
ATTACKING THE INDIAN NEW DEAL: THE
AMERICAN INDIAN FEDERATION AND
THE QUEST TO PROTECT
ASSIMILATION

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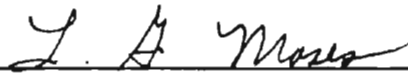
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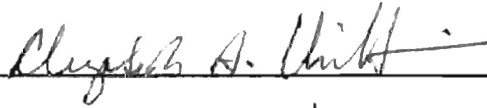
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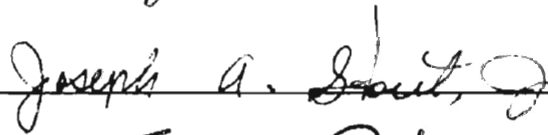
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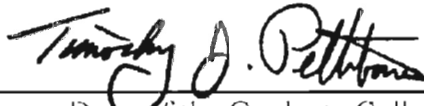
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PREFACE

In this thesis, I examined the leaders of the American Indian Federation (AIF) as products of the United States Government assimilation policies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I viewed the organization as another link in the chain of twentieth-century pan-Indian movements. As such, the AIF tried to empower American Indians by pushing them to take an active role in shaping federal policy and calling for a type of self-determination based on the abolition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). In order to support my argument, I used testimony made by AIF members in congressional hearings, official letters and publications of the group, and its attempt to write legislation, the Settlement Bill of 1940. I also examined the use of the anti-communist rhetoric of the AIF as well as Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier's charges of "fifth column" subversion in the AIF. Ultimately, the leaders of the AIF opposed Collier and his reforms because they appeared to them to contradict the policy of assimilation and its promises of citizenship. Collier's administration symbolized the continued supervision of Euro-Americans over the American Indian population. The purpose of this study is to explain the methods used by the AIF to attack the Indian New Deal in its quest to protect assimilation.

The text contains certain phrases that need explanation. First, I used "American Indian," "Native American," and "Indian" interchangeably to describe the indigenous populations of the United States. Often the leaders of the AIF relied upon the phrase Native American because it expressed more clearly the belief that the Indians were an

integral and ancient part of the citizenry of the United States. Second, because many of the members of the federation were from Oklahoma the phrase “Five Civilized Tribes,” referring to the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Seminole, and Muscogee Creek nations of the state, appeared throughout the text. I chose this phrasing because during the 1930s and 1940s a host of individuals, including AIF leaders and government officials, used the phrase. Today the term “Five Tribes” is appropriate because it does not characterize one group as “civilized” and others “uncivilized.” Next, I adopted “Euro-American” to describe the non-Indian population and society. This was a matter of personal preference over words such as “Anglo-American.” In addition, Euro-American more accurately described the dominant society than did the term “white.” Finally, at times the phrases “full blood,” “mixed blood” and “half blood” also appeared in the text. The idea of “blood” has many connotations in American Indian studies. On the one hand, it implies a “scientific” image of race and lineage. On the other hand, it also indicates a level of authenticity or identification of being culturally an “Indian.” Although it appeared as both in the text, it generally referred to the extent of non-Indian ancestry of an individual. Its usage did not reflect a belief on behalf of the author in the idea of “blood” as defining an individual. It appeared because AIF leaders, BIA officials, and legislation utilized such terminology.

Often when I describe my research, individuals express a sentiment that I do not study “real” Indians because the participants in the AIF were highly assimilated. I reject the idea that a belief in assimilation or acculturation prevents an individual from being a

“real” Indian. A singular and exclusive American Indian point of view does not exist. Rather, there are multiple American Indian points of view. While the particular views adopted by the leaders of the AIF may not have been popular during their time or even today, those views were valid and deserve respect. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the federal government and Euro-American society applied tremendous pressure on indigenous peoples to conform and become “American.” Some individuals such as Bruner succumbed to this force and adopted a different culture while others did not. However, Bruner and others like him continued to express pride in their Indian heritage. Had they denied that they were Indians, perhaps I would acknowledge the argument that they were not “real” Indians. Instead, they were American Indians and quite proud to be so.

Like all researchers, I am indebted to a number of individuals and wish to acknowledge them by expressing my gratitude. I would like to thank the staff of the Edmon Low Library; the Oklahoma Historical Society, especially Dr. Mary Jane Warde; and the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center. Without the assistance of the dedicated employees and volunteers of the Sapulpa Historical Society, this projected would have died in its infancy. I would like to extend thanks to the late Mrs. Josephine Bruner-Batese for having the foresight to donate what were to many “some old” papers belonging to her father to the Sapulpa Historical Society some twenty years ago. Without that gesture, many of the documents used in this study would have been lost forever.

There are many individuals associated with the OSU History Department that deserve my thanks as well. I would like to thank the departmental support staff, Mrs. Susan Oliver and Ms. Diana Hover, for looking out for me during these past two years. Additional thanks goes to Dr. Bill Bryans and the department for providing financial support through assistantships and scholarships. I benefited greatly from the generosity of Dr. Raymond Estep. I would like to extend special thanks to Professors Ronald A. Petrin, Richard C. Rohrs, and Laura A. Belmonte for their assistance.

A special expression of gratitude goes to my committee members. I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth A. Williams for serving as a reader. In addition to providing comments, she challenged me in class and always conveyed a sense of understanding. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Stout for agreeing to serve on my committee at the last minute and providing constructive criticism. He was particularly helpful in his efforts to improve my work during our research seminar. Much of the information in Chapter Five demonstrates his efforts. Finally, I would like to recognize Dr. L.G. Moses, who eagerly agreed to assume the additional responsibility of chairing my committee. Both before and after assuming this position, he always had an open door and sympathetic ear for the problems I encountered. He was supportive, concerned, and considerate throughout the process. I have tremendous respect for all three of these scholars and carry their wisdom with me to the next level.

Furthermore, I have a few personal debts to acknowledge as well. I wish to express my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Thomas W. Cowger of East Central University

at Ada, Oklahoma, for his friendship, for his honesty, and for inspiring my interest in American Indian history. After leaving his fold in 2000, he continues to assist me as I build a career. Also, my parents, Roy and Judy Barnes, encouraged my academic development since I was a child and adopted a “whatever-it-takes” attitude towards my education. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Travis, for being himself. I apologize for neglecting you during this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. FORMING A PAN-INDIAN MOVEMENT	1
II. INITIAL OPPOSITION	13
III. TAKING THE CAMPAIGN TO THE PUBLIC	30
IV. AMERICANISM AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN.....	42
V. "LET THE INDIAN ALONE:" THE SETTLEMENT BILL OF 1940	63
VI. THE AMERICAN INDIAN FEDERATION AFTER 1940	79
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	89

CHAPTER ONE

10

FORMING A PAN-INDIAN MOVEMENT: THE AMERICAN INDIAN FEDERATION'S QUEST TO PROTECT ASSIMILATION

In May 1934, Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier responded to an attack made by Joseph Bruner on the Indian Reorganization Act. Bruner was a wealthy, full-blood Creek from Sapulpa, Oklahoma, and held the title of “Principal Chief” of the Indian National Confederacy—a collaboration of individuals from the Five Civilized Tribes. Collier wrote to Bruner, “you are an interesting social type.... You have Indian blood, you call yourself an Indian, you identify yourself as an Indian, and yet some inward compulsion makes you frenziedly active to prevent Indians from receiving the help and protection which they need.” This was an instigating factor in a long battle between Collier and individuals like Bruner who dedicated themselves to subverting Collier’s reforms through a political pan-Indian organization known as the American Indian Federation (AIF). Between 1934 and 1945, in an attempt to empower Native Americans and with the rhetoric of anti-communism, the American Indian Federation waged a war to force the federal government to live up to the promises of assimilation. The leaders of the AIF viewed the Indian Reorganization Act and other New Deal reforms as a negation of the promises of citizenship and complete inclusion in American society that were central to federal policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,¹

Although the history of the AIF begins in 1934, its antecedents stretch back to federal Indian policy in the mid-nineteenth century. At that time political leaders

designed policy to separate American Indians from Euro-American populations. The purpose of this policy was to limit violence and to allow for unfettered expansion. An early example of this policy was the removal of the Five Civilized Tribes from the Southern states to Indian Territory in the 1830s and 1840s. After the Civil War, policymakers implemented Grant's Peace Policy. This policy established reservations, administered by Protestant religious groups for various tribes throughout the western territories. By 1880, it became clear that this system was not effective due to increased western expansion and violent conflict between the tribes and Euro-Americans. At that time reformers and politicians agreed that the only solution to the "Indian problem" was total assimilation.²

The task of advancing assimilation policy fell to Christian reform organizations in the East. The most important of these organizations, the Indian Rights Association, formed in 1882. Beginning in 1883, the Indian Rights Association met each October with other reform organizations at the Lake Mohonk Conferences of Friends of the Indian. At this and subsequent meetings, Euro-American reformers decided what was best for the Indians. The reformers agreed that the reservations were barriers to assimilation because they segregated Indians from the dominant society.³

According to Frederick Hoxie the shift from separation to assimilation represented a shift in the conditions in the dominant society. After the Civil War the space between ethnic groups decreased as the United States grew more industrial and urban. Hoxie argues that these social changes "threatened many Americans' sense of national identity." Rather than separate the Indian, reformers called for total assimilation in order to prevent the Indian from becoming an obstacle to progress.⁴

To advance assimilation reformers advocated allotment in severalty. Following a campaign to influence politicians and policymakers, the Friends of the Indian achieved their goals with the passage of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. This legislation divided tribal lands among individuals. The Secretary of the Interior issued a fee patent for each allotment, holding it in trust for a period of twenty-five years. At the end of the period the individual would receive his or her land in "fee simple," or without restrictions. Reformers and government officials hoped that the Dawes Act would turn the American Indians into small farmers after the fashion of other Americans. The ultimate goal of the Dawes Act was "to assimilate Native Americans, to set them free from the control of the Indian Office." Once an individual Indian demonstrated his or her ability to be an "American," or a Protestant farmer, he would receive his or her reward. According to Hoxie, this reward included "the extension of citizenship and other symbols of membership in American society." This policy also rewarded the reformers by showing the continuing ability of "the nation's institutions to mold all people to a common standard."⁵

In the early twentieth century, attitudes about assimilation changed. While reformers continued to call for assimilation, they no longer guaranteed equality. By 1920, according to Hoxie, the Indians were a "peripheral people" trapped in a static position in society as dependents. As a "peripheral people," the American Indian was just another minority group relegated to a specific role and expected to remain in it. Although the federal government formally extended citizenship to Native Americans in 1924, many individuals in the mainstream society did not consider the Indian equal to the

Euro-American. The Indian populations continued to be “wards” under the guardianship of the federal government.⁶

Allotment was a disaster. It never attained its primary goal of making Indians into yeoman farmers. According to historian Francis Paul Prucha, the number of farmers among Indian populations actually decreased after allotment. Millions of acres of land were lost to homesteaders, grafters, and sale. Of the nearly 140 million acres allotted, by 1934, only 52 million acres remained in the hands of American Indians. In addition, the Meriam Report of 1928 showed that economic, health, and educational services for Indians were woefully inadequate.⁷

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed John Collier, a dynamic Indian-policy reformer, to the position of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Collier, a former progressive reformer in New York, dedicated himself to reversing the disastrous allotment policies. He set out to write new legislation, such as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act, and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, or Thomas-Rogers Act. He also hoped to improve conditions among the Indians by using other New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps. In addition to improving the economic, health, and social conditions of the Indians, Collier wanted to preserve their cultural heritage. He adopted a program of cultural pluralism. His views allowed American Indians to maintain their cultural heritage while adopting the beneficial aspects of the dominant society. Collier was not opposed to assimilation; however, he opposed the coercive assimilation outlined by the Dawes Act. According to historian Donald Parman, Collier believed that “the Indian Bureau should allow the

Indians to select those aspects of the dominant culture which would be beneficial to themselves.”⁸

Collier's eccentric nature and radical background created serious concerns among more assimilated Indians. His most determined opponents were members of the American Indian Federation. For the most part, the leaders and members of the AIF were successful products of the campaign to assimilate the Indians. They demanded that the federal government fulfill its promise to grant equality and complete inclusion in American society to assimilated Indians. It was this desire to receive compensation for assimilation that fueled the AIF's assault on John Collier and his policies. Joseph Bruner and other Federation members believed that Collier's policies symbolized a withdrawal of the government's promise.

In addition to being products of the assimilation campaign, the leaders of the AIF also were participants in the growing expression of pan-Indianism, movements that transcended tribal lines, of the early twentieth century. According to Hazel Hertzberg, modern pan-Indian movements began during the Progressive era when “a number of organized movements [did] arise, national in scope, based firmly on a common Indian interest and identity as distinct from tribal interests and identities, and stressing Indian accommodation to the dominant society.” Movements grew in the twentieth century because of situations created by the federal policy of forced assimilation including shared experiences of the reservation, improved technology, the spread of the English language, improved education, and increased contact between tribes due to interactions at off-reservation boarding schools. In general, pan-Indian leaders “wanted somehow to remain Indians and at the same time to adopt what they felt to be the best in white civilization

and Christianity.” They viewed themselves as what Hertzberg called “honest brokers” trying to bridge the differences between their Indian and non-Indian realities. Margaret Connell Szasz labeled these intermediaries “cultural brokers.” As such these individuals “changed roles at will, in accordance with the circumstances....Their lives reflected a complexity unknown to those living within the confines of a single culture.” Pan-Indian participants were united by their belief in shared Indian experiences based on their relationship with the federal government, pride in being Indian, and the call for “self-help, self-reliance, and initiative.” They stressed education for all Indians, were “sensitive about their relationship to the larger American society,” and viewed their activities as being of “historic importance.”⁹

The most prominent of early political pan-Indian movements was the Society of American Indians (SAI). Founded in 1911 by a non-Indian, Professor Fayette A. McKenzie of Ohio State University, and two Indians, Dr. Charles Eastman and Reverend Sherman Coolidge, the SAI membership included Dr. Carlos Montezuma, Thomas L. Sloan, Charles E. Daganett, Gertrude Bonnin, Marie Baldwin, and Henry Standing Bear. By 1913, it had two hundred active members concentrated in Oklahoma, Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska and New York. The SAI gained early success, according to Hertzberg, by proving “itself capable of defining an Indian common ground and formulating a thoughtful program for the present reform of Indian policy.” Nevertheless, it was unable to force change in government policies and seemed to be “a reform organization which could not achieve its reforms.” This limitation created tension among its members and exacerbated existing divisions over the abolition of the BIA, the sacramental use of peyote, and the appropriate role of the SAI in tribal disputes. The SAI held onto its goal

until the 1920s when it found itself unable to overcome its internal divisions and accommodate changes in thinking in the dominant society.¹⁰

In addition to national movements, there were regional expressions of pan-Indianism. One such group was the Society of Oklahoma Indians (SOI), which gave many of the leaders of the AIF their first experiences in pan-Indian movements. Formed in 1923, the SOI claimed to be “founded by a small number of patriotic Indian citizens...to organize the poor, uneducated and unorganized Indian Peoples of Oklahoma.” Its leaders included Joseph Bruner, Frank Cayou, Delos K. Lonewolf, O.K. Chandler, and W.W. LeFlore, all of whom would play an important role in the AIF.¹¹

In 1933, Bruner and other members of the Five Civilized Tribes created a new, regional pan-Indian movement called the Indian National Confederacy. According to its by-laws, the Indian National Confederacy sought cooperation and harmony and the preservation of the “noblest traditions and ideals of the Red Man ... to cultivate the new ideals of an enlightened and awakened citizenship.” In addition, the Confederacy called for the advancement of “American citizenship and civilization,” the core values of the campaign for assimilation. Essentially, the leaders wanted greater involvement of Indians in the development of federal policies. From this alliance, the American Indian Federation was born.¹²

The American Indian Federation was a union of like-minded individuals that gathered in Washington, D.C., in June 1934 to protest the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act. The AIF argued that Indians were “the only race held in a position of slavery and involuntary servitude.” Like the Indian National Confederacy, the AIF sought to unite individuals across tribal lines, to promote “American citizenship and

civilization,” and to encourage the hiring of Indians by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The tenets of the AIF constitution were identical to those of the Indian National Confederacy. This similarity reflected Bruner’s dominant position in both organizations. In addition, both declarations had the same author, W. W. LeFlore, who served as secretary for both groups.¹³

The AIF differed from the Indian National Confederacy in two ways. First, the AIF extended membership to individuals outside of Oklahoma and the Five Civilized Tribes. In addition, the leaders of the AIF adopted three informal goals that would become more important than those outlined in the AIF constitution would and that were never part of the Confederacy’s agenda. These informal goals included the abolition of the BIA, the repeal of the IRA, and the removal of John Collier from the office of commissioner.¹⁴

The AIF call to abolish the BIA reflected the influence of earlier pan-Indian leaders. It was an idea advocated by Dr. Carlos Montezuma, a Yavapai Indian raised by Euro-Americans and a BIA physician. Montezuma proposed abolishing the BIA as a solution to the “Indian problem” in the early twentieth century. He would take this battlecry to the Society of American Indians, where he led a faction that promoted abolition although, according to Hertzberg, it was “a simplistic solution to a complex problem” without a “practical likelihood of coming to pass.” His ideas influenced leaders in the AIF like Bruner, Alice Lee Jemison, and Thomas Sloan, who was also a member of the SAI.¹⁵

In its efforts to discredit Collier and advance ideas of Americanism, the AIF sought to recruit members throughout the United States. Reporting between three and six

thousand members between 1934 and 1945, membership was open to all adult American Indians and their spouses; however, most AIF members were of mixed ancestry, highly assimilated, and economically successful in the dominant society. In addition, many of them were from Oklahoma and members of the Five Civilized Tribes.¹⁶

After 1939, the membership reflected a heavy concentration of Cherokee, Choctaw, and Muscogee Creek individuals. John Collier challenged the “Indianness” of the assimilated members of these tribes, such as Joseph Bruner. W. David Baird addressed this phenomenon in his article “Are There ‘Real Indians’ in Oklahoma?” A large proportion of the members of the Five Tribes supported private property, advocated assimilation, and often they were the products of unions between Indians and Euro-Americans. However, Baird argued that members of these tribes are “Real” Indians and to argue otherwise “is to deny them the right of self-definition.” The tendency for many members of the Five Tribes to support assimilation explained the widespread disapproval in Oklahoma of John Collier and his policies. According to Baird, almost ninety percent of American Indians in Oklahoma did not organize under the terms of Collier’s programs. Bruner and the AIF represented the opinions of many of those individuals in Oklahoma. However, the Federation did little to represent those Indians opposed to assimilation.¹⁷

The following chapters explore the methods that the AIF used to attack the Indian New Deal as part of an effort to force the United States to fulfill its promises for assimilation. First, it examines the AIF’s opposition to the Wheeler-Howard Act and the Thomas-Rogers Act as well as its charges of communism in the Indian Bureau. Second, it demonstrates how the AIF publicized its charges against Collier and the BIA to gain support for its movement. Next, it explores how the AIF used the House Un-American

Activities and Propaganda Committee, or Dies Committee, to harass Collier as well as his counterattack on the AIF. Finally, it discusses the AIF's attempt to mold federal policy by writing its own legislation. All of these actions reflected the AIF's quest to protect assimilation using the rhetoric of anti-communism as well as their desire for American Indians to seize the opportunity to control their own destiny.

NOTES

¹ John Collier to Joseph Bruner, 8 May 1934, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma. (Microform)

²Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: the Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 2, 10.

³Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: the United States Government and the American Indians*, Vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988): 616,631.

⁴Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 12-14.

⁵Prucha, *The Great Father*, Vol. 2, 667-68; Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 15, 219.

⁶Ibid., x,xi, 236, 242.

⁷Prucha, *The Great Father*, Vol. 2, 808,896.

⁸Donald L. Parman. *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 30. There are numerous studies on John Collier and the Indian New Deal, which will be discussed throughout the text. They include: Lawrence Kelly, *The Assault on Assimilation: John Collier and the Origins of Indian Policy Reform* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983); Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977); Elmer R. Rusco, *A Fateful Time: The Background and Legislative History of the Indian Reorganization Act* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000); Robert Fay Schrader, *The Indian Arts and Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983); Graham D. Taylor, *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: The Administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

⁹Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971): viii, 14,15,22,58, 73-75; Margaret Connell Szasz, *Between Indian and White Worlds: the Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 6.

¹⁰Ibid., 32, 36, 100, 111, 134, 135,179, 199.

¹¹"Society of Oklahoma Indians," program from Fourth Annual Convention, June 1927, in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, Harriette J. Westbrook Collection, 2000.020 Box 22, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.

¹²Joseph Bruner to John Collier, 7 September 1933, John Collier Papers , 1922-1968, (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).

¹³ Ibid.; “Statement of Joseph Bruner, President of the American Indian Federation,” House Committee on Indian Affairs. *Hearings on H.R. 7781: Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 11 February 1935, 14-15.

¹⁴ Joseph Bruner, “The Indian Demands Justice,” *The National Republic* 20(March 1935): 31.

¹⁵ Hertzberg, *Search for an American Identity*, 178, and Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 67, 94, 105, 107. Iverson presents the most comprehensive study of Montezuma’s intriguing life.

¹⁶ “Statement of Joseph Bruner,” House Committee, *Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 14-15; Bruner, “The Indian Demands Justice,” 31; Laurence M. Hauptman, “The American Indian Federation: A Reinterpretation,” *Pacific Historical Review* 52(November, 1983): 382-84; Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Identity*, 289; “AIF Resolution,” 14 January 1945, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma. The prominent members of the organization were: its president Joseph Bruner, a full-blood Creek from Sapulpa; W.W. LeFlore, a Choctaw from Oklahoma; Alice Lee Jemison, a Seneca from New York; O.K. Chandler, a Cherokee attorney; Delos K. Lonewolf, a Kiowa peyote leader; Thomas Sloan, an Omaha attorney and former president of the Society of American Indians; Winslow J. Couro, a Mission Indian from Santa Ysabel, California; and Judge Napoleon B. Johnson, a Cherokee and future president of the National Congress of American Indians.

¹⁷ John Collier to Joseph Bruner, 9 May 1934, John Collier Papers; W. David Baird, “Are There ‘Real’ Indians in Oklahoma? Historical Perceptions of the Five Civilized Tribes,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 68(Spring 1990) 14,17. Baird discusses a group of Cherokees known as the Kee-too-wah society. This was a traditionalist group that supported Collier and opposed the AIF.

CHAPTER TWO

INITIAL OPPOSITION TO THE INDIAN REORGANIZATION ACT AND THE OKLAHOMA INDIAN WELFARE ACT

John Collier's sweeping reform of federal Indian policy beginning in 1933 would protect many indigenous communities; however, his policies often faced stiff opposition. The most persistent leaders of this opposition were found among the membership of the conservative American Indian Federation, a pan-Indian movement dedicated to the assimilationist policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The relationship between Collier and AIF president Joseph Bruner began quite amicably. In the late 1920s, Bruner cooperated with Collier and Stella Atwood of the Federation of Women's Clubs in their fact-finding missions about the abuses of the BIA. In 1928, Atwood requested that Bruner provide her and Collier with information about "unsatisfactory conditions in Oklahoma in regard to the Indians." Bruner willingly agreed to cooperate and called for BIA reform. He believed that many Indians in Oklahoma were afraid to speak out against the government because of BIA control of their land. In addition, Bruner chastised "irresponsibles [that] have no race pride and will soon be against their people as for them." He believed that "the Indian Bureau...should be taken by the nape of the neck and shook until every crook within it is exposed and kicked out." In response to Bruner's letter to Atwood, Collier wrote Bruner and noted the dedication of the American Indian Defense Association to the cause of BIA reform. Looking at the relationship from 1930, it would seem that Bruner and Collier would be able to cooperate on Indian affairs.¹

Although Bruner had supported Gabe Parker, an Oklahoma Choctaw, for the position of commissioner, he remained hopeful that Collier would improve the BIA. He wrote to congratulate Collier and expressed that his appointment “renews our courage and fill us [the Indian] with new hope” for a “New Dawn for the American Indian.” By inviting Collier to attend Confederacy meetings in Oklahoma, Bruner tried to encourage cooperation between Collier and the Indians through the Indian National Confederacy. Apparently, Collier never responded to either Bruner’s expression of good wishes or invitations.²

Bruner’s cooperative spirit quickly developed into acrimonious criticism as it became clear to Bruner and his associates that Collier’s programs were not designed to protect or advance assimilation. As Congress debated the provisions of the Wheeler-Howard Bill, Collier traveled to Indian country to confer with various Indian groups. At a March meeting with members of the Five Civilized Tribes at Muskogee, Oklahoma, Collier assured the highly assimilated members of the audience that his reforms would not change their positions or status and that their allotments would be safe. He denied the belief that the Wheeler-Howard Act ended the goal of assimilation inherent in the policy of allotment; rather, he claimed it provided a different method for “making the Indian a happy, industrious citizen.” Collier said that he was holding the conference “in order to have his bill, studied, criticized, improved by the Indians.” However, Collier was not an individual known to be open to criticism— a lesson Bruner and others would soon learn.³

At the meetings, Collier spent much of his time defending the IRA against charges of communism and segregation. He denied that there was anything “Russian” in his bill, and he continued by declaring that it was “no more Communism than the Empire

State Building in New York.” When asked if the bill would segregate Indians, Collier argued that each tribe and individual remained autonomous while the legislation addressed the group.⁴

Bruner and the members of the Indian National Confederacy had read the bill and believed that it would have a profound impact on Indian communities. Bruner’s hostile demeanor, as expressed by his questions and objections, indicated his disapproval of the legislation. Collier’s aides dismissed Bruner’s questions about increased employment opportunities for Indians in the BIA. When the traditionalist Kee-too-wah society read a resolution praising Collier, Bruner objected. The BIA officials then ignored his move to adjourn the meeting.⁵

Collier left the meetings hopeful that he had convinced the tribes to support him. However, events in Washington would soon dash his hopes. In April, the Indian Rights Association noted his optimism about the outcome of the conferences, but it also noted that “the information that comes to us from the field suggests that the complicated language of the bill has created much confusion in the minds of the Indians.” Senator Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma hesitated to support the bill as he saw increasing opposition from his constituents. He used his influence to exempt Oklahoma Indians from most of the provisions of the bill. Although disappointed, Collier continued to promote his legislative reforms in Oklahoma.⁶

Despite the obstacles, the Indian Reorganization Act became law in June 1934. After adopting the IRA by tribal referendum, tribal organizations could write new constitutions and establish corporations. The IRA ended further allotment of tribal land, provided funds for the acquisition of additional lands, and extended trust periods. Under

the legislation, the government established a “revolving credit fund” to provide for tribal development. Although the IRA did much to help indigenous peoples, it was, nevertheless, a controversial piece of legislation.⁷

As the BIA supervised the implementation of the IRA in the summer and fall of 1934, Collier sought to find a way to bring the provisions of the IRA to Oklahoma. In the fall, he toured Oklahoma with Senator Thomas. The two men debated the bill during the trip as they tried to gauge Indian opinions. According to Peter Wright, the tour brought both men into agreement on certain issues. Both felt that the existing legislation “was not satisfactory for Oklahoma” and there was a need for “legislation providing for purchase of land and credit for individual Indians.” Finally, they agreed that the law needed to protect Indians “from white encroachments.”⁸

Developments in Congress in 1935 made it possible for Collier to push for an Indian Reorganization Act for Oklahoma. In that year, Oklahomans received three important committee chairs. Most important for Indian affairs, Representative Will Rogers became the chair of the House Indian Committee and Thomas became the Senate Committee’s chair. Together, Thomas and Rogers introduced legislation, the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act.⁹

The Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act provided protection and IRA-like programs for Oklahoma Indians. It divided Indians into two degrees, based on the findings of a competency commission: first degree Indians were “half blood” or more and “would have their property held in trust;” and second degree (less than half) “were to have their restrictions removed as rapidly as their ability to manage their affairs would permit.” Other provisions provided for the purchase of land by the Secretary of the Interior, gave

the President the authority to extend trust periods indefinitely, continued supervision by the Interior Department over estates and guardianship, and provided for social services. In addition, the legislation allowed for voluntary organizations of corporate bodies by the tribes, loan and credit programs, and the extension of “all present and future benefits under the Wheeler-Howard Act to Oklahoma Indians.”¹⁰

The introduction of the bill in February 1935 created immediate opposition from Oklahoma. An example of this opposition came from the Tulsa County Bar Association. The association declared that it was “unalterably opposed” to the restrictions placed on first-degree Indians, the cost of competency commissions, and the continued authority of the Secretary of the Interior. In addition, the group argued that the bill violated state authority. Collier responded to this type of opposition by declaring that most were “professional guardians and the lawyers who fatten upon the estates of the comparatively few wealthy Indians in eastern Oklahoma.” He also explained that the bill protected individuals targeted by such attorneys and guardians. In addition, it provided assistance for “the 100,000 impoverished Indians in Oklahoma.” Although non-Indian opposition to the bill was significant for politicians like Thomas and Rogers, the Indian opposition to the bill was most important.¹¹

While Thomas and Rogers were preparing their legislation, the House Committee entertained a movement to repeal the Wheeler-Howard Act. As a result, the American Indian Federation played an important role in the debates over Collier’s reforms in the spring of 1935. The AIF began its offensive with a letter writing campaign in order to discredit Collier and to attack the Indian New Deal. In a letter to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, Bruner charged both Collier and the BIA with wrongdoing. He called

for an end to federal guardianship of the Indian, an end to reservation schools in favor of increased public school education, and an end to the use of tax money to pay for “the army of unsympathetic ‘experts’ to force a still stronger control over our race.”¹²

Opposition to Collier’s programs, including the Thomas-Rogers Bill, led AIF leaders to appeal to Rogers for a hearing. They wished to show “evidence of coercion and false representation” by the BIA and the “oppression and submersion of the Indian race.” They opposed the irregular election procedures of the Wheeler-Howard Act, arguing that those measures were “illegal, unjust, coercive, and false.” Individuals opposed to Collier’s programs, Bruner argued, were met with “oppression, retaliation, and intimidation.” Finally, he claimed that BIA officials were unfit and showed “their contempt for the intelligence of Indians.” His pleas were effective as AIF representatives received an opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Indian Affairs in February 1935.¹³

At the hearings, AIF representatives testified to the abuses of the BIA and their displeasure with Collier. The representatives included Bruner, Alice Lee Jemison, and Winslow J. Couro. Of course, Bruner represented the Oklahoma contingent of the AIF. Jemison served as the sixth district president, which geographically stretched from Wisconsin to the Mason-Dixon line. Couro, a Mission Indian from California, served as the AIF treasurer from 1934 to 1938.

Bruner began the proceedings by introducing important AIF documents that showed which groups the organization represented as well as its policies and procedures. Bruner testified that the BIA “handicapped” Indians through Collier’s policies. He believed that Collier was bitter towards opponents of the IRA. To support his claim,

Bruner provided letters from other delegates who were unable to travel to Washington to testify because the BIA would not approve the expenditure of tribal funds for that purpose. He also offered the statement of William C. Knorr, a mixed-blood Ft. Peck Indian whose, he claimed, lost his BIA job because he called for people to reject the IRA.¹⁴

Jemison spoke next as a representative of the AIF and the Senecas. Her first charge attacked the election procedures of the IRA for allowing “transients” to vote. She believed that Collier was “trying to push himself forward, trying to exploit the Indians, trying to solicit funds for his organization [AIDA], by holding forth to the people the Indian in his primitive state.”¹⁵

Testimony by other AIF representatives strengthened testimony previously given by Bruner and Jemison. Winslow J. Couro appeared as an authorized representative of the Mission Indians and the Santa Ysabel Indian Reservation. He provided additional examples of the voting irregularities. One “eligible” voter had been gone from the reservation for forty-five years and another was dead. Couro’s testimony served to strengthen the arguments made by Bruner and Jemison. Testimony provided by other individuals such as Rupert Costo, a Cahuilla activist, and Adam Castillo, leader of the Mission Indian Federation, served to advance the AIF’s anti-Collier and anti-IRA program.¹⁶

Collier was not present for the first day of hearings; however, he had aides attend to report on the testimony. His absence did not go unnoticed as Representative John McGroarty of California sent a warning to the commissioner to take the hearings

seriously because it would not be delayed to allow time for Collier to defend his policies. With that, the committee adjourned for the evening.¹⁷

Heeding McGroarty's warning, Collier appeared on the morning of February 12 to address the charges made by Bruner and Jemison. He tried to clarify the irregular IRA elections by explaining that if an individual supported the IRA, he or she did not have to vote. Only individuals opposed to the bill needed to cast ballots. The absence of a vote counted as an assumed affirmative— so it was not the majority of the votes but the majority of eligible voters. This voting style created much controversy because the BIA determined eligibility. Often the approved rolls included persons that were dead or had relocated to non-reservation areas. The AIF and other critics claimed that this was an “un-American” style of voting because it did not conform to the standard “American” election procedures. The committee then permitted Jemison to “grill” Collier about land ownership and the continued supervision of the BIA. He argued that the supervision of the BIA should be continued in order to protect the Indians and to allow tribal governments to acquire more land. The government held title to the land to avoid taxation. Collier did not find a sympathetic audience as Representative McGroarty, reflecting his conservative attitude, announced that he would like to see an end to the BIA as well as termination of the trust period.¹⁸

Collier could not ignore criticisms made by the AIF. As the hearings continued, he and other BIA employees would launch a very bitter and personal attack on the representatives of the AIF. In a February edition of the BIA newsletter *Indians At Work*, an article titled “The Bruner ‘Memorial,’ R.I.P.” appeared calling AIF publications “a blaze of incoherent glory.” Jemison quoted Collier in saying that the AIF was “a fake

organization.” In addition, she claimed that Collier had called her a “half-breed” and labeled her as “insane.” Collier’s reaction to the AIF was one of frustration and confusion. He could not understand how educated Indians like Bruner and Jemison could not recognize the worth of his programs. Instead of using systematic and rational arguments to discredit the AIF, Collier decided to rely on personal attacks. This was just another example of Collier’s passionate yet extreme personality.¹⁹

Jemison used Collier’s personal attacks as an opportunity to expand the scope of the charges made by the AIF. Monopolizing the hearings for four days, Jemison continued to attack the IRA by pointing to the opinions of politicians. She used a speech made by Representative Clyde Kelly in the House of Representatives that criticized Collier’s attack on her. She also used a report that she co-authored with Alfred Beiter in June 1934, that called the IRA a “devastating step toward reviving the life of an already overdeveloped, antiquated, autocratic, un-American bureaucracy.” She criticized the use of tax money to fund Collier’s *Indians At Work*. Jemison argued that Collier used the periodical to publicize his own opinions—not those of Indians. At this point, Jemison introduced a new element in the debate. She identified the influence of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in the BIA through Collier, Ickes, and Nathan Margold, Solicitor General of the Interior Department. The AIF expanded this charge even after these hearings.²⁰

Following Jemison’s marathon testimony AIF member Thomas Sloan, a mixed-blood Omaha from Nebraska, argued for the abolition of the BIA. At the age of seventy-two Sloan was an interesting character. He had studied law and became a successful attorney among the Indians of his state; however, he was accused of profiteering. In the

early twentieth century, he became a peyotist, viewing it use as “an effective vehicle for Indian accommodation to the dominant society.” He was a controversial but important leader of the Society of American Indians as well as an enthusiastic booster for the AIF from 1934 to his death in 1940. In his testimony, Sloan claimed that the IRA would fail because self-government did not have legal support and was “contrary to the fundamental principles of our Government.” He called for the abolition of the BIA and for a policy giving Indians land free from government supervision. He claimed that “Unless the Indian is permitted to work out his own problems, he will never develop, and we will always have it [supervision] with us as a tool of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.”²¹

Collier’s rebuttal followed Sloan’s testimony. He called any plan to abolish the BIA impractical because it would not end the role of the government in tribal affairs unless guardianship was terminated. He argued that at some point, when a tribe was ready, guardianship would end. But until that time the federal government should work to achieve two goals: “the establishment of a maximum responsibility and power for Indian tribes and Indians while they have the privileges and immunities that go with Federal wardship;” and agreements with the states to provide some social services.²²

Following this rational argument against the call to abolish the BIA, Collier returned to personal attacks on individual members of the AIF. He stated that Bruner did not represent any tribe from Oklahoma and that the AIF had few supporters. While this may have been an accurate statement, it did not sit well with committee members. Representative Usher L. Burdick of North Dakota criticized Collier and defended the AIF. Burdick stated that Collier was “hostile to any organization of Indians that seek [sic] to appear” before Congress. Collier, however, denied that he was “hostile.”

Instead, he argued that he was trying to discredit the AIF's testimony and that the AIF had already won a small victory by convincing Congress to cut BIA appropriations. Bruner denied this charge; however, he later declared that Collier's comment inspired the AIF to approach the appropriations committee for just such a purpose.²³

In April 1935, Collier intensified his attacks on the AIF, particularly on Bruner. He charged that the hearings had become "a vehicle for extreme and astonishing misinformation." They were a venue that permitted Bruner to achieve "a momentary apotheosis" as the "banner-bearer of onmarching [sic] Indians, nothing less, indeed, than a hundred Indian chiefs representing 40 tribes." Collier stated that Bruner sought the "exploitation and injury of his own people" and his "momentary apotheosis has brought about in him...a sort of intoxication of glory." Collier also accused Bruner and Jemison of having "united in an audacious humbugging, claiming for their organization the right to speak for and even to count as members many great Indian tribes who have never authorized any such use of their names."²⁴

After attacking Bruner and Jemison, Collier defended the BIA. Whether for well or ill, Collier argued, Indians were wards of the federal government, which had a duty to protect them. Removing guardianship as the AIF advocated would open the Indians to fraud and graft, as demonstrated by the condition of the Indians of eastern Oklahoma who had been released from guardianship and lost their lands. However, those in the western part of the state, who continued under guardianship, retained their properties. He characterized past administrations as brutal and arbitrary, and he vowed to improve the BIA by preserving land and guaranteeing civil rights. To abolish the BIA because of past wrongs, according to Collier, would be "analogous to the burning up of a house in order

to get rid of the annoying mice.” In closing, he pleaded for the continuation of the BIA, for an opportunity to resolve the “ancient, profound, and justified grievances of the Indian.” If Congress repealed the Wheeler-Howard Act, it would be “nothing other than the destruction of the Indians themselves....Surely that is not the way; surely the right way is to build upon the existing good, to purge such evil as may remain, and to make the Federal Government one of the agencies for building up a good and happy life.”²⁵

Two days after Collier’s eloquent defense of the BIA, Bruner returned to the hearings with a prepared statement. Bruner, at the age of sixty-two, was a large man plagued by serious health conditions. Due to blindness in one eye, he received permission from the committee members for Jemison to read his statement. After providing information about his life and involvement in tribal affairs, Bruner turned to his relationship with Collier and the BIA. He noted his initial enthusiasm for Collier’s appointment and hopes of cooperation to improve conditions in Oklahoma. Initially, he hoped that the Wheeler-Howard Bill would help Indians, but he soon began to question the bill. He called Indian self-government in the bill a “misnomer” because the Secretary of the Interior continued to have too much authority. Bruner claimed, “the bill took away from the Indian his right to even complain against an official of the Indian Bureau.” The Thomas-Rogers Bill, Bruner believed, comprised of a “very beautiful and promising scheme,” but it was “isolating, segregating, and race prejudice.”²⁶

Following this argument, Bruner addressed Collier’s accusations that the AIF was a “fake organization.” He denied that the AIF claimed to represent all Indians, as Collier had suggested. However, he noted that the AIF represented specific individuals in many different tribes as well as the Seneca Nation. He provided proof that the Senecas had

authorized the AIF to do so. Bruner also denied Collier's charge that he claimed to be the chief of any tribe. He admitted that he held the title "principal chief of the Indian National Confederacy," an elected position within that organization. Bruner continued by accusing Collier and the IRA as being part of a "communistic scheme" as shown in the Wheeler-Howard Act and the irregular election procedures. He defended Jemison against Collier's "ungentlemanly and unbecoming" attacks on her personal life.²⁷

Within a week of the completion of the hearings on the repeal of the IRA, the House began its hearings on the Thomas-Rogers Bill. Collier began the testimony by introducing statistics on the loss of land among the Indians of eastern Oklahoma. Douglas Johnston of the Chickasaws and Grady Lewis of the Choctaws endorsed the bill. Rolly Canard, principal chief of the Creek Nation, provided an additional endorsement of the bill. He testified that the nine thousand Creeks of Oklahoma recommended the passage of the Thomas-Rogers Bill.²⁸

Bruner prepared a statement for this hearing that Jemison read as well. In the statement, he argued that, as a Creek citizen, he knew a "large majority of the Creek Tribe of Oklahoma Indians unalterably opposed Collier's Indian Reorganization Act." The delegates who had endorsed the measure had been "selected by manipulations of Collier henchmen." Bruner opposed the Thomas-Rogers Act because it was a tool of the BIA, like the Wheeler-Howard Act, and "it is a wandering, ramifying, communistic 'scheme' that will do real harm to the Indian." It was impractical because it treated the Indian differently from other citizens and lost land could never be recovered. Bruner concluded his statement by expressing his adamant opposition to the bill. He wrote, "To me, an Indian, a full-blood Indian at that, the spending of public money in such a manner

is an outrage.” The Thomas-Rogers Bill, he continued, “bristles with Collier and Collierism, which ...is dangerous to our Indians and the well-being of this nation.”²⁹

The Thomas-Rogers Bill created intense debate in Washington as well as in Oklahoma. Despite these obstacles, the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act became law in 1936. The final measures, as outlined by Wright, excluded the oil-rich Osage Indians, but other Oklahoma Indians benefited from its provisions. It provided for the purchase of land for the “landless,” for tribal reorganization and corporations, new tribal constitutions, and for access to federal credit programs and loans. The final version of the bill did not address the continuation of restrictions, but it continued state jurisdiction of probate and heirship cases.³⁰

Ultimately, the opposition of the AIF made little difference to the politicians shaping policy. Most likely, policymakers realized that the AIF represented a minority. Nevertheless, anti-New Deal legislators continued to give the leaders of the AIF opportunities to voice their opinions. AIF leaders continued their attacks on Collier, embracing more fully the rhetoric of anti-communism. Collier quickly grew tired of their antics. In 1940, he voiced his irritation to members of the House Committee on Indian Affairs. He believed that the AIF “has supplied the allegations and generalizations” used to attack the IRA. He believed that those charges had “caused a reversal of the personal and collective thinking of a group of senators,” by turning them against his reforms. Despite their inability to persuade Congress, the leaders of the AIF continued their efforts by appealing to the American public using memorials, popular magazines, open letters, pamphlets, and other mediums to express their anti-Collier and anti-communist rhetoric.³¹

NOTES

¹Stella Atwood to Bruner, 17 December 1927, Bruner to Atwood, 7 January 1928, and John Collier to Bruner, 7 January 1928, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

²Bruner to Collier, 21 April 1933, John Collier Papers; Bruner to Collier, 16 September 1933, John Collier Papers, 1922-1968 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).

³"Proceedings of the Conference for Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes at Oklahoma," 22 March 1934, John Collier Papers, 4, 7. Vine Deloria, Jr., compiled and edited the transcripts of the eight hearings with Indians as well as the draft of and final provisions of the IRA. See Deloria, *The Indian Reorganization Act: Congresses and Bills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

⁴*Ibid.*, 14,23,26.; "Testimony by Joseph Bruner," House Committee on Indian Affairs. *Hearings on H.R. 7781: Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 11 February 1935, 889. For more information about the congresses with the Indians, see Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Indian Reorganization Act: Congresses and Bills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

⁵ Bruner to Houston B. Tehee, 7 March 1934, S.W. Brown, Jr., Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Box 14; "Proceedings of the Conference for Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes," 22 March 1934, John Collier Papers, 39,43,52.

⁶*Indian Truth* 11(April 1934), 1.

⁷Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 159; Philp, "John Collier, 1933-45," in *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824-1977*, edited by Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979): 278; Laurence Hauptman, "The American Indian Federation and the Indian New Deal: A Reinterpretation," *Pacific Historical Review* 52 (November 1983): 389.

⁸Peter Wright, "John Collier and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 50 (Autumn 1972): 361-62.

⁹*Ibid.*, 362-63. Congressman Will Rogers was an educator from Moore, Oklahoma. He was not the famous Oklahoma humorist Will Rogers.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹"Resolution of the Tulsa County Bar Association," c. 1935, Brown Collection, Box 15; Collier to Arthur Brisbane, 22 May 1935, John Collier Papers.

¹²Bruner to Ickes, 22 January 1935, House Committee, *Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 23.

¹³Bruner to Will Rogers, 30 January 1935, *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁴“Testimony of Joseph Bruner,” and William C. Knorr to Bruner, 16 December 1934, *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵“Statement of Alice Lee Jemison,” *Ibid.* , 37-38.

¹⁶“Testimony by Winslow J. Couro,” 12 February 193, *Ibid.* , 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* , 27-28.

¹⁸“Statement of John Collier,” *Ibid.* , 34, 55-56.

¹⁹ “The Bruner ‘Memorial,’ R.I.P.,” *Indians At Work* (February 1935) *Ibid.* , 483, 485.

²⁰“Testimony by Alice Jemison,” *Ibid.* , 490-91, 498-99., 503-04.

²¹Hertzberg, *Search for an American Identity*, 46-47; “Testimony by Thomas Sloan,” House Committee, *Indian Affairs and Conditions*, 598,601.

²²“Statement by John Collier,” *Ibid.* , 647-49.

²³*Ibid.*, 658-69,729.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 768,771,774,775,776.

²⁵“The Functions and Failures of the Indian Bureau,” *Ibid.*, 821-22, 823.

²⁶Bruner to Brown, 17 June 1943, Bruner Collection; “Statement by Joseph Bruner,” House Committee, *Indian Affairs and Conditions*, 853,867-68.

²⁷“Statement by Joseph Bruner,” *Ibid.* , 867-68, 871-72, 879-80, 881.

²⁸“Statement of John Collier,” “Statement of Douglas Johnston,” “Statement of Grady Lewis,” and “Statement of Rolly Canard,” House Committee on Indian Affairs. *Hearings on H.R. 6234: General Welfare of Indians of Oklahoma*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935,2-13, 17.

²⁹“Statement of Joseph Bruner, *Ibid.*, 81-82.

³⁰Wright, “John Collier and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act,” 370.

³¹“Statement by John Collier,” House Committee on Indian Affairs, *Hearings on S. 2103: Wheeler-Howard – Exempt Certain Indians*, 76th Cong., 3d sess., 11 June 1940, 60.

CHAPTER THREE

TAKING THE CAMPAIGN TO THE PUBLIC

As the AIF presented its charges to Congress, it also conducted a public campaign to discredit Collier, the BIA, the Indian Reorganization Act, and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act. In this campaign, the AIF used memorials, popular magazines, open letters, pamphlets, and other publications. These materials incorporated the now familiar charges of communism and mismanagement as the AIF tried to gain more members and to increase its public support.

In 1934, the AIF developed its first “memorial” to advance its anti-New Deal program. Adopted at the first annual convention of the AIF in Gallup, New Mexico, “The Gallup Memorial” called for the removal of Collier from the office of commissioner because he had “lost confidence of the Indian people.” The memorial also claimed that Collier had slandered Indians by insulting them in articles, misrepresenting attitudes about the Wheeler-Howard Act, and using government resources to secure tribal acceptance of the legislation. Finally, it stated that he had perpetuated these crimes by endorsing legislation the Indians “did not understand and did not want,” ignoring “fraud in the Indian services,” and encouraging “intertribal division and hatred.”¹

A second method that the leaders of the AIF employed was the publication of articles in popular periodicals. In March 1935, Bruner wrote an article, “The Indian Demands Justice,” for the conservative *The National Republic* to inform mainstream society of the injustices inflicted on the Indians by the federal government. The narrative reflected a rational tone and consisted of valid arguments about Indian affairs. He began by glorifying the history of the Indian fulfilling “his duty toward the white man.” He

pointed to cooperation between tribes and colonists as well as voluntary military service by Indians during World War I. He wrote, "This is our adopted government; we revere the American flag and we shall ever be loyal to it." The work served to create a sympathetic reader; however, it also testified to Bruner's dedication to assimilation. He was not an indigent "ward" of the government. He and his "brothers" were loyal and patriotic citizens. He believed that "treatment of the American Indian by our government and also the various states, is now a national disgrace" and asked, "Why does this shameful practice continue?" He explained that the Indian Bureau formed on the premise that the American Indian "was incompetent and must be made a public 'ward' and that the control of his person must be made perpetual." The Indian New Deal promised freedom. Instead, it limited the freedom of the Indian. He wrote, "the Indian today...is more sorely disappointed with his treatment, or mistreatment" by the current BIA administrators than with past injustices. The policies of the BIA have "so nearly completely ruined and destroyed a race of noble peoples" through its maladministration. Furthermore, Collier's administration, according to Bruner, denied the Indian his "rights which apply in general to other citizens."²

The tone of Bruner's criticism was quite calm and rational, for he limited his criticism to the bureaucracy in general and the legislation specifically. He argued that "the real purpose of those running the Indian Bureau was not to assist in qualifying the Indian for citizenship, but to control his property." He continued, "Under the Wheeler-Howard Act we are voluntarily surrendering the real freedom in self-government, and taking only what the bureau desires to give us." When he did attack Collier directly, it was to accuse him of trying to have the BIA assume too many duties of Congress. He

also attacked the “rolls” used in the IRA elections. In addition, Bruner decried Collier’s censorship of Indians who disagreed with his policies.³

It is interesting to note that Bruner did not identify his position as AIF president. Rather, he represented himself as a concerned citizen. He called for the repeal of the IRA, the resignation of Collier, and “a straightforward interpretation of the Citizenship Act of 1934.” As a solution to the “Indian Problem,” Bruner called for the government to adhere to the “sound principles of equal justice under law,” to an end to government regulation of Indian lives, and to the supremacy of the lesson of “experience.” He made this simple plea “We simply ask for our just freedom...and to be allowed to live under local, state, and federal laws like any other citizen” and for Indians “to have a deciding voice” in their future, meaning assimilation. In closing, Bruner wrote, “Our aim...is, that this Congress will display the courage to deal with this gigantic octopus...and in the name of justice, free the last of enslaved people.”⁴

The AIF also used “open letters” to attract new members, increase support, and to advance its anti-Collier program. Soon after the approval of the Indian Reorganization Act, AIF first vice-president Jacob C. Morgan, a Navajo from New Mexico, became a prominent anti-Collier agitator in his own right as well as through the AIF. As a Navajo tribal leader, Morgan dedicated himself to assimilation. According to Donald L. Parman, the passage of the IRA inspired Morgan to “expand his political activities beyond the reservation.” In October 1934, Morgan wrote an open letter addressed to “All Indians and Friends” that the AIF circulated to its members and political allies. In the address, Morgan argued that the BIA sought to encourage the Indians “to remain just as they are and to segregate themselves apart from the rest of the citizens of the land.” He also

claimed that “the main idea of the Bureau is to deprive the Indians the rights of American citizenship.” According to Morgan, Collier and the BIA “promoted discord between individuals on the reservations.” He continued by arguing that Collier wanted to resurrect traditionalism and thus to destroy progress. His diatribe concluded by encouraging his audience to join and to support the AIF.⁵

In 1935, Bruner issued his own “open letter” addressed to “The American Citizenship of the United States.” In this letter, Bruner again outlined the AIF’s charges against Collier. Bruner used testimony from the congressional hearings as evidence to support AIF charges that Collier was a communist seeking to “sovietize” the American Indian through the New Deal. He portrayed Collier as “an associate and admirer of radicals, liberals, free thinkers, and communists for the past twenty years.” He exposed the influence of the ACLU and its leader Roger Baldwin. Bruner’s charges in this document played on nativism and the fear of “un-American” influences. He attacked Collier’s cooperation with Mexican administrators in shaping policy, especially the training of BIA employees in Mexico for the purpose of “organizing COMMUNITY CENTERS” in Arizona. Next, Bruner attacked the BIA employment of medical professionals trained in China where they studied “the life and habits of the Chinamen.” He denounced Collier’s effort to seek “constitutional advice for his Indian program from South Alaska, anthropological advice from Canada; and ethnological advice from South Africa.”⁶

Particularly inappropriate to AIF leaders was the high position of Esherf Shevky, a Turkish biologist. As a student at Stanford University in the 1920s, Shevky conducted a study of the Pueblo Indians that Collier utilized in his campaign to protect Pueblo

landholdings. Shevky, who came to the United States in 1913, went to work for the BIA in 1935. AIF leaders found his Turkish heritage troublesome. Shevky did not apply for citizenship until the 1930s. Then he did so at the behest of Collier in order to work for the BIA. The AIF objected to Shevky's employment because he filled a position that Bruner believed an Indian should fill. Although Parman characterized the AIF attack on Shevky as an "extremely unfair" depiction of "Shevky as an evil and diabolical Turk," most of the federation opposition to Shevky came from the desire to see Indians controlling the BIA. Essentially, it was part of their efforts to empower Native Americans.⁷

Bruner concluded his diatribe by assuring his audience that "the members of the American Indian Federation are NATIVE AMERICAN CITIZENS" and could not in good conscience accept Collier's programs. He called Collier "an atheist and a communist, which is his right as an individual" but "he is trying to force those ideas upon the American Indian citizens." In closing, Bruner asked what citizen could "support this man and his policies....WE WANT THIS MAN REMOVED FROM OFFICE AND THE WHEELER-HOWARD ACT REPEALED." The intended audience for this letter was not specified; however, from its inflammatory, nativist, anti-communist rhetoric it probably was intended for the non-Indian dominant society in addition to like-minded Indians. The AIF may have distributed it to what Bruner called "patriotic organizations" like the American Legion or the Daughters of the American Revolution. Most likely, they also gave it to AIF members and sympathetic politicians. Whatever its audience, the intent of the piece was clear. AIF leaders designed it to draw attention to Collier's policies and to raise questions about his motivations.⁸

In 1936, AIF leaders Jemison and O.K. Chandler intensified the AIF's anti-communist rhetoric with the publication of "Now Who's Un-American? An Exposé of Communism in the United States Government." Selling for twenty-five cents, the pamphlet warned its reader that "at the expense of the American taxpayer, the First Americans ...are being forced into a status of COMMUNISM." The AIF dedicated itself to exposing government employees who were communists. The pamphlet was part of "an effort to arouse CHRISTIAN AMERICANS to a defense of CHRISTIANITY AND the fundamental principles of OUR AMERICAN FORM OF GOVERNMENT." Jemison and Chandler simplified the issues of contemporary America into a struggle of "Atheism and Communism versus Christianity and Americanism." The Indian's status was one in which "the person, property and resources...are under the complete and autocratic control of the Indian Bureau."⁹

The authors divided the pamphlet into two sections. The first section of the pamphlet targeted the ACLU and its leader Roger Baldwin. Of course, Jemison and Chandler portrayed the BIA as a minion of the ACLU's communist agenda. They wrote, "Operating behind a smoke-screen in the name of the right of free speech, the American Civil Liberties Union, by its own records is a subversive, seditious, communist-aiding, Christ-mocking organization." The second section targeted Collier and the Wheeler-Howard Act. They portrayed Collier as a pro-communist revolutionary and puppet of the ACLU. The Wheeler-Howard Act, instead of bringing about self-government, was "a DICTATORSHIP over the Indians." It brought segregation and reversed American citizenship. Aiming to revitalize indigenous language, art, and cultures, the Wheeler-Howard Act negated the policy of assimilation, the policy that had conditioned AIF

leaders throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, the authors accused Secretary Ickes of trying “to consolidate Indian land holdings anywhere in the United States and to establish SOVIET forms of government” through “the abolishment of individual allotments” and advocating “the Marxian theory of communal ownership.” Obviously, Jemison and Chandler sensationalized their charges against Collier and Ickes.¹⁰

Collier’s communism, according to the AIF, was part of a larger conspiracy to “sovietize” the United States. By gaining control of Indian lands, Jemison and Chandler argued that Collier was establishing a “foothold to CAPTURE AND TAKE OVER THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES.” Collier’s policies were part of a wider scheme of “New Deal radicals” wishing “to use the already helpless Bureau-controlled Indians as a laboratory for the establishment of ‘model’ Soviet communities.”¹¹

The “Collier-Civil-Liberties-Union scheme” created both the Wheeler-Howard and Thomas-Rogers Acts. According to Jemison and Chandler, the bills destroyed individual property and ended individual inheritance. Also, the creation of “chartered communities” or “cooperatives” offended AIF leaders because anyone of “one-half Indian blood” living in the United States could participate in the cooperative, including the “thousands upon thousands of non-citizen Mexican *half-blood* Indians now residing in the United States.” The authors presented both bills as “efforts to destroy INDIVIDUALISTIC tendencies, private property and small scale production.”¹²

In closing, the AIF leaders presented their view of what the BIA should be. Its original purpose was for “CHRISTIANIZING” the Indian and preparing him for citizenship. “Forward-looking Indians of all tribes since the very first contact,” the authors asserted, supported this purpose. As evidence of this dedication to Christianity,

they cited Indian volunteered for military duty from the Revolutionary War to World War

I. Instead of promoting Christianity, the current leadership of the Indian Bureau consisted of a radical (Collier) who supported the cause of Sacco and Vanzetti and a draft-dodger (ACLU leader Roger Baldwin).

“Now Who’s Un-American” possibly represented the AIF at its worst. It was full of misinformation, loose paraphrase, outrageous exaggeration, and inflammatory anti-communism. However, it reflected some very important characteristics of the AIF and its members. Their opposition to the Wheeler-Howard Act and the Thomas-Rogers Act reflected their dedication to assimilationist policies. In addition, their use of anti-communist rhetoric reflected the extent of their level of assimilation. Jemison and others had witnessed the anti-communist tirades of the dominant society and recognized it as a useful tool against the BIA.

These charges of communism in the Indian Bureau did not begin with the AIF. Although its origins are debatable, stories in the Oklahoma press portrayed the IRA as communist in early 1934. Collier credited Elwood A. Towner, a mixed-blood Hoopa from Oregon, with beginning the communist charges. Towner was a controversial figure who played an important role in Collier’s retaliation against the AIF and Bruner.

Jemison later claimed that she began the charges in April 1934.¹³

The AIF carried its charges of communism throughout the United States. Its leaders included their charges in letters to all types of individuals and groups. They carried their charges to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and expressed their displeasure with his lack of response to their concerns. The President failed to respond to the AIF’s claim that Collier was subverting Christianity and their charges against Nathan Margold,

Solicitor General of the Interior Department, who was a former chair of the ACLU Indian Committee. Bruner excused Roosevelt from responsibility, unwilling to believe that the President would choose not to act. Instead, Bruner believed that a Collier-supported plot kept AIF letters from reaching FDR.¹⁴

Within one week of writing to the President, Bruner approached W. G. Skelly, National Committee member of the Republican party, to offer the Grand Old Party the assistance of eight thousand AIF members in its struggle against the New Deal. Bruner informed Skelly that the BIA had forced the IRA on the Indian. He warned that the act would “segregate us as a race, revert us to backward customs, religious practices, and modes of government.” After characterizing Collier as a communist, Bruner closed his letter by assuring Skelly that the AIF wanted to help the Republicans and was “not asking the aid of the white citizen. It is offering its aid to all Americans.”¹⁵

From time to time AIF charges of communism also appeared in newspapers and the newsletters of other organizations. In 1936, newspapers reported on the AIF’s annual convention in Salt Lake City and the AIF’s “charges that the Bureau...seeks to sovietize all Indians echoed through the convention.” Other stories carried coverage of AIF testimony before congress. In 1938, Jemison appeared on the front page of the *Buffalo-Courier Express* along with a story describing AIF charges that Ickes and other officials “were members of the American Civil Liberties Union, described...as a Communist Front organization.” During the same year, the *Industrial Control Reports*, the mouthpiece of ultraconservative James True Associates, used Jemison as a source for charges of communism in the BIA. True revealed that the BIA plan “discloses the secret purpose of the New Deal for all Americans.” Collier was very aware of these articles.

He dismissed all charges that he was a communist. In a letter to newspaper editor Arthur Brisbane, Collier wrote, "All of Bruner's fulminations...about communism, anarchism, atheism, Turkism, Chinaism, is the merest smoke screen." He also defended Ickes and the BIA by describing them as "plain American."¹⁶

In 1938, members of the AIF continued their attack on Collier and the BIA with testimony in front of the recently established House Special Committee on Un-American Propaganda and Activities, or Dies Committee. This attack prompted John Collier to investigate the AIF and its connections with "fifth-column" groups like the German-American Bund. The Dies Committee and Collier's counterattack weakened the federation and its quest to protect assimilation.

NOTES

¹“Gallup Memorial,” 28 August 1934, House Committee on Indian Affairs. *Hearings on H.R. 7781: Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 11 February 1935, 18-19.

²Joseph Bruner, “The Indian Demands Justice,” *National Republic* 20 (March 1935): 23.

³*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴*Ibid.*, 24, 31.

⁵ Jacob C. Morgan, “To All Indians and Friends,” 25 October 1934, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

⁶Joseph Bruner, “To the American Citizenship of the United States,” April 1935, 1-2, John Collier Papers, 1922-1968 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).

⁷ *Ibid.*; Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977): 44, 172; Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 100; “Statement by John Collier, House Committee, *Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 717.

⁸ Bruner, “To the American Citizenship of the United States,” 3-4.

⁹ O.K. Chandler and Alice Lee Jemison, “Now Who's Un-American? An Exposé of Communism in the United States Government,” 1936, 3-4, 5-6, Lee Harkins Collection, OHS.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14, 17, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22, 23.

¹³ “Statement by John Collier,” and “Statement by Alice Jemison,” House Committee on Indian Affairs, *Hearings on S. 2103: Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians*, 76th Cong., 3d sess., 11 June 1940, 32, 167.

¹⁴ Joseph Bruner to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 3 August 1936, S.W. “Billy” Brown, Jr., Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Box 7.

¹⁵ Bruner to W.G. Skelly, 10 August 1936, Bruner Collection.

¹⁶“U.S. Indian Bureau Hit,” unidentified newspaper article, Lee Harkins Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 82.105.213; “Indian Bureau Linked to Civil Liberties Union,” *Buffalo-Courier Express* Buffalo, New York, November 1938; “Communizing the American Indians,” *Industrial Control Reports* 235 (15 October 1938), Bruner Collection; and Collier to Arthur Brisbane, 22 May 1935, John Collier Papers.

CHAPTER FOUR

AMERICANISM AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN

The leaders of the AIF viewed themselves as loyal, patriotic, Native American citizens dedicated to the United States and Christianity. They viewed the AIF's mission, much like the Euro-American Christian reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as one of protecting the "helpless" and "uncivilized" by demonstrating the value of American citizenship and assimilation. Unlike those early reformers who saw danger in the persistence of indigenous religious and cultural traditions, the leaders of the AIF had a new perceived enemy, communism. In their relentless assault on the influence of communism, the AIF leaders made real enemies in John Collier and Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes. In response to AIF charges of communism, Collier retaliated with charges of another twentieth century "ism," fascism. Between 1938 and 1940, these two adversaries exchanged accusations, each trying to prove the other was "un-American," while claiming to be the protector of "American" ideals.

Following the Red Scare of the early post-World War I period, domestic anti-communism became less prevalent in American society. The Great Depression encouraged political extremism on both the right and the left. Initially, the ultraconservative extremism of the Right, labeled as fascist, drew the most attention from the public once it became clear that Hitler and the Third Reich were formidable foes. Part of the increased attention to the Right was attributable to the activities of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Following Hitler's rise to power, the

Soviet Union, through the Comintern, called for Communist parties everywhere, according to Melvyn P. Leffler, “to cooperate in popular-front alliances with other antifascist groups.” This arrangement continued until 1939 when the Soviets made their pact with the Nazis and called for an end to “popular-front” alliances. While communism continued to concern the American public, which traditionally supported private property, individualism, democracy, and religious freedom, congress attacked the extreme Right in the 1930s. As John Haynes argued, “All virtues and vices that would later mark post-World War II congressional investigations were first played out by...investigations of domestic fascism in the 1930s.” The AIF was part of this prewar movement.¹

The most infamous of the congressional committees was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). HUAC began in the 1930s under the watchful eye of Representative Samuel Dickstein of New York. His crusading nature and exaggerations were unpopular with his congressional colleagues. As a result, they replaced him with Texas Representative Martin Dies. Dies was a conservative Democrat opposed to the New Deal. Initially designed to investigate foreign-sponsored propaganda activities, the committee, under the direction of Dies, expanded its scope to investigate domestic communism as well as so-called fascist movements. In his attack, Dies targeted New Deal Liberals such as Harold L. Ickes and John Collier.²

According to Sander A. Diamond, Dies was extremely unpopular with New Deal administrators, who were reluctant to cooperate with the committee. However, they became more cooperative once “the published testimony of witnesses underscored the congressman’s allegations of rampant foreign subversion.... The fact that Ickes and the President had little use for his demagoguery no longer mattered.” Ickes expressed his

hostility publicly by calling Dies a “Bubble Dancer” who “cavorts lumberingly on the Congressional stage with nothing but a toy balloon with which to hide his intellectual nudity...the most contemptible human being in public life.” In 1938, during a hearing, Ickes called Dies “the outstanding zany in all our political history... [whose] evident intent was to smear the New Deal.” At other times, Ickes called Dies an “ass,” a tax evader, an equal to A. Mitchell Palmer, and “a blatherskite.” Ickes’s distaste for Dies and his investigations reflected in part Dies’s willingness to cooperate with the AIF in its attack against Collier and the BIA.³

Dies eagerly gave the AIF an audience with the HUAC in November 1938. In a written one-hundred-page statement, Alice Lee Jemison, as an official representative of the group, outlined its evidence against Collier, Ickes, and other persons associated with the BIA between 1936 and 1938. Collier and Ickes were the primary targets of the AIF’s attacks, which resembled those heard before other committees and found in “Now Who’s Un-American.” Other targets included Allen G. Harper, special assistant to Collier and member of the ACLU; Willard D. Beatty, director of education for the BIA and an associate of ACLU members; Robert Marshall, formerly of the Forestry division of the BIA and chair of the Washington, D.C., ACLU; Harold N. Foght, superintendent of the Cherokee Indians of Cherokee, North Carolina; and Mary Heaton Vorcee, director of publicity for the BIA, editor of *Indians At Work*, and wife of Robert Minor, a former presidential candidate for the Communist Party of the United States. Most of these individuals had connections to the ACLU, an old adversary of the AIF. Jemison testified that since 1930, the motivation for the ACLU’s role in Indian Affairs was “the underlying principle...to have the Indians live in a state of communal bliss.” According to the AIF,

the ACLU had shaped four pieces of legislation concerning the Indians: the Wheeler-Howard Act (IRA); the Thomas-Rogers Act (Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act); the Indian Arts and Crafts Board Act (IACB); and the Indian Claims Commission Act.⁴

Jemison also objected to many of the texts used in Indian schools. She criticized the use of the book *New Russia's Primer* by M. Illin. According to Jemison, this book compared the United States to the Soviet Union to demonstrate Soviet superiority. She charged that it “was written for the express purpose of indoctrinating young children.” Collier, in a letter to Elmer Thomas, later explained that the BIA used the primer for “a course in industrial geography.” Jemison also identified other “communist” texts used in social studies courses at the Cherokee Agency School in North Carolina. She pointed particularly to Walter White’s *Rope and Faggot*. She charged that this book attacked the Christian religion by blaming it for lynchings in the United States. White, Jemison claimed, was “a radical, if not an actual Communist, a colored man” too.⁵

Following her charges of communism in Indian schools, Jemison turned to the Wheeler-Howard Act and the BIA. She called the Wheeler-Howard Act communistic. Its unpopularity with Indians was evident in the efforts of Senator Burton K. Wheeler, a sponsor of the bill, to repeal the legislation during 1937 because of its “pure and unadulterated communism.” She charged that the BIA targeted and harassed Indians who spoke out against the Wheeler-Howard Act. She gave the example of Reverend Floyd O. Burnett, a Cherokee missionary and AIF chaplain. After he criticized the IRA, she claimed, the BIA had revoked Burnett’s privileges to the Sherman Institute at Riverside, California, in 1934. Collier, according to Jemison, refused to discuss the situation with

Burnett. Instead, Collier used government resources “to personally injure and discredit Reverend Burnett.”⁶

Jemison broadened her attacks by criticizing Collier’s policies towards Christian schools and religious freedoms. His policies, she declared, contradicted the purpose of the BIA to “christianize” the Indian. Instead, Collier closed Christian schools and limited Christian services for students. Jemison believed that Christian training in Indian schools was essential to assimilation. She argued “invariably the majority of Indians who can be classed as substantial, industrious citizens are those who received their training in these schools.” Jemison continued by criticizing Collier’s efforts to protect the Native American Church and the ceremonial use of peyote. She argued that peyote use “is a very real detriment to health...demoralizing and degrading.”⁷

Jemison’s testimony further attested to the dedication of the AIF to policies and institutions of assimilation as well as the promise of American citizenship. She attacked Collier’s program of cultural pluralism, which revived indigenous cultures that the federal government, for nearly a century, had tried to erase. The members of the AIF believed that “Indian children should be trained to be Americans and no effort made to make them more race conscious.” BIA revitalization of indigenous cultures, Jemison argued, “constitutes a crime against the Indian children” by trying “to handicap and hobble them.”⁸

In 1938, Ickes recorded his feelings about Jemison’s testimony in his “secret diary.” He wrote, “She gave no facts but merely expressed her own biased opinions” and “she has been a dangerous agitator in Indian matters for several years.” Ickes criticized Dies for giving her an opportunity to speak. He lamented, “She has constantly attacked

the Indian Service, but, of course, she has never been able to get any real publicity until the accommodating Congressman Dies came along intent on smearing the New Deal.” At the same time, Ickes introduced the first clue of a BIA defense against the AIF’s charges by noting “that the Jemison woman is closely connected with certain active pro-Nazi groups.” Ickes’s comments indicated the beginning of a powerful counterattack that would help destroy the AIF. This attack was part of a larger effort of the Roosevelt administration to smother its opposition by using the FBI to investigate subversive “fifth-column” elements in the United States.⁹

Beginning in 1936, the German government, according to Diamond, began “a major propaganda campaign aimed at the Americans.” The Nazis used “almost every pro-German, anti-Communist, and right-wing organization to disseminate its viewpoints.” Known as the “American Enlightenment,” such propaganda targeted individuals of “all regions and ethnic backgrounds” until World War II. The primary organ of the “American Enlightenment” in the United States was the German-American Bund, which grew from the Friends of the New Germany. Bund membership consisted of about twenty-five thousand individuals, mostly immigrants who had left Weimar Germany in the 1920s. The Bund’s leader, Fritz Kuhn, like many German veterans, joined a paramilitary *freikorps* unit after World War I and, later, joined Hitler’s National Socialist German Worker’s Party (NSDAP). In 1923, Kuhn left Germany for Mexico where he remained until 1927. At that time, he entered the United States, gaining citizenship in 1934. A charismatic leader he unified the Bund in 1936. He modeled himself after Hitler and “consciously aped Hitler’s manner.” In 1936, he traveled to

Germany to meet the *Fuhrer* himself. This meeting peaked interest in congressional investigations of domestic fascism.¹⁰

After 1936, the public became increasingly suspicious of Bund activities. The Bund gained attention from the public with what Diamond called its “bellicose statements and elaborate fanfare...at the time Hitler was becoming a central figure in the world events.” Some individuals believed that “the Bundists intended to establish a Nazi dictatorship in the U.S.” The American public increasingly became less willing “to tolerate Hitler’s followers” by 1938. Ultimately, in 1940, the Dies Committee labeled the Bund as “subversive, conspiratorial, and un-American.”¹¹

As part of the “American Enlightenment,” the Bund worked with other anti-New Deal groups, often characterized as fascist. According to Diamond, most of their connections came from “the direction and influence of Bundists who had joined other organizations.” Often the Bund invited speakers from other “fascist and psuedo-Nazi groups” to speak at meetings. At times, more non-Germans than Germans attended them. An allied organization was the Silver Shirts of America, directed by William Dudley Pelley. He was a screenwriter and journalist who ran for president in 1936. The Silver Shirt application was a complicated document questioning both eye and hair color as well as requiring a Christian name. According to Kurt Brader, Pelley designed this last ploy to exclude Jewish applicants. Historians cast Pelley and his organization as possessing “a strange creed that mixed fascism, anti-Semitism, and religious doctrines” and a fascist “archetype, unscrupulously exploiting the ignorant for financial gain.” The Silver Shirts had approximately five thousand members until the federal government convicted Pelley for sedition in 1942. A second organization was the James True Associates of Asheville,

North Carolina. Contemporaries cast True as “the dean of anti-Semitic propagandists” who “somehow remains aloof...ties up definitely with no one, yet manages to stick his fingers into every Fascist pie.” Nevertheless, True respected Dies and warned others to be careful with the committee.¹²

Investigations conducted by the FBI, at the behest of Ickes and Collier, would cast a suspicious eye on the AIF and its members. Ultimately, they led to charges that the AIF and its leaders were pro-fascist, “fifth-column” subversives. Contemporaries of Collier would “buy” into this charge just as anti-New Deal forces believed AIF charges that Collier was a communist. Author Harold Lavine recognized that the Indians were “the favorite oppressed minority” of Pelley. The Bund used American abuse of the Indian to cut “short all talk about Jews in Germany by erupting into tears over the ‘way you robbed the red man of their land.’” Lavine wrote, “Up and down the country, from one reservation to another, go the American Indian Federation’s salesman...with attacks on the commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier.” Lavine tried to cast the AIF as an anti-Semitic organization by falsely identifying Collier as a Jew. Other commentators took a less sensationalized view of the AIF. In 1940, Oklahoma historian Angie Debo implied that the AIF was a group of “Super-patriots.” She dismissed claims that the Thomas-Rogers Bill was communistic.¹³

In May 1939, Collier outlined the facts learned through the FBI’s investigation of the AIF in a letter to author Oliver LaFarge of the National Association of Indian Affairs. Collier warned, “It should not become known to the parties in question that we have these particular facts at our disposal.” His first fact was that California members of the AIF attended Bund meetings and its literature “has been distributed through the Bund

headquarters.” He expanded the AIF connection to the Bund by using the case of Elwood A. Towner, a Hoopa from the Siletz Indian Reservation in Oregon. Collier identified Towner as an AIF member and “one of the most prominent Bund speakers,” who claimed, “that the Indians are the original Jew-haters of this hemisphere.” Next, Collier identified AIF cooperation with the James True Associates, which had “circularized its clientele to raise money for Mrs. Jemison.” He admitted that he learned from hearsay that the amount of money raised was “substantial.” Collier also wrote, “Whether coincidental or not, the German government officially has declared the Sioux Indians (i.e. all Indians) to be Aryans.” He noted that there was “considerable” activity by Jemison among the Sioux. Jemison, according to Collier, received “from direct Bund sources...at least two monthly payments of \$200 each.” Collier introduced Henry Allen as an AIF operative “who has a jail record and whose anti-Semitic and pro-Fascist activities are well known.” The Commissioner charged that Allen worked as an “intermediary” between True, Pelley, and the Bund. Allen, Collier wrote, “has used and has been used by the Federation.” Collier identified “intimate collaboration” between Jemison and F.G. Collett, an associate of the Silver Shirts. He stated that Collett was aiding Pelley in a lawsuit against Ickes and Collier. The Commissioner also attacked Thomas Sloan for being an AIF member and eager participant in Bund activities in Los Angeles. Finally, Collier argued that the AIF solicited funds from Indians and disseminated “typically Fascist” literature on reservations. In closing, he pledged to provide LaFarge with evidentiary material to use in a campaign against the federation.¹⁴

Collier took his “facts” to the House Committee on Indian Affairs in 1940. In his testimony, he began by defending the Wheeler-Howard Act, denying that it was

communist-inspired. He argued that the law protected individual property rights. His defense of his policies quickly turned into a tirade against the AIF. His attack began by questioning the credentials of the AIF membership, specifically those of Jemison. He provided a letter from Jarrett B. Blythe, chief of the Eastern Cherokees, which denied that Jemison was an authorized representative of his people. Blythe rejected any charges about "the teaching of communism or atheism at the Cherokee agency school." This letter refuted Jemison's complaints in front of the Dies Committee about the use of "communist" literature for social studies courses at the North Carolina school.¹⁵

Collier's most damaging evidence concerned Elwood A. Towner, who had called for Bund members to provide support for the AIF. Towner, according to historian Kenneth Townsend, was a Hoopa Indian from Pendleton, Oregon, an attorney, and "offered himself as a model for Indian youth to emulate." In addition to being a Hoopa Indian, Towner was a member of the Bund, an indication of his Indian-German heritage. According to Collier, Towner appeared at Bund meetings "adorned in Indian dress and wearing swastikas on both arms and on his headband." At the rallies, he called himself Chief Red Cloud.¹⁶

At the hearing, Collier provided newspaper articles showing the extent of Towner's activities. As Chief Red Cloud, Towner expressed virulent anti-Semitism in his attacks on Roosevelt and the ACLU. Collier reported that Towner "expressed scorn for the intelligence of the American people, calling them half-baked saps and nitwits." The reports noted Towner's recommendation "that Indians join the American Indian Federation because it is closely allied with the German-American Bund and the Silver Shirts." Collier questioned Towner's Indian heritage. In a BIA investigation, the

commissioner discovered that Towner had grown up on a reservation and attended an Indian school; however, he also learned that Towner's alias was a "Sioux" name and "that the regalia he wears is not that of a coast Indian." He identified Towner as an admirer of Hitler, who was "imbued with the spirit of the great Indian prophet and ...is establishing an American Indian form of government in Germany." In addition, Collier claimed that the federation Towner "represents approves of Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese Governments."¹⁷

Towner was the most vocal and obnoxious of the Indian protestors against the Indian New Deal. In addition to being communistic, Towner characterized the Wheeler-Howard Act as "Jew-planned ... efforts to bring about the ruination of the Indians." He found "Jewish domination" in the BIA, too. Towner, according to published accounts, believed that the BIA "was composed of a bunch of misfit incompetents...who couldn't get jobs elsewhere and who were a bunch of blood-sucking parasites, from John Collier, the Jew-loving 'pink-red' down to the last dogcatcher on the reservation." Towner also declared that "all 'isms' are from insane jew [sic] minds," equated reservations to concentration camps, and accused the Dies Committee of being "Jewish." There was no question that Towner represented the most reactionary expression of Indian opposition to the New Deal; however, the question remains —was he that representative of the AIF?¹⁸

For obvious reasons, AIF leaders vehemently denied that Towner was a member of the federation. Despite her 1939 resignation from the AIF, Jemison responded to Collier's charges at the same hearing. She testified that she did not know Towner personally, but that she had become aware of him in 1936. At that time, he appeared at the annual convention to support revisions of the AIF constitution. He expressed his

disappointment because he felt that the AIF was “doing nothing but opposing the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.” Jemison testified that the leaders of the AIF dismissed his complaints as nonsense and “thought he was a troublemaker, trying to break up the federation.” She continued, “Consequently, we thought he was an agent of Mr. Collier, we did not pay any attention to him.” She also testified that Towner had appeared at a subsequent convention in Lewiston, Idaho, along with a representative of the Silver Shirts, but, that AIF leaders had not allowed them to address the assembly. Other AIF leaders reiterated Jemison’s denial of Towner’s affiliation with the federation. Bruner responded to such charges by writing that Towner “is [in] no way connected with us in membership or otherwise in our organization.” In fact, Towner’s name did not appear on AIF stationery or correspondence. By Collier’s own admission, Towner had been an anti-New Deal and anti-Collier activist before the AIF was formed. But the AIF had connections in Towner’s hometown, Pendleton, Oregon. A Pendleton resident, George Red Hawk, served as the second vice-president of the AIF from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s. In addition, Sam Kash Kash, also of Pendleton, headed the second district in 1938. Therefore, it was possible, in fact probable, that certain AIF members had connections to Towner. However, these connections did not prove that Bruner or the national organization solicited Towner’s participation or promoted his views.¹⁹

Furthermore, as part of the Bund’s “American Enlightenment,” Towner addressed many groups and endorsed other anti-New Deal organizations in addition to the AIF. Lavine noted, “on several occasions Mr. Towner has spoken before Negro groups...Filipinos...and Eskimos...so the Nazis may be able to carry the Eskimo vote for

Adolf Hitler too.” As noted by Diamond, the Bund would often “lend” its hand to other anti-New Deal groups with and without solicitations.²⁰

Towner was not the only “fascist” identified by Collier during the hearing. Jemison herself was dismissed as a “fascist,” too. To substantiate his claims, the commissioner expanded on the “facts” that he had provided to Oliver LaFarge in 1939. He informed the committee members of Jemison’s connections to the James True Associates and the Bund payments made to her in 1938. He also used Pelley’s devotion of “much space and wind to denunciations of Indian matters, practically identical with those which were being put out by the American Indian Federation.” Collier seemingly was not aware of the number of friends Jemison had in congress. Representative Usher L. Burdick of North Dakota declared that Jemison was “one of the really patriotic Americans” dedicated to stopping the spread of communism among the Indians. Collier rejected Burdick’s comments. He indicated that she was “not doing anything of the sort because there isn’t any communism among the Indians.” Instead, he said, she has “endeavored among other things to stigmatize the whole program for the welfare of the Indians as communism.”²¹

Jemison’s friends in congress made certain that she received an opportunity to defend herself. In her testimony, she denied that she was an associate of Pelley, but she admitted that she had written to him to request information about his group. She also admitted that she wrote and received payment for articles that appeared in right-wing publications. Finally, she defended the controversial James True by declaring that he “is a fine, sincere, Christian gentleman, and he is my friend.” Her testimony did not refute,

necessarily, Collier's claims; however, she provided her perspective and some explanation for the activities.²²

Collier used the examples of Towner and Jemison to portray all federation members and the AIF as part of a fascist "fifth-column" movement in the United States. The distinction "fifth column," according to Haynes, came from the Spanish Civil War and pertained to a "clandestine underground that spread political subversion, engaged in sabotage, and prepared the way for military conquest." To be a "fifth-column" movement, an organization had to receive direct, financial support from a foreign government. Haynes did not characterize any fascist movement, epitomized by the German-American Bund, in the United States as "fifth column" because their activities were public—not hidden. If the Bund and other groups were not exactly definitive "fifth-column" organizations, that distinction escaped the public. By 1940, the public grouped both political extremes, fascism and communism, together as "fifth column" because of the Soviet-Nazi alliance of 1939.²³

Collier reflected this trend of classifying both fascist and communist groups as "fifth column." Collier defined "fifth column" as "persons or organizations who are under the direct or indirect sway of Fascist, Nazi-ist, or Communist foreign states and who work to break down the unity, to weaken the defenses, and prepare for revolutions within or conquest of countries where they are acting." This definition included Towner, True, and Jemison because they "depict the United States as horribly persecuting its Indian minority." Collier felt that congress did not take the threat seriously. By doing so, the individual members were committing a grievous error by allowing them room to expand, just as Europe did for Hitler.²⁴

Collier rhetorically asked why “fifth column” groups would use the Indians. He believed it was done to collect propaganda for use against the United States in Europe. In addition, the Germans sought allies in South America, where the indigenous peoples were on the verge of revolt. He warned, “the fifth column activities among the Indians are seriously intended and are or will be on the scale of the hemisphere, and may have the power to do infinite harm to the Indian race...democracy...and to the United States.”²⁵

Collier’s denunciation of the “fifth column” and warnings about the risks of they posed to the U.S. were amusing to committee members. When a call for a vote on a tax bill interrupted the hearing, committee members joked about Collier’s claims. They dead-panned that their proceedings were much too important to interrupt for something as mundane as tax legislation. Such a bill, they kidded, would be useless if the “fifth column *blitzkrieg*” took Washington. This incident made it appear that congressmen paid more attention to AIF charges of communism in the Indian Bureau than they did to Collier’s charge of “fifth-column” subversion. However, some members of congress seriously considered the evidence provided by Collier and other witnesses. In 1940, the Dies Committee declared that the German-American Bund, the James True Associates, Pelley’s Silver Shirts, and other “fifth column” groups — including the American Indian Federation— were subversive and un-American.²⁶

The question Collier raised about why the “fifth column” would use the American Indian was an interesting one. Today, it continues to be intriguing. As indicated by Collier in his letter to LaFarge, the Nazis declared that the Sioux were Aryans in March 1939. In the 1930s, a German anthropologist, Colin Ross, traveled through Indian Country writing articles about the Indians for German audiences. Nevertheless, the

Germans never received much attention from Indian communities themselves.

According to Townsend, propaganda efforts by Nazis were “unsuccessful.”²⁷

Germans had a long fascination with the American West and its indigenous peoples, partly based on the novels of Karl May. According to Townsend, May’s writings, combined with traveling Indian shows, and letters sent back home to Germany by immigrants, created among many Germans “a curious perception of Indians—savage yet adaptable to a state of nobility, racial inferiors yet distant racial comrades.” Most Indians did not concern themselves with what the Germans believed about their origins because German-generated propaganda “clearly revealed German misunderstanding of the United States in general, and American Indians in particular.” With the exception of Towner, an alleged AIF representative, none of the AIF leaders or materials praised Nazism or its propaganda.²⁸

The characterization of the AIF as a “fascist” organization has persisted since the 1940s. But, the question remains— why? The most obvious explanation is the tie between the German-American Bund and Towner and Jemison. Collier’s allegations were hard to disprove; in fact, they often appeared somewhat accurate. Nevertheless, it is not clear that Towner was a member of the AIF. Additional research may indicate one way or the other. While it was undeniable that Jemison was an AIF member and associated with certain “fifth-column” participants, these associations did not make her a fascist.

Thanks to the efforts of historian Laurence Hauptman, Jemison has been the most well researched AIF member. He examined her life and political career with the assistance of her family and FBI files accessed through the Freedom of Information Act.

Instead of a fascist, Hauptman depicted Jemison as “a sincere, hardworking and earnest critic of the BIA” whose activism expressed her childhood environment, which was rooted in “the non-Indian world of conservative western New York and the deeply rooted tribal life of the Seneca Indian Community.” Born in 1901, Jemison came of age in an environment that was historically distrustful of the federal government. Hauptman argued that the persistence of her negative image is the result of “liberal-oriented historians unaware of the Iroquois worldview or of certain similarities in Indian and nonIndian [sic] political perspectives in western New York.” In addition, he asserted that all evidence used to discredit Jemison was based on hearsay and perpetuated by Ickes and Collier.²⁹

Another explanation for the persistence of the negative image of the AIF could be found in the political climate of the 1930s. As Morris Schonbach explained, it was difficult to distinguish between the various shades of conservatism in the 1930s. During this time, Schonbach argued, “it was extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to distinguish between unabashed pro-Fascism and (a.) strictly political opposition to the administration...or (b.) extreme conservatism, or (c.) the honest desire to remain isolated” from international problems. He continued by noting that often in politics “the purposes of one will serve the other, to the extent that the incidences of guilt by association was perhaps inevitable.” The AIF represented a perfect example of this phenomenon. Its opposition to the New Deal programs in general and the Indian New Deal in particular attracted attention from extremist groups like the Bund and James True. Their shared anti-New Deal interests created “guilt by association” for most of the members of the AIF.³⁰

A final reason for the persistent negative characterization of the AIF was evident in the generally pro-Collier attitudes of administrators and historians. Many individuals refused to believe that Indians, or at least “real” Indians, would reject Collier’s programs for tribal sovereignty and self-determination. In 1983, AIF member and activist Rupert Costo acknowledged the persisting admiration for Collier. He said, “*Of late years, somewhat of a cult has developed around John Collier. He is perceived as the hero of Indian rights.*” Costo rejected this praise of Collier and called for additional investigations of “the sources and material on the Indian Reorganization Act.” The availability of new sources and changing attitudes about the legacy of the Indian New Deal have diminished this pro-Collier bias evident in scholarship. This new attitude was evident in works by Laurence Hauptman, Kenneth Townsend, and Kenneth Philp.³¹

NOTES

¹John E. Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996): 10-11, 64; Melvyn P. Lefler, *The Specter of Communism: the United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994): 23,28.

²*Ibid.*, 66.

³Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1960* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974): 303; Harold L. Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1943): 298, Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953-54): , 501,506-07,547.

⁴"Statement by Alice Jemison," House Special Committee, *Un-American Propaganda and Activities*, 75th Cong., November 1938, 2437-2439, 2441-42.

⁵*Ibid.* , 2443, 2444.

⁶*Ibid.*, 2446-47.

⁷*Ibid.* , 2493.

⁸*Ibid.*, 2502.

⁹Ickes, *Secret Diary*, 2: 506-07; Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism during the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth, and Its Decline* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985): 387.

¹⁰Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1960*, 8, 193-94, 205-06,211,222, 257 262.

¹¹*Ibid.* , 8, 22, 323.

¹²*Ibid.* , 93-94, 318-19, 320,323; Harold Lavine, *Fifth Column in America* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1940): 48-49,75, 185-86; Kurt A. Brader, "Image of A Failure: The Symbolism of American Nazis During the Depression," M.A. Thesis (San Jose State University, 1995): 11-12; Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?*, 20, Schonbach, *Native American Fascism*, 256, 319.

¹³Lavine, *Fifth Column in America* , 207; Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940 Reprint edition, 1972): 371-72.

¹⁴Collier to Oliver LaFarge, 10 May 1939, John Collier Papers, 1922-1968 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980.

¹⁵ “Statement by John Collier,” and Jarrett B. Blythe, “Memorandum with Reference to Hearings before the Senate Indian Committee with Reference to the Cherokee Indian Reservation,” House Committee on Indian Affairs, *Hearings on S. 2103: Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians*, 76th Cong., 3d sess., 11 June 1940, 39.

¹⁶ “Statement by John Collier,” Ibid., 68, and Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000): 42-43.

¹⁷ “Statement by John Collier,” House Committee, *Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians*, 68,69, 70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71-74.

¹⁹ “Statement by Alice Lee Jemison,” Ibid., 166; Bruner to Mrs. S.S. Severson, 17 February 1942, Bruner Collection. Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

²⁰ Lavine, *Fifth Column in America* ,209; Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States* ,318-19.

²¹ “Statement by John Collier, House Committee, *Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians*, 100, 106, 118; and “Statement by Usher L. Burdick,” House Committee, *Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians* , 118.

²² “Statement by Alice Jemison,” Ibid., 153,156,165.

²³ Haynes, *Red Scare of Red Menace?* , 18,19,34-35.

²⁴ “Statement by John Collier,” House Committee, *Wheeler-Howard Act- Exempt Certain Indians*, 91.

²⁵ Ibid., 92.

²⁶ Ibid., 100,101; and Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States* , 323.

²⁷ Collier to LaFarge, 10 May 1939, John Collier Papers; Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* ,38-39.

²⁸ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States* , 75; Townsend, *World War II and the American Indians*, 34,35.

²⁹ Laurence Hauptman, “Alice Jemison: Seneca Political Activist, 1901-1964,” *The Indian Historian* 12 (Summer 1979): 15,16,22.

³⁰Schonbach, *Native American Fascism* ,14-15.

³¹Rupert Costo, in Kenneth Philp's, *Indian Self-Rule: First-Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Salt Lake City, UT: Howe Brothers, 1986): 28,53,103; Laurence Hauptman, "The American Indian Federation and the Indian New Deal: A Reinterpretation," *Pacific Historical Review* 52 (November 1983): 380, Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933-1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): xii; Townsend, *American Indian and World War II*, 31-60.

CHAPTER FIVE

“LET THE INDIAN ALONE:” THE SETTLEMENT BILL OF 1940

In addition to testifying in congressional hearings and distributing organization literature, leaders of the AIF used another tool in their assault on John Collier and the Indian New Deal—the drafting of legislation. In 1940, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, chaired by Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, provided the leaders of the AIF an opportunity to argue the merits of a proposed Settlement Bill of 1940. This bill provided for the final settlement of individual Indian claims against the government. In essence, the Settlement Bill sought to destroy the goals of the IRA. As expected, Collier and Ickes immediately launched an attack on the legislation, calling it an “Indian Racket.” The Settlement Bill, along with the negative publicity associated with Collier’s charges of “fifth column” subversion, sealed the fate of the federation by providing additional fuel for Collier and creating a schism within the AIF that transformed its focus and leadership. Eventually, these factors destroyed the AIF as an effective representative for a particular Indian point of view.¹

In its effort to empower Native Americans, the AIF called for the Indians to take charge of their future and assume an active role in shaping federal policy. With this in mind AIF leaders called for an end to policy shaped by non-Indians. At its fourth annual convention in 1937 the AIF reaffirmed an important resolution originally drafted in 1935. This resolution called for Congress “to stop introducing any Bills ... pertaining to Indian Affairs except such Bills as shall be specifically requested by the Indians themselves.” To justify this resolution, AIF leaders argued that Indians were controlled by a plethora of BIA regulations, “which supervises every act of Indian life...which an Indian may do

from the first breath of life which he draws at birth to the one with which he makes his exit.” In addition, they claimed that pieces of unwanted legislation “clutter up” congressional calendars by taking time that “could be more profitably spent in the consideration of weightier problems for the good of all Americans.” The resolution reflected two interests of the leaders of the AIF. First, it reflected their interest in giving the American Indian more power, a right to self-determination in Indian Affairs. Obviously, it was also an attack on the legislative centerpieces of Collier’s reforms, the Indian Reorganization Act and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act. According to the AIF, non-Indian groups, particularly the ACLU, shaped these bills. Jemison complained about the influence of the ACLU in Indian Affairs. She said, “Regardless of how many Indians we represent, the fact remains that we are Indians, and as such have a far greater right to concern ourselves with Indian legislation than does the Civil Liberties Union.”²

After reaffirming the 1935 resolution attacking legislation written by non-Indians, the delegates at the annual convention of the AIF in Lewiston, Idaho, prepared “Resolution No. 20.” The acceptance of this resolution marked the birth of the Settlement Bill. Unanimously, the delegates agreed to authorize Bruner, as national president, “to prepare or to have prepared a comprehensive program of Indian legislation which will accomplish the purpose of the American Indian Federation... [and] shall become the legislative program” of the organization. After approval of the draft, AIF leaders were to present it to Congress. The resolution outlined the motivation for the program. The Resolution read, “Our claims against the Government on account of broken or violated treaties remain unsettled, and the time for the emancipation of the Indian...and his complete establishment as an American citizen in all that the word

applies, is as far removed from accomplishment today as it was 100 years ago.” The legislation would provide for a “per capita payment of from \$2,500 to \$3,000 to each and every recognized Indian.” AIF leaders arrived at this amount by multiplying by twenty the average appropriations for the BIA during the New Deal administration. They believed that this was a viable solution because most of the money appropriated for Indians never found “its way into the pockets or hands of the Indians.”³

In 1938, the AIF set about to accomplish its task of formulating a viable Indian legislative program. Its leaders continued to harass Collier and the Indian Bureau with charges of communism; however, attacks from the executive committee decreased. In 1939, Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas and Representative Usher L. Burdick of North Dakota introduced the Settlement Bill. An ill-conceived and selfish attempt to mold federal Indian policy for the benefit of AIF members, it called for a final settlement of all claims against the government for individuals willing to join the Federation by paying \$1 for himself as well as for any deceased relative. Payment of these “dues” entitled the individual and his or her ancestors to inclusion on a roll and to a \$3,000 payment for “full, final, and complete settlement of all their rights, equities, or interests in and to all past, present, or future claims.”⁴ By accepting final settlement, the individuals agreed to relinquish their tribal allegiance and to surrender all rights to treaty provisions or government services. In addition, the legislation called for state courts to settle estate disputes and for the Secretary of the Interior to continue supervision over rights to tribal property.⁵ Federation members argued that this bill would end the paternalistic supervision of the federal government over the affairs of assimilated Indians. However, the bill was not a practical solution to the so-called “Indian problem.”⁶

The Settlement Bill also provided new ammunition for Collier to attack the AIF. He and Ickes used their power and influence in Congress to stifle support for the legislation. Calling the bill the "Indian Racket," the two men tried to persuade Senator Thomas and Representative Burdick to withdraw support for the bill. In a letter to Congressman Burdick, Ickes warned that the AIF had malicious intent in proposing the legislation and knew the bill would never pass. Instead, Ickes argued, Bruner and others sought to "victimize" Native Americans with their "cynical scheme" targeting "ignorant and needy Indians."⁷ In May 1939, persuaded by Ickes and Collier's arguments, Burdick withdrew the bill in the House of Representatives. He justified his action because "the attitudes and the operation of the American Indian Federation has [sic] been called in question...and very grave charges were made against this organization by the Department of the Interior."⁸

In a letter to Congressman Burdick the Federation leaders responded to charges Ickes and Collier made by continuing to question their "Americanism" and claiming the men had communist sympathies. In the letter to Congressman Burdick, the leaders of the Federation, including Joseph Bruner, O.K. Chandler, and N.B. Johnson, argued that Ickes had misrepresented the group and its intent. The AIF also resented Ickes calling Indians "dupes" and "ignorant." If accepted by all of the American Indians in the United States, the Federation argued, its plan would cost slightly more than one billion dollars. The AIF argued that this was less than it would cost to administer Indian affairs through the bureau over a twenty-year period. The Federation also defended the \$1 fee for inclusion in the settlement roll by arguing that this was an amount fixed by the Federation for dues before the development of the bill. In addition, the AIF denied charges that its leaders

received the funds; however, it did not provide an explanation of how the Federation used the collected dues. The AIF leaders argued that Collier and Ickes had attacked the Federation because it opposed the Indian Reorganization Act and other Indian New Deal programs. Specifically, the group pointed to the influence of the “un-American” American Civil Liberties Union and the influence of “foreign-born” individuals in the Interior Department. Finally, the AIF denied any connection with “any group objectionable to a loyal patriotic citizen.”⁹

The pressure Collier and Ickes exerted on Burdick persuaded him to withdraw his support, but Senator Elmer Thomas refused to do so. Thomas was a skilled politician and had cooperated with both Collier and the AIF. Thomas opposed Collier’s appointment in 1933 and led the campaign to exempt Oklahoma Indians from the IRA; however, he had also sponsored the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, which brought the IRA to Oklahoma. His cooperation with Collier seemed to come from his sense of duty to his state and its Indian population. Thomas also recognized the significance of his position as chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. This position required Thomas to work closely with both the commissioner and the Indian Bureau. Thomas’s aptitude for political maneuvering allowed him to maintain amicable relations with the AIF as well. When approached by AIF leader O.K. Chandler for information concerning the activities of his committee, he cooperated with Chandler. However, the senator made it clear that he was aware of “the contest that exists between you and Mr. Collier, and I have no criticism to offer for anything you have done or said, yet as a matter of policy I must refrain from taking sides as the interests of 140,000 Indians of the State are paramount to my personal opinion.” When other legislators contacted Thomas for his opinion of the AIF, he

acknowledged that the AIF was “very violently opposed to our Indian Commissioner...and is doing what it can to force his resignation or dismissal. As Chairman...I am not taking any active interest in this program.” Thomas’s cooperative attitude toward the AIF irritated Collier. In a letter to Oliver LaFarge in 1939, he discussed the failure of the BIA campaign to discredit the Settlement Bill and to influence Thomas to withdraw his support. If Thomas withdrew his support of the bill, Collier believed it would discredit the AIF and terminate its signature-gathering campaign. Instead, Collier lamented, “the solicitations among the Indians go forward with high speed.”¹⁰

Despite his willingness to accommodate the AIF, Thomas’s disapproval of the Settlement Bill and other AIF proposals was obvious throughout the June 1940 hearing. He found the per-capita payments to be troublesome. These payments would not solve any problems, but instead, Thomas argued, would create greater economic problems. A final settlement implied the loss of the federal advocate to protect the Indian from fraud. Thomas also opposed the Federation’s desire to close all Indian schools. He believed most Indian children lacked the resources to attend public, non-Indian schools. Without these Indian schools, Thomas feared most would remain uneducated. His concerns about the repercussions of the Settlement Bill were admirable and valid. Nevertheless, they also reflected a persistent attitude of paternalism. Like many of his colleagues, Thomas was uncertain of the abilities of American Indians to succeed in the dominant society. He was afraid that without the BIA and government supervision the Indians would be unable to compete in the dominant society.¹¹

AIF representative O.K. Chandler responded to Thomas's criticism of the Settlement Bill. Although Chandler, like most AIF leaders, was a beneficiary of an Indian school education, he argued that the institutions perpetuated a system of inferiority and prevented the Indian from becoming "a resourceful, independent, self-supporting citizen." The institutions, under the New Deal administration, taught students "to be, act, and think as an Indian ...not a citizen." In response to Thomas's concern that Indians receiving a per-capita payment would mishandle their money, Chandler argued that Indians were just as capable of handling money as Euro-Americans were. If they did mishandle their share, it was that individual's problem— not the government's. Chandler argued that the problems facing Native Americans were social problems, not the result of racial inferiority. He called for the government to "let the Indian alone." In order to do so, it had to settle claims and dissolve the BIA. While Chandler's dismissal of "race" was an enlightened attitude for a conservative anti-New Dealer, his perspective was as troublesome as Thomas's paternalism. In addition to dismissing the concept of "race," Chandler advocated erasing the cultural heritage of the American Indian by supporting the idea of the "melting pot," as applied to Indian communities.¹²

Individuals supporting the "melting pot" theory viewed it as a way to create a "new American" in the early twentieth century. The "melting pot," according to Hertzberg, served "as a unifying process to which individuals from many diverse backgrounds contributed." Through the forced assimilation policies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea of the "melting pot" meant a "vanishing policy" as "the Indian alone was to be melted and was to come out white, in culture if not in color."

The idea of “melting the Indian” guided not only federal policy but also the Society of American Indians, just as it would later influence the AIF.¹³

World War I challenged ideas about American identity and culture. According to Robert Fay Schrader, the war “awakened” many Americans “to a new interest in Americana and found that the Indians were at the core of America’s national experience.” The ideals of cultural pluralism replaced the ideals of the “melting pot.” According to Molly Mullin, cultural pluralism “would focus on Indians and was not part of a broader effort to challenge orthodox perceptions of race and culture.” Cultural pluralism also meant the acknowledgement of “the anthropological notion of separate and integral cultures” providing for “more than one center of the world.” Essentially, it was a celebration of difference— at least some difference. Influences on cultural pluralism included “early twentieth-century reform movements, the rise of American cultural nationalism, the increasingly popular influence of anthropology, and the expansion of tourism.” Collier was an avid supporter of cultural pluralism and his dedication reflected itself in his legislative reforms. As part of New Deal Liberalism, cultural pluralism contradicted the tenets of the campaign for assimilation. Assimilation promised to erase “Indianness” whereas cultural pluralism celebrated indigenous cultures and traditions. AIF leaders like Chandler, Bruner, and Jemison were products of the campaign to assimilate. It shaped their thought from childhood to middle age. Many of these individuals, such as O.K. Chandler and N.B. Johnson, had worked for the Indian Bureau and were part of the administration of assimilation. Therefore, it was natural for them to think in terms of assimilation and the “melting pot.” Collier’s cultural pluralism was antithetical to those beliefs.¹⁴

The Settlement Bill represented the interests of the highly assimilated Oklahoma members of the AIF. According to AIF leaders the success of the Oklahoma tribes demonstrated that government supervision of American Indians was unnecessary. In a letter to Representative Burdick, they argued, "Indians of the State of Oklahoma have stood for progress in every respect, and many of our members are now holding responsible public positions in government." Their example was Napoleon B. Johnson, a mixed-blood Cherokee, former BIA employee, attorney, and Sixth District Judge in the State of Oklahoma. He was a "non-restricted" Indian, which meant that he managed his own affairs (land) without government supervision. In testimony Johnson called for the termination of federal supervision of Indian affairs, and removal of all "special privileges" for the American Indian. AIF leaders assumed that all American Indians either were or wanted to be like themselves: financially successful in the mainstream economy, assimilated, and well educated.¹⁵

The Settlement Bill specifically represented the interests of Joseph Bruner. During the Civil War, the Creeks had divided into factions supporting the Confederate States and those remaining loyal to the federal government. The Unionist Loyal Creeks fled Indian Territory, seeking refuge on Cherokee lands and in Kansas. After the war, the United States promised to compensate the Loyal Creeks for their losses, but never did so.¹⁶ As a member of the loyalist faction, Bruner's mother, Lucy, fled to Kansas. Throughout his life, Bruner worked to receive financial compensation for Loyal Creek descendants.¹⁷ Therefore, Bruner looked at the Settlement Bill as an opportunity to receive payment for his mother's loss. Following the defeat of the bill, Bruner continued

to work for a settlement for Loyal Creek Claims through other organizations as well as the AIF.¹⁸

The Settlement Bill transformed the AIF by replacing its national focus with a regional one. These changes were evident in its structure and leadership. The AIF constitution, adopted at Gallup, New Mexico, in 1934, provided for the election of seven national officers, making up the Executive Committee, as well as the appointment of seven national district presidents, chosen by the national president. Before the introduction of the Settlement Bill, the AIF listed its district leaders on its stationery and official publications. By 1940, members of the AIF's new administrative board replaced the district leaders on stationery. Also, Oklahoma county districts replaced most of the national districts. In addition to these structural changes, shifts in leadership provided additional evidence of the changes connected to the legislation. In 1938, the national leadership of the AIF included many Oklahomans; however, it included many non-Oklahomans as well, among them individuals from New York, Idaho, Nevada, California, and Arizona. By 1940, the number of non-Oklahoman leaders decreased dramatically. Most of those remaining members were long-term members of the group. More important, Oklahomans dominated the administrative board that handled the business affairs of the group. It never included more than two non-Oklahoman members.¹⁹

The most important consequence of the Settlement Bill was the resignation of Alice Lee Jemison, the AIF's most dedicated and controversial representative. As a founding member, she relocated from New York to Washington, D.C., to advance an anti-Collier and anti-New Deal program. In July 1939, Jemison resigned, citing her

opposition to the Settlement Bill as the reason. She believed the legislation contradicted the AIF's goals to fight the Indian Reorganization Act and to abolish the Indian Bureau. Instead of fighting the bureau, Jemison argued, the AIF was courting the government "in order to win approval of the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs." The loss of Jemison's representation in Washington created a greater strain on federation resources by forcing others to travel to Washington to appear before congress.²⁰

The Federation experienced additional shifts in leadership after 1940 that weakened it even further. In the early 1940s, Bruner's health grew worse and his wife died suddenly. He spent much of his time with his daughter in Window Rock, Arizona, leaving the administration of the AIF in the hands of others. O.K. Chandler and Napoleon B. Johnson briefly assumed the responsibilities of administration. Chandler dominated the organization until 1943. At that time, Bruner became aware that Chandler had abused the powers bestowed upon him. Soon Bruner unsuccessfully appealed to Jemison to return to the organization, but she refused. With the decline of Chandler's influence and the failure to re-enlist Jemison, Napoleon B. Johnson assumed the dominant position in the AIF. However, in 1944, his influence also diminished when he became the first president of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).²¹

Due to the emphasis on final settlement and the abolition of the BIA, historians have characterized the AIF Settlement Bill as "a early version of ...termination legislation," which dissolved tribal entities and liquidated tribal assets. According to Kenneth Philp, "Termination was a broadly based social movement in the United States to assimilate Indians and to liberate them from federal supervision. It reflected the

conservative nationalist mood of the Cold War era.” It was, according to Thomas Cowger, “a final drive to assimilate the Indians” and “a legal means to abrogate the federal government’s trust obligations.” Donald Fixico has written that the arguments the AIF used “persuaded officials even more that Native Americans were ready to enter the competing mainstream society.”²²

Central to termination was a belief in assimilation, a call to end government supervision, and hostility towards the BIA. Neither the AIF nor its leaders were the first pan-Indian movement to advocate those things. In fact, they have a long tradition. Carlos Montezuma, a Yavapai raised by Euro-Americans and a BIA physician, proposed abolishing the BIA as a solution to the “Indian problem” in the early twentieth century. He took this “battlecry” to the Society of American Indians. In the SAI, a faction developed that adopted this as, according to Hertzberg, “a simplistic solution to a complex problem” without a “practical likelihood” of happening. His ideas influenced Jemison, Bruner, and other AIF leaders. The ideas for termination already were evident in Congress as well. In 1935 as Collier defended the Wheeler-Howard Act, Representative John McGroarty of California informed him that he would like to see an end to the BIA and termination of the trust relationship. Other factors shaped termination legislation as well, factors that the AIF had no control over at all. A recent study looking at the termination of mixed-blood Utes by R. Warren Metcalf argued that part of the push for termination came from the personal, religious beliefs of key political leaders both national ones and tribal ones among the Ute of the Uintah and Ouray reservation. He pointed specifically to the election of Utah Senator Arthur V. Watkins and his appointment to chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs within one month of

entering the Senate. Metcalf identified Watkins's Mormon faith as a major influence on his thought about Indians and the need for termination legislation. He also identified tribal business committee chair Rex Curry as an individual torn between his tribe and his faith. Although AIF leaders supported the ideas behind termination, they were not responsible for the movement. In the late 1940s and in the 1950s, the ideas of termination would find many different adherents. As such termination was the result of a mix of social, cultural, and political factors.²³

Without support in the House of Representatives and the obvious disapproval of Senator Thomas, the Settlement Bill died in June 1940. Bruner and the AIF continued to call for a final settlement of all Indian claims, but they placed greater emphasis on increasing employment opportunities for American Indians in the BIA. Combined with the bad press from the Dies Committee, the Settlement Bill sealed the fate of the AIF. Its reputation tarnished and leadership transformed, the AIF slipped into the background of American Indian affairs.²⁴

NOTES

¹ *Congressional Record*, May 1939, Lee Harkins Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 82.105.194.

² "Resolution no. 2 of 1938," with "Alice Lee Jemison to the Seventy-Sixth Congress," 2 January 1939, Folder 99, Box 10, Subject Series, Elmer Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma; "Resolution no. 7," 30 July 1937, Folder 93, Box 34, Subject Series, Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Center; "Statement by Alice Lee Jemison," House Special Committee, *Un-American Propaganda and Activities*, 75th Cong., November 1938, 2464.

³ "Resolution Number 20," 31 July 1937, Folder 93, Box 24, Legislative Series, Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Center.

⁴ Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians: Hearings on S. 3750*. 76th Cong., 3d sess., 20 June 1940, 1, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Memorial Addressed to Elmer Thomas," by William Madison, Senate Committee, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians*, 22-23.

⁷ Harold Ickes to Usher L. Burdick, 28 April 1939, *Congressional Record*, May 1939, Harkins Collection, 82.105.194.

⁸ "Statement of the Hon. Usher L. Burdick of North Dakota in the House of Representatives, May 1 and 29, 1939," *Congressional Record*, 1939, Harkins Collection.

⁹ American Indian Federation to Usher L. Burdick, 15 May 1939, *Congressional Record*, Harkins Collection.

¹⁰ Elmer Thomas to O.K. Chandler, 5 February 1937, Folder 3, Box 10, Subject Series, Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Center; Thomas to Edwin C. Johnson, 10 February 1937, Folder 3, Box 10, Subject Series, Carl Albert Center. For more information about Thomas's relationship with Collier, see Peter Wright, "John Collier and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 50 (Autumn, 1972): 347-371; Collier to Oliver La Farge, 10 May 1939, John Collier Papers, 1922-1968 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).

¹¹ Statement of Elmer Thomas, Chair Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Senate Committee, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians*, 10-12.

¹² Statement of O.K. Chandler" Senate Committee, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians*, 10-12

¹³Hazel W. Hertzberg, *Search for an American Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971): 21, 179, 180.

¹⁴ Robert Fay Schrader, *The Indian Arts and Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983): 12; Molly H. Mullin, *Culture in the Marketplace: Gender, Art, and Value in the American Southwest* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 15, 27, 97; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974): 67-68.

¹⁵ AIF to Burdick, 15 May 1939, *Congressional Record*, 1939, Harkins Collection, 82.105.194.; "Testimony of Napoleon B. Johnson," Senate Committee, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indian*, 3, 5-6.

¹⁶ Gail Balman, "The Creek Treaty of 1866," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 48(Summer 1970), 191, 196. See also Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941, 1967), 142-176, for a discussion of the Creek experiences during the Civil War.

¹⁷ Joseph Bruner, Interview by Effie S. Jackson, 28 February 1938, WPA Narratives, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁸ Bruner to S.W. Brown, Jr., 24 January 1939, S. W. "Billy" Brown, Jr., Collection, Box 13, AIF File, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Brown Collection includes a number of boxes concerning Brown's efforts to bring about a settlement. Unfortunately, there has not been a comprehensive study of the efforts of Loyal Creeks and their descendants to gain compensation.

¹⁹"AIF Constitution," House Committee on Indian Affairs. *Hearings on H.R. 7781: Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 74th Cong., 1st Sess., 11 February 1935, 15.; O. K. Chandler and Alice Lee Jemison, "Now Who's Un-American? An Expose of Communism in the United States Government," (Washington, D.C.: American Indian Federation, 1936), 1. This is evident in the letters and resolutions of the AIF after 1940. See Senate Committee, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians*, 27; and letters from Bruner to Brown found in the Brown Collection. Typically, non-Oklahoman board members were Couro, Curran, and Lorena Burgess.

²⁰ Laurence Hauptman, "Alice Jemison: Seneca Political Activist, 1901-1964," *the Indian Historian* 12(Summer 1979): 16, 21-22. Despite her criticism of the BIA and the Roosevelt administration, Jemison accepted a job with the Census Bureau in 1940; Alice Jemison to Joseph Bruner, 10 July 1939, Bruner Collection. Based on the claims of John Collier, Franco argued that Bruner and others forced Jemison to resign because of her connection to fifth-column organizations; however, there does not appear to be any proof to back this argument. Bruner and Jemison remained friends after her resignation and continued to correspond with one another, especially once Bruner and Chandler

disassociated with one another. See Jeré Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999): 31.

²¹Bruner to Brown, 17 June 1943, Brown Collection, Box 12; Bruner to Brown, 2 August 1943, Brown Collection, Box 12; Sapulpa book, vol 2, 219; Rita F. Newton to Alice Lee Jemison, 28 June 1943, Bruner Collection. Newton was Bruner's secretary and often took care of his correspondence. The full scope of Johnson's role is an aspect of the Federation that requires more research. The Bruner collection contains a number of letters exchanged between Bruner and Johnson including a letter from the Federation to Elmer Thomas recommending the nomination of an American Indian to the position of Indian Commissioner in February 1945. The letter is on Johnson's District Court stationery, signed Joseph Bruner, and includes a handwritten note from Johnson to Bruner indicating that he sent the letter to Thomas on behalf of Bruner.

²²Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933-1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): xii; Thomas W. Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): 3; Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986): 14; R. Warren Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy: The Discarded Indians of Utah* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002): .

²³Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 67,94,105,107; Hertzberg, *Search for an American Identity*, 178; House Committee, *Indian Conditions and Affairs*, 55-56; Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy*, 13,30.

²⁴"AIF Resolution," 29 April 1945, Bruner Collection.

CHAPTER SIX

THE AMERICAN INDIAN FEDERATION AFTER 1940

Weakened and divided, the AIF left its legislation-writing efforts with an uncertain future. During World War II, Bruner and other leaders tried to restore the wounded organization; however, their efforts were not enough to overcome the many obstacles. They continued to fight the influences of Collier and "Collierism" in the Indian Bureau, utilizing many of the earlier tactics.

In the summer of 1940, Bruner and other members devised a scheme to get rid of Collier. If Roosevelt lost his re-election bid, Collier would lose his position as commissioner. To advance this plan, Bruner and his associate S.W. "Billy" Brown, Jr., supported Republican candidate Wendell L. Willkie and formed the Indian Willkie Club of Oklahoma. In a leaflet titled "Wendell L. Willkie's Promise to the Indians Explained," Brown, as president of the club, explained Willkie's promises and his complaints about the management of Indian Affairs. While protecting social services, Willkie would give "restricted Indians more liberty in ...managing their restricted lands and funds." He believed that heavy federal supervision prevented Indians from becoming prosperous. The club used the anticommunist rhetoric of the AIF in its warnings against the establishment of a "commune" in Oklahoma by "admirers of the Russian plan." In closing, Brown declared, "A VOTE FOR WENDELL L. WILLKIE IS A VOTE AGAINST JOHN COLLIER AND HIS HORDE OF COMMUNISTS." Ultimately, this was an unsuccessful tactic because Roosevelt won the election. By 1943, Bruner gave up defeating the New Deal at the polls and declared that neither Willkie nor any other Republican could beat Roosevelt. Although Willkie promised to fire Collier in his

speeches, Harold Ickes recorded in his diary that Willkie had told Collier's brother "if he were elected, John would be kept at the head of Indian Affairs." Even if Willkie had won, Bruner and Brown might have been disappointed with his policies.¹

One reason for the decline of the influence of the AIF in Congress after 1940 related to changes wrought by World War II. In addition to altering all social conditions and lives, World War II changed the lives of American Indians through military service and employment opportunities in defense industries. Focusing much of its attention on the war, Congress had little time for the concerns of the Indians. Citing fiscal concerns, Burton K. Wheeler launched an attack on his own legislation, the Wheeler-Howard Act, when he issued another call for its repeal in 1943. Between 1941 and 1945, Collier faced increasing criticism from congress and faced the rejection or repeal of many of his reforms. In this atmosphere, the American Indian Federation was not as important as it used to be. Congressional representatives no longer needed Indian opposition to justify their attacks because it was much easier to use the conditions created by war as an excuse.²

Despite this obstacle, Bruner continued to use "open letters" and a few Congressional hearings to publicize the causes and efforts of the AIF. In May 1943, Bruner issued a letter to "All Friends of the AIF" to announce its annual convention and to encourage members to buy war bonds. In addition, he complained that an agreement for the settlement of claims probably would not occur during the war. A resolution from the same year showed the continued effort for settlement and a call for the cessation of "unuseful" services for the Indians. Although this resolution retained some of the AIF's causes, it differed from earlier efforts by supporting the continuation of Indian schools

and hospitals. In 1944, Bruner made his final Congressional hearing appearance on behalf of the AIF. In his testimony, he continued to claim that the BIA, the IRA, and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act were communistic. In addition, he continued to call for the abolition of the BIA.³

Compared to AIF activities between 1934 and 1940, this period was relatively quiet. In 1945, the AIF emerged again, for a short time. In that year the cash-strapped organization reinstated its membership dues that it had suspended at the beginning of the war. Bruner continued to call for a final settlement citing Indian participation in World War II as evidence of the abilities of Indians to compete in the dominant society. He called for better employment opportunities for Indians in the government. In addition, the AIF achieved a small victory when Collier resigned from his position as commissioner in early 1945. The AIF called on Senator Thomas to use his power “to bring about the appointment of a qualified person of Indian blood,” preferably an Oklahoman, to the position. Bruner vowed to oppose the appointment of anyone associated with Collier and to fight the persistent influence of “Collierism” in the BIA.⁴ Efforts to have an Indian appointed to the position were unsuccessful, and William A. Brophy, a BIA attorney for the Pueblos and an Interior Department administrator, became Collier’s replacement.⁵

Much of Bruner’s resources and, therefore, those of the AIF went to fund an attack on the new pan-Indian movement the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). Formed in late 1944 the NCAI, according to Thomas Cowger, was a moderate organization that attempted to appeal to the full spectrum of Indian society. As part of its desire “to maintain Indians’ legal rights and cultural identity,” most of its efforts targeted

fighting the termination policy of the 1950s. According to Cowger the first twenty years of the NCAI were a period of trying “to create a shared identity to promote sovereignty and to push for civil rights for all Native Americans.” Bruner found the NCAI objectionable from its beginning. The creation of the NCAI made the AIF seem unnecessary because it appeared that there was only room for **one** national Indian movement. Napoleon Johnson’s position as the first NCAI president limited his ability to continue his work with the AIF. Although Bruner and Johnson remained friends at first, Johnson’s divided allegiance eventually strained their relationship. By 1946, Bruner declared that Johnson was a puppet of the NCAI. Furthermore, Bruner viewed the NCAI as “an important LINK IN THE CHAIN to keep Indians under control” and a minion of Collier. Its sole purpose, according to Bruner, was “to destroy the American Indian Federation.” The individuals dominating the NCAI, Bruner wrote, were “known to be under the influence and control” of Collier—the “Self-Established ‘Messiah’ of Minority Groups.” Although the leaders of the NCAI were highly assimilated individuals, they were much more successful than the AIF at appealing to a broader group, beyond those Indians like themselves. The NCAI leaders, according to Philp, were “the vanguard of ... [the] movement toward more self-determination.” Although some NCAI leaders, such as Johnson, favored “the progressive liquidation of the Indian Bureau and a staged federal withdrawal,” others dedicated themselves to protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. Additional research will be required to determine the influence of the AIF on the first years of the NCAI.⁶

Bruner’s charges against the NCAI elicited mixed reactions from government officials. Senator McCarran announced in Congress that the NCAI was a “communist

front organization” designed to destroy the influence of the AIF in Washington. Other government officials refuted Bruner’s charges. William A. Brophy, the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs, confronted Bruner about the ridiculous nature of his claim that delegates to the NCAI’s founding convention were persons “known to be under the influence and control of former Commissioner John Collier.” Brophy argued that the statement “would properly be resented by a good many of those who attended this convention. The name of the president of the Congress [Johnson] appears on your letterhead as a member of your own Administrative Board.”⁷

Bruner tried to continue the AIF after 1945; however, he was unsuccessful partially due to perceptions of the organization as being too virulent in its pro-assimilation and anti-Collier rhetoric. He seemed especially out of touch after 1945. J.T. Smith, an associate of Billy Brown and Bruner, expressed this sentiment in 1947 when he explained why he did not attend an AIF “Pow Wow” held in Tulsa. Smith wrote, “I was invited but I didn’t go— I don’t believe in that organization, guess I’m too much full blood.” This very simple statement reflected a strong sentiment— the AIF was too “white,” or non-Indian, for many members of the Indian community to support it.⁸

The AIF was another link in a chain of political pan-Indian movements in the early twentieth century, ranging from the Society of American Indians to the National Congress of American Indians, and possibly, as suggested by Laurence Hauptman, to the American Indian Movement. Its members learned about political lobbying from experiences in the SAI and Society of Oklahoma Indians. AIF leaders fit the characteristics identified by Hertzberg as those shared by pan-Indian leaders. They assumed a bond between all Indians because of similar relationships with the government

and viewed the term “Indian” to express a belief in the “race” not in a single culture. They embraced their heritage, expressing pride about being an Indian while calling for “self-help, self-reliance, and initiative.” As individuals they believed themselves to be exceptional examples of American Indians and were “sensitive about their relationship to the larger American society.” They valued education and viewed their efforts as “a movement of historical importance.” Like other pan-Indian leaders AIF leaders held a “middle ground,” serving as intermediaries between their Indian and non-Indian realities. American Indian leaders lived in, as described by L.G. Moses and Raymond Wilson, “one world of great complexity that challenged, sustained, and sometimes destroyed them, but never removed their ‘Indianness.’” While the traditionalist may seem to be more “exciting” and valuable in historical research, assimilated pan-Indian leaders, like Bruner, Johnson, Sloan, and Jemison, are important for an understanding of American Indian experiences. Their economic success, education, and acceptance in the dominant society gave them significant influence in both the Indian and non-Indian political worlds. Many government officials, like Senator Thomas and Representative Burdick, viewed their opinions as legitimate “Indian” points of view and used those views to shape policy.⁹

AIF resistance to the Indian New Deal reflected on the success of the campaign to assimilate the Indians, as Frederick Hoxie has described. As students at Indian boarding schools or BIA employees the leaders of the AIF believed in the promises of American citizenship and the proclaimed “superiority” of American culture. These individuals viewed Collier’s reforms, based on the ideas of cultural pluralism, to be antithetical to their ideas about being an “American.” Hence, they denounced Collier and his programs

as “un-American.” According to Sander Diamond, the dominant society, in the 1930s, viewed “un-American” as “any individual, ethnic group, or organization subscribing to a foreign ideology. ... Refusal to conform to the dominant culture was often regarded as un-American.” For the American Indian Federation, Collier’s program of cultural pluralism was foreign to their assimilation-oriented upbringings, an experience they defined as American.¹⁰

An underlying theme in all of the federation’s efforts was the empowerment of the American Indian. The federation leaders called for their Indian brothers and sisters to voice their opinions and claim what was rightfully theirs. They viewed the supervision of the Bureau of Indian Affairs over their lives and property as oppression. Essentially, they called for self-determination or what Chandler called “letting the Indian alone.” If the BIA had to exist, they argued that Indians should control it, not be controlled by it. They advocated the preferential hiring of Indians to fill jobs in the BIA. Furthermore, the Settlement Bill and federation attacks on the ACLU-influenced Indian Reorganization Act demonstrated that they wanted Indians to shape federal policy without the influences of non-Indian bureaucrats or reformers.¹¹

For the most part historians have vilified the American Indian Federation and its leaders for being “right-wing” extremists that boasted a program of “blended super patriotism, fundamentalist Christianity, and Ku Klux Klan attitudes.” A persisting admiration of John Collier, a tendency to dismiss pro-assimilation Indians as being less “Indian,” and a heavy dependence on government sources helps to explain some of the characterizations of these scholars. Historians that went beyond these ideas, like Laurence Hauptman and Kenneth Townsend, began to portray the AIF as what Hauptman

called a “much more mundane and Indian-oriented” organization. In addition to changing views about the AIF, a closer study of the AIF adds to the understanding of Collier and his reforms. By doing so, it changes historical perceptions of this important period in American history. While Collier’s reforms were important and continue to affect tribal communities today, they were not a panacea for Indian problems.

Opposition to his reforms were significant. The American Indian Federation’s campaign against the Indian New Deal was not the ranting of a few disgruntled individuals. It was an expression of a hundred years of policy and pressure, the success of the campaign for assimilation, expressing much more about those involved than originally thought.¹²

NOTES

¹“Wendell L. Willkie’s Promise to the Indians Explained,” 1940, Bruner Collection, Sapulpa Historical Society, Sapulpa, Oklahoma; Bruner to Brown, 29 August 1943, S.W. “Billy” Brown, Jr., Collection, Box 12, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953-54): 338.

²Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000): 170, 196, 215-217. Townsend provides an excellent discussion of American Indian experiences during World War II. For additional information, see also: Alison Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Towards a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Jere’ Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999); Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

³Bruner to Friends of the AIF, 1 May 1943, Box 13, Brown Collection; “AIF Resolution,” 4 December 1943, Box 13, Brown Collection; “Statement by Joseph Bruner,” House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, *Hearings on H.R. 166: Changing Status of the Indian*, 78th Cong., 2d Sess., 1944, 1054-55.

⁴“AIF Resolution,” 14 January 1945, Bruner Collection; Bruner to Joseph O’Malley, 22 February 1945, Bruner Collection.

⁵S. Lyman Tyler, “William A. Brophy, 1945-48,” in *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824-1977* edited by Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 283-288.

⁶Bruner to Thomas, 3 February 1945, Bruner Collection, showed Johnson’s efforts to continue his AIF work by drafting and sending letters on behalf of Bruner and the AIF; Bruner to Ms. Sunflower, Secretary of the National League for Justice to American Indians, Inc., 10 January 1946, Bruner Collection; Bruner to Mr. Millima M. Newton, 30 December 1944, Bruner Collection; “National Congress of American Indians: An Indian Bureau Organization, How It Was Formed,” 1 June 1947, Bruner Collection; Philp, *Termination Re-Visited*, xviii, 15.

⁷“National Congress of American Indians: An Indian Bureau Organization, How It Was Formed,” 1 June 1947, Bruner Collection; William A. Brophy to Bruner, 1 June 1945, Bruner Collection.

⁸J.T. Smith to S.W. Brown, Jr., 8 June 1947, Box 13, Brown Collection.

⁹Laurence Hauptman, "The American Indian Federation and the Indian New Deal: A Reinterpretation," *Pacific Historical Review* 52(November 1983): 401; Hazel W. Hertzberg, *Search for an American Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971): 73-75; L.G. Moses and Raymond Wilson, eds, *Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Native American Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993): 4.

¹⁰Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974): 22.

¹¹ "Statement by O.K. Chandler," Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, *Final Discharge, Certain Individual Indians: Hearings on S. 3750, 76th Cong., 3d Sess., 20 June 1940, 10-12,16.*

¹²Kenneth R. Philp, ed, *Indian Self-Rule: First Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986): 58.

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