex and variegated picture of American Indian activism during the 1960s.

Imagine Standing Rock Sioux activist and intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. sitting on a sofa in his den. A cup of coffee and a row of carefully aligned Pall Mall
table in front of him. On this brisk fall morning, he is bedecked in a white sweatshirt and matching pair of white sweatpants. Over several hours, he methodically works his way through one smoke after another while telling stories about his tenure as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians during the mid-1960s. This is how I remember my first encounter with one of the towering figures of the twentieth century, a man who shaped not only the course of American Indian history but also the way we think about it. It was October 2001, a little more than five years before his passing. I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma then, and the two days I spent interviewing him at his home in Golden, Colorado, fundamentally altered the way I conceptualize my work.

This chapter explores four important aspects of the politics of tribal self-determination during the 1960s—the Workshop on American Indian Affairs, the American Indian Chicago Conference, the War on Poverty, and the Poor People's Campaign. The analytical thread holding each of them together derives from one of the many poignant observations Vine Deloria made during our conversations. "At NCAI," he told me, "I was looking for some kind of intellectual format of how you would justify overturning termination and at the same time escape this big push for integration that civil rights was doing." To make this distinction, he situated tribal issues in the context of what he called “an era of resurgent nationalism among dark-skinned people the world over.” He remembered telling tribal leaders, "if we're gonna say we're nations and we got sovereignty and our treaties are as valid as other treaties, then we gotta talk the language of the larger world."

In arguing this point, Vine Deloria added his voice to a conversation that had been under way for more than a generation. Indian activists began drawing parallels between themselves and nations emerging from colonialism after World War I, but the advent of the Cold War following the Second World War added a new sense of urgency. In 1954 and again in 1957, Native and non-Native advocacy organizations launched aggressive campaigns for what they called an American Indian Point IV Program, a strategy that invoked President Harry S. Truman’s plan to provide technical assistance and scientific training purportedly needed by developing nations to “modernize” their cultures, political systems, and economies. These reformers presented their appeal as more than just an alternative to termination (see table 3). They argued that it represented a Cold War imperative: if the United States expected to prevail in its ideological contest with the Soviet Union in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, they argued, it would have to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it treated the indigenous peoples within its own borders with justice and honor.

Darcy McNickles. Born on the Flathead Reservation to a Cree mother and Scots-Irish father in 1904, McNickles entered the Indian Service during the 1930s, just as Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier initiated the Indian New Deal, a wide-ranging reform agenda that intended to bolster tribal self-government. McNickles helped to found the National Congress of American Indians in 1944, before resigning from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) ten years later, disgusted by the advent of termination (see table 2). Like Deloria, McNickles believed that Indians shared “the world experience of other native peoples subjected to colonial domination.” In the 1950s he set about extending “the process of decolonization to the United States through an organization called American Indian Development (AID).”

In 1960 McNickles committed AID to sponsoring the Workshop on American Indian Affairs, a six-week program for Indian college students, initiated by University of Chicago anthropologist Sol Tax in the summer of 1956. At the outset, the workshops endeavored to offer course credit through the University of Colorado, provide an incentive for Indian youths to complete their degrees, and cultivate a new generation of leaders—a particularly important goal, given the threat that termination posed to many Native communities. The workshops metamorphosed into something greater still after Robert K. Thomas, a Cherokee doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, placed his mark on the curriculum (figure 6). Through a combination of reading about Robert Redfield’s anthropological work in Latin America, studying under Edward Spicer and Sol Tax, and reflecting on his own personal experiences, Bob Thomas began thinking about American Indians as a folk people adjusting to contact with and colonization by an urban industrial society.}

Thomas contended that Indian students, like their peers in so-called underdeveloped countries, traditionally received vocational training to learn specific skills. When they did go to college, they dropped out in inordinately high numbers because they felt marginal, and they felt marginal because of the messages they received about who they were and where they did or did not fit in. Under his direction, workshop students learned that they were not forsaking their relatives or somehow abandoning Indian culture by going to and succeeding in college. “These kind[s] of bullshit dilemmas are false and come from high school teachers,” he seethed. When students recognized that the problems they confronted personally, within their families, and in their communities were not their fault and that they were not alone, they could see these problems for what they were, objectify them, and deal with them “intellectually instead of in a personal, secret, unformalized way.” Social science would make this possible by serving as a
The curriculum Bob Thomas constructed compelled students to confront the idea of internal colonialism and to apply it to analyses of federal policies, their own communities, and even themselves. In 1962 Thomas asked workshop students to “[d]escribe the consequences for the world and social relations of a folk people under a colonial administration” and, even more pointedly, asked, “Is it possible for a government, given a colonial situation, to determine the destiny of the governed people and also to terminate their colonial status with success?” The final exam in 1963 read: “Compare the structure and consequences of colonialism or minority group

status in one of the following: India, Kenya, Ghana, Maori in New Zealand, aboriginal people in the Philippines, with the structure and consequences of the relationship between either American Indians or a specific group and the wider American society.”

D’Arcy McNickle later remarked that the workshop experience served as “an awakening” for many of the students who attended. The essays they wrote during their summers in Boulder lend credence to his assessment. “I had never before thought of the Indians as compared to colonialism,” Frank Dukepoo (Hopi) reflected. “I thought colonialism existed only in the older countries like southern Europe or in places such as Africa.” Clyde Warrior (Ponca) detected similar resonances. “Another thing I learned is that all over the world tribal peoples are coming in contact with the outside world,” he wrote, “and basically they all have the same reactions.” What this young person—who was instrumental to the formation of the National Indian Youth Council in August 1961—meant by “same reactions” was, of course, rebellion. Makah tribal member and NIYC member Bruce Wilkie explained why: “[A]s long as there is a colonial agency set up to administer to Indian affairs,” one of his papers read, “there will always be an Indian social problem.”

In a perceptive essay written in 1962, Sandra Johnson, another Makah from the Neah Bay area, extended a Cold War analogy to this discourse on colonialism and wove it into issues of identity. “It is not that Indians reject white culture, per se. It is that they reject white culture when they are forced to adapt to it by losing what they are and [what] they value. One does not painlessly reject oneself,” she asserted. Searching for an appropriate metaphor, she asked how non-Indians might respond to the prospect of being forced to live under Soviet domination: “Many would cry, ‘Better dead than Red.’ And yet, another battle between the Reds and the Whites is being fought within our own borders. Given this different context it may be easier for white citizens to understand our cry which would sound more like, ‘Better Red than dead.’”

The workshop’s emphasis on decolonization and ethnic pride clearly informed students’ rejection of termination and assimilation. Moreover, many of the “Workshoppers,” as they called themselves, carried these ideas with them as they went on to become elected tribal leaders, educators, doctors, lawyers, documentary filmmakers, artists, writers, and founders of activist organizations such as the National Indian Youth Council. From this generation arose people who, over the course of the succeeding fifty years, would become influential promoters of change in Native America—youth activists Clyde Warrior, tribal leaders Mel Thom and Bruce Wilkie, filmmaker Sandy (Johnson) Osawa, former Institute of American Indian Arts president Della (Hopper) Warrior (Otse-Missouria), lawyer Browning Pipestem...
(Otoe), tribal college administrator Phyllis Howard (Mandan), Stockbridge-Munsee community leader Dorothy Davids, Mary Hillaire (Lummi), Evergreen State College’s first Native staff member, and many, many others (Warrior, chapter 16, this volume). All of them have been active in decolonizing a wide range of spheres, from art and education to mass media and federal-Indian relations.  

A second example of how international affairs shaped Indian politics during the 1960s can be found in the American Indian Chicago Conference. Seizing upon a United Nations proclamation that the 1960s would be the “Decade of Development,” Sol Tax proposed a meeting that would bring delegates from across Indian Country to Chicago in order to finalize a comprehensive “Declaration of Indian Purpose.” This statement would, in turn, be presented in person to John F. Kennedy, the newly elected president of the United States. The National Congress of American Indians endorsed the idea in December 1960, and D’Arcy McNickle quickly took the lead in authoring a draft document. Then, during the spring, Sol Tax coordinated a series of regional meetings in which Indian and non-Indian people discussed and critiqued it. Long an advocate of the Point IV philosophy, McNickle infused the initial statement with the spirit of international development. The final declaration even resurrected the Cold War imperative by intoning, “[T]he problem we raise affects the standing which our nation sustains before world opinion.”  

Looked at from a different perspective, the Chicago conference reveals still another dimension to politics in Cold War Native America. Indeed, one of the untold stories of the event is the extent to which it was plagued by the politics of anticommunism. If the Chicago conference’s proponents sought to harness the Cold War as a means of advancing a progressive agenda, its detractors used the fear of communist subversion as a bulwark against change. Earl Boyd Pierce, general counsel of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, proved instrumental in this regard. Born and raised in Ft. Gibson, a small town in Muskogee County, Oklahoma, he saw himself as a champion of the American way of life, lamented Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover, and kept an autographed copy of the zealous anticommunist’s book, Masters of Deceit, in his personal library. Although he actively pursued Cherokee legal claims against the federal government, he was suspicious of strident acts of protest, such as civil rights demonstrations and antwar rallies.  

The Chicago conference came under close scrutiny in January 1961 when the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes convened in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Detecting a nefarious scheme, Cherokee principal chief W. W. Keeler, an executive for Phillips Petroleum, recalled a trip to the Soviet Union he had taken in August 1959: some Russians took the issue and explained to me how they would like to work with me in working out plans to set up some Indian Republics here in the United States. [They talked about freeing the Indians…they had the idea Indians are held as prisoners…they spoke of the Indians in leg-irons…] But that was not all. They said it came from the reports of the University of Chicago. Earl Boyd Pierce added his own premonition that Sol Tax, D’Arcy McNickle, and others intended to lay a “hooby trap” in Chicago that would culminate in nothing less than “an overall Governmental State.”  

With deep suspicions in tow, Pierce traveled to Chicago in February to attend a meeting of Indian leaders who had been chosen to serve as the steering committee for the conference. He proceeded to bait the participants and to underscore that Indians were no longer sovereign nations—that they must remain loyal to the United States government. Repeatedly, the Cherokee general counsel argued that the Interior Department and the Bureau of Indian Affairs should be consulted before Indians took any definitive actions. By being too forceful, he feared, they would come off as “unhappy minor- ity.” Pierce had to leave before the steering committee disbanded, and he suspected rightly that he had earned their derision. He also knew that a tape recorder had been running throughout all but the first session. Upon his return to Oklahoma, he requested copies. An incredible game of cat and mouse followed, with Pierce pursuing what had become, in his mind, a “black plot against him” and assistant coordinator Nancy Lurie, an anthropologist and a former student of Sol Tax, doing all in her power to forestall the inevitable surrender.  

In the months that followed, opponents of the Chicago conference spread rumors that Tax, a Jew whose socialist parents emigrated from Germany, was a communist in disguise. If Pierce could not destroy the conference by whispering such intimations, he resolved personally to see that no one advanced a radical agenda. When the hundreds of tribal delegates finally descended on Chicago in June 1961, he and his allies worked diligently to secure passage of a stridently anticommunist “American Indian Pledge” that ultimately prefaced the “Declaration of Indian Purpose.” In ultrapatriotic prose targeting Tax and his allies, it denounced “the efforts of the promoters of any alien form of government.” When representatives from the Chicago conference finally had their personal meeting with John F. Kennedy, it appears that the “American Indian Pledge” was the only part of the declaration the president actually read.  

This aspect of the Chicago conference suggests that the intersection between domestic and international politics did not occur merely in the realm of ideas. Rather, it literally shaped behavior and, with it, the course of
as decolonization informed the organizers’ embrace of development through democratic self-determination, fear of communist subversion inspired its opponents.

Another unanticipated manifestation of these ideological border crossings—one that extended into the realm of action—can be found in the strategy Vine Deloria carved out for the National Congress of American Indians. Upon assuming the executive directorship in 1964, not only did he adopt rhetoric reminiscent of that found in anticolonial movements across the globe, but he also used similar approaches for affecting change. In a study of Cold War foreign policy, historian John Lewis Gaddis observed that although “Third World” countries could not challenge the Soviet Union or the United States militarily, they could manipulate these world powers “by playing on flattery, pledging solidarity, feigning indifference, threatening defection, or even raising the specter of their own collapse and the disastrous results that might flow from it.”49 Under Deloria’s direction, the NCAI engaged in precisely this kind of veiled resistance by adopting a carefully orchestrated play-off system involving several government agencies.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson unwittingly handed him the primary vehicle he would use to push for reform, when Johnson launched and then proceeded to escalate the War on Poverty (see table 4, 1964). Deloria immediately formed a significant relationship with James J. Wilson, an Oglala Lakota brought in to oversee all the War on Poverty’s Indian programs in the spring of 1965. Channeled through what Deloria called “inside-outside politics,” they seem to have agreed to use each other in order to manipulate the federal bureaucracy from within rather than confront it from without. Both of them knew that the War on Poverty—and particularly the Community Action Program, given its direct funding of tribes and emphasis on local initiative—offered a potent critique of wardship and paternalism. Having the dubious distinction of being the quintessential symbol of these unsavory concepts, the Bureau of Indian Affairs became the central focus of their attacks.50

The political strategy Wilson and Deloria devised evidenced itself during the National Congress of American Indians’ annual convention in Scottsdale, Arizona, in November 1965. Through the spring, summer, and fall of that year, the Office of Economic Opportunity, which served as the administrative headquarters to the War on Poverty, was embroiled in tremendous controversy, in large part because of the explosion of the Watts riot in Los Angeles. Members of Congress and city mayors intimated that federal money was being used to incite racial and class conflict. At the same time, the rising cost of the war in Vietnam meant potential budget cuts for the War on Poverty.

Shriver used his address to proclaim the Office of Economic Opportunity’s commitment to tribal self-determination. Reservation communities, he argued, could be likened to underdeveloped nations, and, therefore, the same kinds of prescriptions for change applied to them. “White imperialism, white paternalism,” he argued in a thinly veiled reference to the BIA, “cannot be replaced by the paternalism of experts, the paternalism of professionals.” He also said, “The money is yours—because the whole basis of the poverty program is self-determination—the right of the people—individually and collectively—to decide their own course and to find their own way.”51 Deloria considered Shriver’s performance a tremendous success. The War on Poverty received the positive media coverage it needed, while he gained additional leverage to use against the established bureaucracy. With OEO on his side, Deloria recalled, he could go to the BIA and say, “Okay, we’ll listen to the commissioner, but this better be good.”52

Vine Deloria allowed the Office of Economic Opportunity to cultivate a romantic image of Community Action. But did that mean he really believed in it? Consider this remembrance from my interview with him: “I never liked most of the OEO people cause they were so...snobby, and they were all Ivy League people, you know?” They might talk a good game about empowerment and representation, he remembered, but they had no idea what it was like to live in poverty. “If you took one of these OEO guys and
hit that thing as hard as we can and see what’s going on.” To do so, he called an emergency meeting. In short order, two hundred representatives from sixty-two tribes descended on Santa Fe to hold countermeetings a mere three blocks away from Udall’s closed session. Taking the civil rights movement as his model, Deloria sought to create a “media phenomenon” that would dramatize the BIA’s complete disregard for basic democratic principles. For three days, the NCAI rallied against the Indian bureau as a reporter from the New York Times recorded every detail.

Throughout the confrontation, members of the NCAI juxtaposed the “spectacular success” of local initiatives via Community Action with the BIA’s penchant for paternalism. The New York Times articles, according to Deloria, delivered the following message: “Here are the Indians who are managing their own affairs, and they’ve got poverty programs and everything. Here’s the Bureau trying to put them back in the nineteenth century.” Praising the War on Poverty while criticizing the Bureau fostered the kind of competition that Deloria hoped would prove advantageous to tribes. To be sure, the Office of Economic Opportunity could ill afford to lose one of the few friends it had left, and the last thing the much-maligned BIA needed was to appear to be perpetuating dependency.

In the wake of Santa Fe, Deloria continued the strategy. “Certainly there has been no single program or theory of government that has caused such excitement on Indian reservations in 100 years as the Poverty Program,” he expounded in the pages of the NCAI Sentinel. But in keeping with the strategy employed by other developing nations during the Cold War, he added a dire warning: “There is now a good chance for wholesale collapse of enthusiasm on reservations if the basic philosophy of the OEO is changed to conform to what is happening in the large cities.” Through the spring and summer of 1966, black-white coalitions fragmented, calls for Black Power and welfare rights peaked, and the inner cities exploded. Through it all, the National Congress of American Indians continued to cultivate an image of Indians as the one minority group that Lyndon Johnson’s administration could safely champion without fear of white reprisal. Why? To advance a nationalist agenda to promote tribal sovereignty.

After Vine Deloria resigned from the NCAI in 1967 to pursue a law degree at the University of Colorado, John Belindo (Kiowa/Navajo) carried his efforts forward. In March 1968 the organization scored a victory when President Johnson issued “The Forgotten American,” the twentieth century’s first presidential statement devoted exclusively to Indian affairs. The address did not renounce termination outright, but it did indicate that the Johnson administration wanted to end the debate by committing the federal government to a
policy of “self-help and self-determination.” " Showing himself to be equally adept at leverage seeking, Belindo assured Johnson’s advisers that if the NCAI were given an audience with the president, then it would “include quotes like 'The Johnson Administration has done more for Indians than any other president' and would also ‘support the President’s Viet Nam stand.’” Following closely on the heels of the disastrous Tet Offensive in Vietnam, this must have been inviting, indeed.

The Poor People’s Campaign, a massive six-week protest in the heart of Washington DC, revealed that even as the NCAI’s patient incrementalism seemed to be producing results, the political climate was becoming increasingly radicalized. Less than two months after Johnson issued “The Forgotten American,” thousands of poor whites, blacks, Chicanos, and American Indians converged on the capitol, taking up residence in Resurrection City, a makeshift community located just off the National Mall, and in churches and schools throughout the city. Together, they marched, picketed, testified before Congress, conducted sit-ins, and allowed themselves to be arrested—all in an effort to expose what they considered to be the grave injustices visited upon those who lived in America’s shadows. Over the course of the Poor People’s Campaign, a demonstration was staged outside the Supreme Court to protest the anti-treaty fishing rights Puycile decision, and a spontaneous sit-in occurred at the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters.

Indian involvement in what many perceived to be a primarily African American demonstration created deep divisions within tribal communities. The National Congress of American Indians, as well as a number of tribal governments, refused to endorse the Poor People’s Campaign. Although Vine Deloria understood the Indian participants’ anger and reasons for being there, he questioned their tactics. “The temptation to be militant overcomes the necessity to be nationalistic,” he later wrote in Custer Died for Your Sins. “Anyone can get into the headlines by making wild threats and militant statements. It takes a lot of hard work to raise an entire group to a new conception of themselves. And that is the difference between the nationalists and the militants.”

Mel Thom did not see it this way. On May 1, 1968, Thom—a participant in the American Indian Chicago Conference, a student in the Workshop on American Indian Affairs, a founding member of the National Indian Youth Council, and director of the Walker River Paiute Community Action Program—stood as one with a multiracial delegation of the poor called the Committee of One Hundred as it met face-to-face with members from President Lyndon Johnson’s cabinet. In an impassioned speech delivered before representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Thom spoke of poverty as a product of internal colonialism. “There is no way to improve upon racism, immorality and colonialism; it can only be done away with,” he railed. “The system and power structure serving Indian peoples is a sickness which has grown to epidemic proportions. The Indian system is sick. Paternalism is the virus, and the Secretary of the Interior is the carrier. . . .” By drawing analogies between Indians and others, and particularly by locating the struggle of Native people squarely in the context of decolonization, Mel Thom followed in the tradition of D’Arcy McNickle, Sol Tax, Robert K. Thomas, and even Vine Deloria Jr., though he came to a different conclusion. As he wrote, “the struggle is not only for self-determination but also for national liberation. The time for talking was over. ‘The day is coming when we’re going to move,’ he warned during a second encounter with government officials, ‘this time representatives from the Office of Economic Opportunity. ‘And when we move, like I said, watch out!’” As Mel Thom hammered his fist against a table, he offered an accurate premonition of things to come. Later that summer, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, members of an embattled urban community formed an organization they eventually called the American Indian Movement, and in California a small contingent of college students launched an abortive attempt to occupy and lay claim to Alcatraz Island as Indian land (see table 4). The rest, as they say, is history.

This analysis of the Workshop on American Indian Affairs, American Indian Chicago Conference, War on Poverty, and Poor People’s Campaign illuminates several new dimensions of American Indian politics and activism during the 1960s. It shows how a generation of Indians and non-Indians situated themselves and the struggle for tribal self-determination in the context of domestic controversies involving race, class, and war, as well as global concerns over the rights of indigenous peoples and the Cold War. But talking the language of the larger world, no matter how conceptually powerful it proved to be, did not necessarily produce results—for it was one thing to speak, another to be heard, and still something different to be understood. Indeed, as Mel Thom stood in solidarity with the Committee of One Hundred, he had reached the point of exasperation for the very reason that Indian people had been listened to but not understood. Despite drawing analogies and assiduously pointing out parallels, the dominant society simply could not or would not make the translation. It is a problem that continues to this day.

Notes


Daniel M. Cobb

172 Talking the Language of the Larger World