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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM AND INDIANNESS IN THE ACTIVISM OF LADONNA HARRIS AND WILMA MANKILLER

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

SARAH EPPLER JANDA
Norman, Oklahoma
2002

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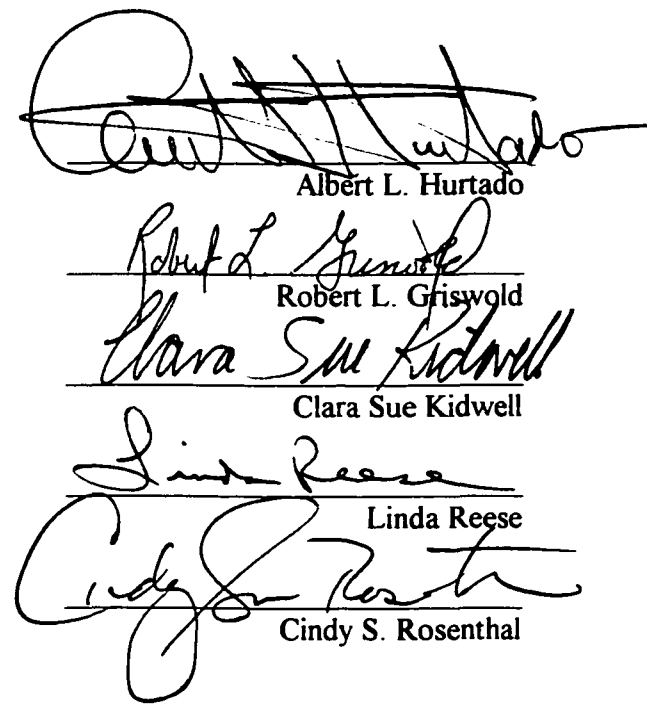
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THE INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM AND INDIANNESS IN THE ACTIVISM OF LADONNA HARRIS AND WILMA MANKILLER

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY



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Abstract

My work offers a comparative examination of the use of feminism and Indian identity in the careers of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller. While they took different paths to political activism, Harris as the wife of a United States senator and Mankiller as the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation, they share a number of similarities. A study of these women, who were the two most prominent Native American women in the twentieth century, offers a useful vehicle through which to understand larger issues in federal Indian policy, the role of Native American women in politics, and the use of identity politics. Both received recognition as humanitarians and advocates of women's rights as well. A comparative study of Harris and Mankiller, therefore, has ramifications at a national level and in a wide variety of areas, including civil rights and the environment. The way each came to national prominence, how they projected their images and identities, and how they have been depicted by the media are issues that are explored throughout.

The format consists of an introduction followed by two chapters that focus on LaDonna Harris, two chapters that deal with Wilma Mankiller and two in which they are compared as Native American leaders and as women in politics. The introduction sets up the significance of the work and situates it within the existing historiography. Chapter one deals with how LaDonna Harris became involved in politics as a congressional wife, her work with Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, which she founded in 1965, and the public relationship of her and her husband, Senator Fred Harris. Chapter two examines how she evolved into an activist in her own right, the founding of Americans for Indian

Opportunity, and how her national reputation took on an identity separate from that of her husband. Chapter three examines Mankiller's early life and then moves into an analysis of Mankiller's election to deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation in1983, her ascension to principal chief in1985 when Chief Ross Swimmer left to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and her election to principal chief in1987. Allegations of sexism in elections and gender-opposition to her leadership are explored as well. Chapter four deals with Mankiller's tenure as chief from1985-1995. A discussion of her accomplishments, leadership, and symbolism to Indians and non-Indians during a period of renewed interest in Indianness is discussed. Chapters five and six deal with both Harris and Mankiller. Chapter five examines how each is a product of the shift from termination to self-determination and their roles in federal Indian politics. Their use of community development and their prominence in the national arena is evaluated here as well. Chapter six focuses on their role in politics as women, including the influence of feminism and their shared belief that no sexism existed among Indians prior to contact. This chapter concludes by placing them in the larger context of the changing nature of the role of women in politics.

Introduction

> *An American Indian woman is primarily defined by her tribal identity. In her eyes, her destiny is necessarily that of her people, and her sense of herself as a woman is first and foremost prescribed by her tribe.*[1]
>
> -Paula Gunn Allen

The formation of identity lies at the very core of human experience. It shapes not only the view of self but the lens through which people view the world around them. Certainly, Allen's description of identity does not apply to all Native American women. However, for LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller, their sense of being Indian women underpinned their constructions of self, their identity, and the image they projected to the outside world. The activism of each became inextricably linked to their identity as Native American women.

Both self-identified feminists, Harris and Mankiller affected national policy as they worked on behalf of Native American and women's issues throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. As the wife of United States Senator Fred Harris from Oklahoma, LaDonna Harris became the first congressional wife to testify before Congress, founded Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity(OIO) in 1965 and Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) in 1970, and served on scores of federal committees pertaining to both women and Native Americans. Wilma Mankiller became the first female deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1983, the first female principal chief in 1985, and then led her tribe for the next decade. Each altered the place of women in politics, Harris as a congressional

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[1]Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 43.

wife and Mankiller as an elected tribal leader.

The way in which the intersection of feminism and Indianness shaped the political career of each woman as well as their image and identity lies at the core of this study.[2] It is important because an examination of the way in which each experienced Indianness and femaleness ultimately contributes to a wider understanding of the avenues open to women in politics and the possibilities afforded them to affect federal Indian policy in the late twentieth century. Harris and Mankiller provide useful vehicles through which to gain a better understanding of a variety of issues, including Native American feminism, federal Indian policy, and the way in which women engage in politics. And yet, to fully appreciate the role of Harris and Mankiller in the latter half of the twentieth century, it is necessary to establish the historiographical context into which a study of each fits.

Over the past four decades the field of Native American history has grown tremendously. The social movements of the 1960s and 70s triggered a shift toward social history and an emphasis on giving greater voice to groups previously left out of history books. Prior to the 1960s most scholarship failed to portray Native Americans as historical actors, telling either a sad story of monumental exploitation and oppression or offering a racially driven interpretation of an inferior people unable to resist the force of dominant white society. Whatever the author's perspective, Indian history essentially ended in 1890 with the Battle of Wounded Knee, until changes in the history profession itself after 1960 and the reassertion of Indian sovereignty contributed to new

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[2]While there are many definitions of "feminism," the word is used throughout this manuscript as meaning a belief in the equality of men and women. "Indianness" signifies the various components of Indian identity.

interpretations of both Native American history and Indian-white relations. While these accounts largely emphasized colonial and nineteenth century developments, more recent scholarship reveals a number of significant developments in Indian history since 1890. In fact, the field of twentieth-century Native American history has evolved into a rich interdisciplinary field of scholarship and addresses some of the most vital issues facing Native Americans today. Peter Iverson's *"We Are Still Here": American Indians in the Twentieth Century*, for example, offers a good overview of Native American history in this period and in the title captures the struggle of both Indians and historians to correct the persistent view of Native Americans as relics of an earlier time.[3]

Recently, the relationship of Native Americans to the federal government, sovereignty, Indian activism, and Indian identity have also received attention from scholars of twentieth-century Native American history. Historians have attempted to illustrate the perseverance of native cultures and to examine the major changes in federal Indian policy. James Clifton, C. Matthew Snipp, Fergus Bordewich, Joane Nagel, and Phil Deloria each contribute to the dialogue on Indian identity and white perceptions of Native Americans.[4] Historians such as Donald Fixico and Alison Bernstein examine the detrimental implications of the policy of termination, which aimed to assimilate Native Americans by

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[3]Peter Iverson, *"We Are Still Here": American Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Wheeling, Ill: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1998). For another good overview see, Donald L. Parman, *Indians and the American West in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[4]James A. Clifton, ed., *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1989); C. Matthew Snipp, *American Indians: First of this Land* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1989); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, University of Yale Press, 1998).

quite literally terminating numerous tribes as well as the services provided to them.[5] Along with termination came the relocation of thousands of Indian families to urban areas. Many of these urban Indians became key actors in the subsequent challenges to federal Indian policy. Both *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* and *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk* reveal the amalgamation of Indian activism and Indian identity that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[6] Out of this experience grew a renewed demand for sovereignty and cultural restoration.

The emphasis on pan Indian identity manifested in the American Indian Movement (AIM) led by young urban Native Americans, many of whom were displaced by termination era relocation programs during the 1950s, held great ramifications for the future of federal Indian policy.[7] It is here where the lives of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller shed light on the two most critical elements in twentieth-century Native American history: the shift from termination and assimilation policy to self-determination and cultural revitalization on the one hand, and the birth of pan Indianness and activism on the other. An examination of the experiences and work of both women provides great insight into each of these issues. However, their place in twentieth-century Native

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[5]Donald Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Alison Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[6]Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996); Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne, eds., *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[7]See Donald Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

American history speaks to only part of their significance because both Harris and Mankiller engaged in activism as women, and gender significantly informed their experiences.

Like the field of Native American history, women's history also underwent substantial change and growth in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, there remains a dearth of information about Native American women. Women's history emerged in large part out of the 1960s and 70s feminist movement which pushed to bring women's issues into the public domain. Betty Friedan's best-selling work, *The Feminine Mystique*, exposed the sense of emptiness many women felt in the socially constrained role of wife and mother and ultimately shaped both scholarship on women and the public discourse on gender roles.[8] Sara Evans argues that women's involvement in the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s provided women with the organizational skills needed to form their own movement. Many women found themselves relegated to the traditional female roles of making coffee and typing rather than taking part in leadership within the very movements which agitated for equality and individual rights. Out of this experience grew the conviction among some women that they needed a movement which concentrated on sexual discrimination.[9]

The feminist movement succeeded in bringing many women's issues to the forefront of public awareness, including demands for equal pay, equal educational opportunities, and reproductive freedom. However, as Alice Echols provocatively

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[8]Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963).

[9]Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

illustrates, the shortcoming of the movement lay in its failure to recognize and tolerate the plethora of differences that exist among women. Ultimately, issues of race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and life experience tore the movement apart as it splintered into smaller and smaller factions.[10] The feminist movement, as it became more radical and decentralized, largely consisted of white middle and upper-class women on the east and west coasts. Despite even the most earnest efforts by feminists to articulate issues they believed concerned all women, finding a common ground often eluded them. For example, as feminists cheered the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which guaranteed women's right to abortions, Native American women worried about forced sterilization and many socially conservative women condemned the decision as immoral and a threat to the family.[11]

The failure of the feminist movement to address the diverse needs and concerns of women from different backgrounds led to a number of scholarly efforts to articulate these differences. However, most of these works focus only on the differences between African American and white feminists.[12] Native American women receive much less attention in

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[10]Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[11]For a discussion of the sterilization of Native American women see, Paula Gunn Allen, "Angry Women Are Building: Issues and Struggles Facing American Indian Women Today," *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, ed. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), p. 43-47.

[12]See Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Perspectives* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1981); Bonnie Dill Thorton, "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Black Women's History* in Black Women in the United States History Series v.10 ed. Darlene Hine Clark (Brooklyn: Carson Publishing, 1990), p. 21-40; Nancie Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

the historiography but they too tended to shy away from the feminist movement. According to Sara Evans, Native American women "resisted feminist perspectives that emphasized individual choice over communal relations and obligations as contrary to their deepest cultural values."[13] Many Native American women confronted a different set of circumstances and concerns than did white middle-class women in the1960s, and this contributed to their peripheral status, both in relation to the feminist movement and in the study of women's history.

In fact, Glenda Riley argues that Indian women suffered from double jeopardy, by virtue of their race and gender, at the hands of historians until the mid 1980s, and even then works tended to focus on pre-twentieth-century developments. [14] Theda Perdue also laments the absence of women in Native American history. She describes gender as "the most basic form of social organization," thus advocating its usefulness as a category of analysis in Indian history.[15] Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman do an excellent job of demonstrating the significance of gender in Native American culture. They provide one of the most comprehensive evaluations of the role of Indian women.[16] Each essay in their book examines a different tribe to determine the status of women, the centrality of gender

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[13]Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, 1997), p. 298-99. See also Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands, *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 129.

[14]Glenda Riley, "The Historiography of American Indian and Other Western Women," *Rethinking American Indian History*. ed. Donald Fixico (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

[15]Theda Perdue, "Writing the Ethnohistory of Native Women," *Rethinking American Indian History* p. 83.

[16]Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman, *Women and Power in Native North America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

in the culture, and the extent to which women in those tribes exercised power. Not surprisingly, the experiences of women varied significantly. For example, in comparing Muskogee and Cherokee women, the latter enjoyed considerably more autonomy and power.[17] However, the tendency to generalize that all Native American women exercised far greater power than their Euro-American counterparts persists in much of the scholarship. It should be remembered, however, that such works emerged as a corrective to the absence of Indian women in history books and the tendency to view them as either "princesses" or downtrodden "squaws."[18]

Despite the call for more work on Native American women, two main problems persist in the historiography. Most scholarship on Native American women does not extend into the second half of the twentieth century and that which does generally insists on linking traditional values with twentieth-century experiences. Imagine if every work on white women in the recent American history began with a discussion of Republican Motherhood. It would promulgate an inaccurate link between the present and the past, creating a static view of women. Just as it would be misleading to explain the role of women in American society today as an extension of Republican Motherhood, it is equally problematic to rely solely on an understanding of traditional Native American gender roles to explain their contemporary experiences. Still, many of the works which do exist tend to offer romanticized portrayals of Indian women rather than dealing with their lives in the

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[17]Richard A. Sattler, "Women's Status Among the Muskogee and the Cherokee," *Women and Power in Native North America*, eds. Klein and Ackerman, p. 214-229.

[18] For a re-evaluation of the biased sources on Indian women see Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Boston: University Press of America, 1983).

modern world.[19]

The tendency to over-emphasize the connection between traditional tribal beliefs and modern experiences poses a difficult problem for historians. For instance, Susan Williams and Joy Harjo explain that many of the women who have contributed to the recent increase in female tribal leadership came from tribes which "have always treated men and women as equally sacred."[20] They also assert that "feminism is not a word found in tribal languages." Yet, the word "feminism" itself did not come into common use until the early twentieth century and first appeared in the Oxford English dictionary in 1933.[21] During a period when Native Americans struggled just to preserve their languages, it seems wholly unremarkable that there is no word for feminism in any Native American language. Moreover, Native American children in the early twentieth century often suffered harsh punishment for speaking their native tongues in schools, thus making it all the less surprising that no comparable word to"feminism" emerged.[22]

Approaches that overemphasize the lack of a need for feminism among Indians prior to contact are dubious, at best. They tend to stress complementarity- the idea that

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[19]See Virginia Sutter, "Today's Strength from Yesterday's Tradition-The Continuity of the American Indian Woman," *Frontiers* v. 6, n. 3 (Fall 1981), p. 53-57.

[20]Susan M. Williams and Joy Harjo, "American Indian Feminism," *The Readers Companion to U.S Women's History*, et al., Wilma Mankiller (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), p. 198-199.

[21]Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 4.

[22]For a discussion of the treatment of Native American children for speaking their native languages see, Margaret Connell Szasa, *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination Since 1928*, 3rd ed Rev. and Enl. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999).

men's and women's roles while different, complimented each- reciprocity, and the "sacred" appreciation of women as "givers of life."[23] Simply because Native American women were esteemed and found ways to exercise power does not mean they enjoyed a status equal to that of men. While unofficial expressions of power should not be ignored, nor should they be overstated. For instance, Confucian principles of reciprocity were applied to gender roles in traditional China and women were esteemed as mothers but they still had their feet bound and by no means did they achieve equity with men. Women's rights and respect for motherhood are two very different things. Over-emphasizing the reciprocity in tribal cultures and both formal and informal expressions of power among Native American women contributes to myth-making just as the squaw-princess dichotomy did.

Increasingly, there are more works which address the historical role of Native American women within their tribes. Rayna Green acknowledged that while in some Indian tribes, most notably those organized matrilineally, women exercised a great deal of power, there were also tribes which "were as male centered as the Europeans who invaded them."[24] Clara Sue Kidwell also contributes to the understanding of the diversity in the experiences of Indian women in her examination the impact of European influences on the traditional role of women in their families and their tribes.[25] Scholars have made

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[23]Williams and Harjo, "Native American Feminism," p. 199.

[24]Rayna Green, *Women in American Indian Society* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1992), p. 21-22.

[25]Clara Sue Kidwell, "Native American Women," *The Readers Companion to U.S. Women's History*, et al., Wilma Mankiller, p. 405-410.

considerable efforts to re-discover the lives of Indian women but still the problem remains that much of this scholarship does not offer an in-depth analysis of the role of Native American women in modern movements and events.[26]

Because of the lack of scholarship on the role of Native American women in the American Indian Movement, in the feminist movement, and in politics, biographical and autobiographical works currently offer the best insight into the experience of these women.[27] For instance, the lives of Native American activists such as Anna Mae Aquash and Mary Crow Dog reveal the stark differences between the experiences of Native American women and mainstream white feminists.[28] Both Aquash and Crow Dog participated in the American Indian Movement and felt alienated, to say the least, from mainstream values and experiences. LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller also published autobiographies. And, although they are useful in providing insight into each woman's identity and experience as a Native American woman involved in politics, expose the limitations of autobiography and the need for critical scholarship in the area of Native American Women and politics since the 1960s.[29]

In *Mankiller: A Chief and her People*, Wilma Mankiller places her personal story

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[26]See Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., 1977).

[27]See Gretchen M. Bataille, ed. *Native American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993). For a discussion of Native American women's autobiographies see Bataille and Sands, *American Indian Women*, p. 3-26.

[28]Johanna Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1978); Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erodes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

[29]LaDonna Harris, *LaDonna Harris: A Comanche Life* ed. H. Henrietta Stockel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, *Wilma Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

within the context of Cherokee history.[30] Informed by a feminist perspective and a profound sense of cultural heritage, Mankiller's story offers insight into her identity and into the political image she projected while in office. The narrative of her life is interspersed with Cherokee spiritualism, limited historical analysis, and at times a static view of Indians grounded in exceptionalism. Her work stresses the paramount role of her heritage in shaping her identity.

In a similar manner, LaDonna Harris also situates her life story within the context of her Indian heritage. She sets the tone of her book on the title page with the assertion: "I filter everything through Comanche values."[31] Following a loosely chronological pattern, Harris describes her life experiences within the framework of traditional Comanche beliefs, instilled in her at an early age by her grandparents. While this book lacks detail in a number of places, its greatest asset is its conversational tone. As such, it provides insight into how Harris views herself, her past, and her accomplishments as a woman and a Native American. Interestingly, Harris and Mankiller stressed the centrality of their Indian heritage in shaping their outlook on life despite the fact they are both part Irish as well.

The research for this work is based on a variety of archival sources, including the Wilma P. Mankiller Collection and the Fred R. Harris Collection, both of which are located at the University of Oklahoma, the LaDonna Harris Collection at NAES College in Chicago and the Ross O. Swimmer Collection at the Cherokee National Archives in

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[30] Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller.*

[31] *LaDonna Harris.*

Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Many of these sources have not been used previously. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first scholar to go through the Mankiller Collection and all of the LaDonna Harris Collection. In addition to the above mentioned collections, interviews with LaDonna Harris, Wilma Mankiller, Fred Harris, and Ross Swimmer inform this study. While a handful of books and articles refer to LaDonna Harris or Wilma Mankiller, there is no detailed scholarly examination of either one of them. There are, in fact, very few monographs on Native American women in politics in the latter half of the twentieth century and my work helps fill this gap.

Undertaking a study of two people in recent history brings with it both advantages and difficulties. Many a scholar has wrestled with what some historical figure likely meant in a particular statement or to ascertain how he or she really felt about a given issue. The list of "what ifs" and possibilities are endless. Being able to actually pose questions directly to the research subject adds a more intimate component and affords a possibility for greater clarity and understanding. Yet, what of the drawbacks? Historical memory is a tricky thing. Asking a person about an event that happened thirty years ago, or even five years ago, is no guarantee that he or she will remember, or that the memory will be the in accord with other sources. In places where discrepancies exist between memories and documents, I have tried to give voice to both views. Harris and Mankiller have given hundreds of interviews and public speeches. They have been involved in organizations and initiatives too numerous to mention and certainly, to be recalled with complete accuracy.

As public figures, there is a contrived aspect to the images of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller. How could there not be? They have had a vested interest in being

perceived in a particular way in order to accomplish their goals. The same can be said of virtually all public leaders. But they are also women who underwent real and meaningful change over the course of their lives. This is both a study, then, of how their identities were shaped over time and the types of images they projected as national leaders. By no means is this intended as a definitive biography of either Harris or Mankiller. Nor is it a comprehensive history of Indian policy or feminism. Rather, it is an interpretation of the interplay between image, identity, activism, and indeed, the intersection of feminism and Indianness in the lives of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller.

The first two chapters focus exclusively on LaDonna Harris and her transition from being a young wife and mother with only a high school education to a prominent Indian and women's rights advocate. LaDonna Harris' relationship with Fred Harris, and her introduction to activism and politics are examined in addition to issues of both racial and gender identity and how her activism grew over time.

Using the feminist movement as a transition point, the next two chapters focus on Wilma Mankiller and her move from activism to politics. An examination of her election, first to the office of deputy chief, and then to principal chief, is particularly important in understanding the centrality of feminism and Cherokee heritage in the image she projects to the public. Her activism in San Francisco, her return to Oklahoma in 1976, and her subsequent employment with the Cherokee Nation is explored, as is her role in Cherokee politics and the twelve years she spent in elected tribal office.

Chapter five examines the impact of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller on shaping Federal Indian policy in the United States. It also discusses how both women

were themselves products of the shift in federal Indian policy from termination to self-determination. Attention is given to Indian activism since the 1960s, Indian identity, and public perceptions of Native Americans. As two of the most visible Native American women in the second half of the twentieth century, Harris and Mankiller played an important role in shaping public opinion of Native Americans.

The final chapter is an attempt to place LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller within the larger historical context of women in politics as well as the feminist movement. Both women helped redefine the role women play in politics and how they play these roles. This chapter also compares the different styles of leadership between Harris and Mankiller and the different set of circumstances each confronted. Mankiller, who is younger than Harris, also entered into a different kind of political arena- one of tribal politics- as opposed to national or even state politics. Another significant difference between these two women is that Harris first became involved in politics as the wife of a senator, not as an elected official. These differences are explored in greater detail as a means of accessing the impact that each has had on opportunities afforded to woman and their participation in politics.

That LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller hold an important place in twentieth-century Native American and women's history seems clear. The challenge lies in discerning the way in which their concepts of traditional tribal values, feminism, and mainstream culture converged during a critical juncture in the dialogue on both gender roles and federal Indian policy and shaped their lives and activism. It is that effort to which the following pages are dedicated.

Chapter One: An Introduction to Racism and Politics

There is no 'Indian problem' or 'Black problem.' There is an American problem, a human problem, a problem of making clear that the right to be different and still entitled to full citizenship must be not only safeguarded but also encouraged.[1]

-LaDonna Harris

LaDonna Harris rose to national prominence as a leading Indian rights advocate in the latter half of the twentieth century. She helped to integrate Lawton, Oklahoma in the 1950s, founded Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO) in1965 and Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) in1970. She became the first congressional wife to testify before Congress as an expert on Native Americans and served on a litany of both state and national committees, concerning everything from mental health to education to women and African Americans. She has received numerous awards for her humanitarian efforts. Her most significant work, however, remains in the area of Native American advocacy. The year 1995 marked the 25 year anniversary of the founding of Americans for Indian Opportunity and Harris' lifetime of service. Born in rural southwestern Oklahoma, LaDonna would meet with every president from Lyndon B. Johnson to Bill Clinton because of her expertise on Indian affairs. The path that took Harris from the poor farm community of Walters, Oklahoma to national prominence began with the lessons she learned in childhood. From her earliest memories, elements of both Comanche tradition and mainstream white culture infused LaDonna's life.

Born on February 13, 1931 in Temple, Oklahoma, she spent most of her youth

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[1]LaDonna Harris quoted in Terry Morris, "LaDonna Harris: A Woman Who Gives a Damn," *Redbook Magazine*, February 1970, p. 118.

living eight miles east of her birth place in Walters, Oklahoma. LaDonna's father, a white man of Irish descent named Donald Crawford and her Comanche mother, Lily Tabbytite, divorced while she was very young and her mother went to work at the Fort Sill Indian Hospital in Lawton, Oklahoma.[2] After her parents divorce, LaDonna learned to speak the Comanche language and about Comanche traditions and culture as she grew up in the care of her maternal grandparents, John and Wick-ie Tabbytite. Through her Comanche heritage she learned the importance of being a strong individual, not for its own sake, but for the good of the group. She also learned to value all life as sacred. [3] Her grandmother made all of LaDonna's clothes when she was a child. She recalled feeling well-dressed and proud of the respect people in Walters seemed to show toward her grandparents.[4] However, she also experienced first-hand the problems encountered by Indians. Harris described herself as "more fortunate than other Indians who came from bitter, poverty-stricken homes," explaining that "it took me longer to feel that I was 'different,' and therefore inferior to non-Indian children. But gradually I got the message too--through the subtle downgrading that is constantly taking place and the general atmosphere of prejudice that chips away at the self-esteem of Indian children."[5]

LaDonna had blue eyes and lighter skin than many of Native Americans and realized early on that this made a difference in how people responded to her. She became

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[2]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 18.

[3]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 6.

[4]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 2.

[5]Terry Morris, "LaDonna Harris: A Woman Who Gives a Damn," *Redbook Magazine*, February 1970, p. 117.

acutely aware that white people treated her better that her aunt, Rose Marie, who had much darker skin than she.[6] Despite LaDonna's fair complection, she too experienced many hurtful encounters with racism. Once she entered grade school she, like many Indian children, suffered from name calling and other forms of abuse. To shield her hurt feelings, LaDonna retreated into a shy and reserved demeanor. She watched people and tried to figure out their personalities instead of interacting with them.[7] Her first recollection of encountering racism came when a classmate at school called her and her cousin "gut-eaters, " for which her female cousin promptly "whipped up" on the boy who had made LaDonna cry.[8] She had no idea that not everyone ate intestines, a traditional Comanche food, and for the first time she found herself painfully confronted with what it meant to be different. When LaDonna tearfully told her grandmother about the incident that evening, her grandmother cheered her up by telling her that white people ate mussels and crawdads.[9] This of course shocked her.

As much as being called a gut-eater hurt her feelings, it paled in comparison to the discrimination she encountered under the guise of religion. LaDonna recalled Christians saying some very ugly and racist things to her about Indians. In fact, the anger she felt over these insults threatened to consume her but for the teachings of her grandmother. Wick-ie Tabbytite told her young granddaughter that allowing someone to make her angry

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[6]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 21.

[7]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 3.

[8]Ibid., p. 2.

[9]LaDonna Harris, Draft of biographical profile, p. 2, Series 1, Box 4, LaDonna Harris Collection (hereafter LHC), NAES College, Chicago.

meant that she had lost control of her spirit.[10] LaDonna learned to channel her hurt feelings and cope with anger but she never forgot those early encounters with prejudice. They stayed with her and later fed her determination to fight against prejudice and other problems facing Native Americans. Early on then, LaDonna drew on the lessons taught by her Comanche grandparents to make sense out of the world.

LaDonna grew up in a home that blended elements of Comanche tradition as well as mainstream white values. Her grandfather was a traditional peyote man and her grandmother a Christian. From her earliest memories, she internalized what seemed a natural merging of two worlds and adopted skills to function in both. Her grandparents also raised her in a politically aware home. They made a habit of following national politics despite the fact that her grandfather could not read and that her grandmother had only an eighth grade education. They voted regularly and were strong supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal programs during the Great Depression. In fact, LaDonna thought that President Herbert Hoover's first name was "God Damn" because she always heard her grandfather talking about "that God Damn Hoover."[11] The early years of LaDonna Harris's life were shaped by loving grandparents, a strong infusion of Comanche culture in her everyday life, and an awareness of political issues.

As a teenager toward the end of World War II, LaDonna went to live with her sister for a short time in Oklahoma City. By this point she had become acutely aware of her difficulty in school. LaDonna suffered from dyslexia and while it remained

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[10]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 21-22.

[11]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p.1.

undiagnosed, she realized that she could not perform well in school in the usual sense. Instead, she studied her teachers and tried to figure out what she could do in order to get through her classes and gain their approval. The difficulty she experienced in school contributed even more to her shyness. While living with her sister and attending Putnam City High School, LaDonna began to come out of her shell. She exuded a natural grace which attracted people and, by this point, she had grown into a striking young woman with long legs and big blue eyes. She started dating and soon began going steady with the president of the Putnam City High School Student Council. She enjoyed the prestige and popularity that went along with dating the president. And when LaDonna returned to Walters to live with her grandparents, she set her sights on dating the president of Walters High School Student Council.

After a few inquires, LaDonna discovered that a young man named Fred Harris was president of the student council at Walters. Fred was a year ahead of LaDonna in school and even though their families owned neighboring farms, the two had never met. Fred's family, though they were poor, had high hopes for him. Fred did well in school and involved himself in extracurricular activities. He also worked at a local print press to earn extra money. While LaDonna "wasn't very impressed with his physical appearance" at first, she eventually responded to his overtures.[12] He offered to run her campaign for turkey queen of Cotton County and although she did not win, this marked the beginning of a partnership that lasted for over 30 years.

After Fred Harris graduated from high school, he moved to Norman to attend the

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[12]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

University of Oklahoma. He and LaDonna married the following year in 1949 just before she received her high school diploma. Both families objected to their marriage. Fred's father feared marriage would stand in the way of Fred going to school and having a career. Fred was the first person in his family to attend college and held aspirations of being a lawyer and his parents had high hopes for their promising young son. LaDonna's family, on the other hand, did not think Fred was good enough for her. LaDonna had grown into a beautiful young woman, and her mother hoped she would go to modeling school. LaDonna's older sister, Billie Carl, wanted her to go to college.[13] Either way, Fred simply did not fit into the plan. According to LaDonna, her family believed that she married beneath her.[14] The fact that LaDonna was half Comanche and that Fred was white did not appear to be an issue with either family. After all, LaDonna's mother had married a white man. LaDonna described herself as a "stoic Indian girl" and Fred as "poor white trash."[15] She and Fred were both poor but ambitious, and that commonality superceded racial difference. After Fred and LaDonna married, they moved to Norman in the summer of 1949 and LaDonna became pregnant with their first child, Kathryn. LaDonna worked as a babysitter and at other odd jobs to help support Fred as he attended school. After he earned his bachelor's degree, he attended law school at the University of Oklahoma.

The time Fred and LaDonna spent in Norman proved pivotal in shaping their marriage, their politics, and their awareness of racism. The partnership that began with

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[13]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 33.

[14]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[15]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

LaDonna's bid for turkey queen only deepened during Fred's college and law school days. Early on, Fred developed the habit of sharing what he learned in his classes with LaDonna. It not only brought the two of them closer, it became a key study habit for Fred as he prepared for exams. This tendency of Fred to discuss his ideas and newly acquired knowledge with LaDonna established a trend that defined their relationship when Fred later became involved in politics. Their time in Norman also coincided with the emergence of the civil rights movement and awakened them to the extent of prejudice against African Americans. Beginning with the end of WW II, numerous cracks in the system of segregation appeared. In1948, for example, President Harry S. Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces. Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball by signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers. And Thurgood Marshall from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) announced a plan to challenge segregation in higher education in Oklahoma.[16]

The town of Norman, Oklahoma did indeed witness volatile challenges to segregation during the late 1940s and early 1950s. A notorious "sun down town, " African Americans had not dared to stay in Norman after dark for most of Norman's short history up until this period. Beginning in the mid 1940s, a handful of African American students, with the help of the NAACP, begin challenging the segregation laws in the Oklahoma. The 1896 United States Supreme Court decision in *Plessy verses Ferguson*,

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[16]See Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Neil Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1976); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study inCivil Rights, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

which laid the legal foundation for segregation by recognizing that separate but equal facilities could be provided for blacks and whites, came under increasing fire. According to Oklahoma law, anyone of African descent was recognized as "negro" or "colored" in the Constitution. All other people fell into the category of "white."[17] This language not only set up significant prejudice against African Americans, it underscored the ambiguous status of Native Americans in the state.

As a result of lengthy court battles led by the NAACP, George W. McLAurin became the first African American admitted to the University of Oklahoma Graduate College in 1948.[18] Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher became the first African American admitted to the University of Oklahoma School of Law school in the summer of 1949, just a few months after the marriage of Fred and LaDonna Harris.[19] When Fred and LaDonna made their first home together in Norman that same summer, racism still infested the town on the heels of forced integration of the graduate college. Living in Norman in the early 1950s, LaDonna became aware of racism in a way she had not fully appreciated before. The daughter of the principal of the black school in Norman babysat for Fred and LaDonna's daughter, Katheryn. One afternoon, LaDonna saw her babysitter standing outside a movie theater protesting segregation and she realized that people she knew were

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[17]George Lynn Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges: Oklahoma's Landmark Cases.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. 29

[18] See Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges.*

[19]Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher and Danney Gobel, *A Matter of Black and White: The Autobiography of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996);. Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges.*

being affected by the battle against segregation.[20]

As LaDonna witnessed the blatant racism against African Americans, this experience not only awakened her outrage over their treatment but it gave her a context in which to reflect on the racism that she herself had encountered throughout her life. There was nothing subtle about racism toward African Americans. In 1941 the Oklahoma State Legislature declared it a misdemeanor for blacks and whites to attend schools together to head off challenges to segregation.[21] However, for Native Americans, a different story existed. Oklahoma had, after all, been the site of many Indian reservations prior to statehood and boasted a significant population of Native Americans. Many native Oklahomans, who identified themselves as "white," had retained quaint stories of Indian ancestry in their family trees. While the discrimination against Native Americans did not follow the same clear cut pattern as that against African Americans, it still served the same function. When LaDonna watched African Americans challenging racism in Norman, she began to relate it to her own experiences. She remembered an occasion as a young girl in Walters when the Native American children were separated from the white children for purposes of immunization. Recalling that incident, she now had a larger context of racial discrimination in which to place her experience.[22] Living in Norman clearly shaped LaDonna's perception and understanding of the problem of racism for both African Americans and Native Americans.

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[20]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 2002.

[21]Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges*, p. 32.

[22]LaDonna Harris, draft of biographical profile, p. 1, Series 1, Box 4, LHC, NAES.

When Fred graduated from law school in 1954, he and LaDonna moved to Lawton, Oklahoma and he began practicing law. While they had left Norman behind, their introduction to the struggle for civil rights had just begun. That same year United States Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren handed down the unanimous decision in *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka*, which deemed the doctrine of separate but equal "inherently unequal" and called for the desegregation of public schools. Yet the process of integration came slowly and not without considerable effort by grassroots activists.[23] While Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher and other African Americans gained entrance to the graduate college at the University of Oklahoma, the undergraduate school was not integrated until 1955, after the ruling in the Brown case. Indeed, cities all across the United States resembled Norman in the tumultuous process of securing basic rights for African Americans.

Influenced by the demonstrations they witnessed in Norman, Fred and LaDonna Harris brought those lessons with them to Lawton and worked with others in their new community to challenge racism and integrate the city. LaDonna helped organize a small group of African Americans, whites, and Native Americans in Lawton to challenge segregation. They orchestrated integrated dinner parties to discuss tactics for battling segregation. Members of the groups visited local businesses and pressured them to stop discriminating against African Americans. The work of this group brought considerable attention to the issue of segregation. Eventually, the commanding general of the nearby

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[23]For a discussion of grassroots activism in the civil rights movement see, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Army base provided the help they needed to accomplish the desegregation of Lawton. Fort Sill, which is adjacent to the city and one of the largest employers, put off limits to all soldiers and base personnel any business which refused to serve African Americans, thus forcing local businesses to comply or go under. Finally, the goal of integrating Lawton became a reality.[24]

Some African Americans who worked with LaDonna and Fred Harris to promote integration recalled LaDonna's sympathy, feeling that she had a deeper understanding and compassion for their struggle because of the discrimination she had faced in her own life as a Native American.[25] The role of LaDonna Harris in the integration of Lawton and the way in which African Americans in the community viewed her foreshadowed her later humanitarian efforts to protect the civil rights of all people. Her ability to identify with others and to draw on her own experience contributed significantly to her activism. Indeed, the interest that both Fred and LaDonna Harris took in civil rights extended not just to African Americans but to all groups of people subjected to unequal treatment. And when Fred Harris decided to run for the Oklahoma State Senate in 1956, his support of civil rights earned him a number of minority votes.[26]

As a college student Fred participated in the young Democrats organization at the University of Oklahoma. He even ran for the Oklahoma State Legislature while still in law school. He lost in that first attempt but won the 1956 election and became an Oklahoma

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[24]John Henry Nelson, Interview with the author, 20 September 2001; see also, *LaDonna Harris*, p. 54-56.

[25]Ibid.

[26]John Henry Nelson, Interview with the author, 20 September 2001.

state senator. Fred remained in the Oklahoma State Senate until 1964 when he left to fill a United States Senate seat after the death of Robert S. Kerr. Fred always included LaDonna in his political career and she became a crucial asset. This young pair from rural Oklahoma ultimately became one of the most prominent political couples of this period. Just as Fred had discussed his course work with LaDonna while studying at OU, he continued to share his work in the state legislature with her. Both described their marriage as one in which they shared everything with each other and were each the other's best friend. While making LaDonna an integral part of his political career seemed natural to the two of them, it raised more than a few eyebrows and did not come without criticism from friends and colleagues alike.[27]

LaDonna frequently joined Fred on the state senate floor, sitting by his desk. Both Fred and LaDonna were in their mid twenties when Fred took office making them considerably younger than the politicians with whom they interacted. LaDonna felt that her assistance made Fred appear more mature.[28] However, as the only senate wife present, it took people time to adjust to her unusual presence. She drew on her experience as a young girl in school when she learned how to read people in order to figure out how to fit in. LaDonna explained that she would watch people to determine what role she could play and how best to act, and in the state senate she solved this problem by serving as a hostess until eventually people grew accustomed to seeing her

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[27]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 6; Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

[28]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 9.

there. She poured drinks, emptied ashtrays, and ironically acquiesced to conventional assumptions about women's roles while simultaneously challenging them.[29] Her very presence on the floor of the state senate stood in stark contrast to perceptions of the proper role for women in general and political wives in particular. Yet acting as a hostess, she played a traditional female role in a non-traditional setting. She offered a further challenge to gender assumptions when photographed on the senate floor while very noticeably pregnant with her second child, Bryon. When the picture appeared in the most widely circulated newspaper in the state, *The Daily Oklahoman*, Fred Harris remembered it causing considerable grumbling about the inappropriateness of her being in the senate offices in such a delicate condition.[30]

LaDonna did, however, do more than simply spend time on the senate floor playing hostess to her husband's colleagues. She actively campaigned for her husband in both the 1956 election and in his successful bid for re-election in 1960. While it was not that unusual to see the wives of politicians campaigning for their husbands and acting as unofficial staff, LaDonna far surpassed this sort of "helpmate" status relatively quickly. Increasingly, the state senator made good use of his wife's talents. He received numerous invitations to serve on state committees and organizations and could not possibly accept them all. On occasion, Fred sent LaDonna in his place and this arrangement opened the door for LaDonna to develop her own political identity. When the Southwest Center for Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma invited Fred to participate in a week long

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[29]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 9.

[30]Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

seminar on civil rights, he could not get away and asked LaDonna to attend instead. Significantly, Fred told the sponsors of the seminar that he would support whatever LaDonna said and that they would basically be getting two-for-one by having LaDonna in attendance.[31]

While attending the seminar on civil rights in Norman, LaDonna remembered being struck that the focus centered only on discrimination against African Americans. Not once did she hear anything about Native American problems. She tried to raise this issue but could not seem to find the words to express how she felt. She finally burst into tears of frustration at her failure to verbalize her concerns about Native Americans to the group.[32] She and Fred had always worked so closely that they spoke as one; unfortunately for LaDonna it was with Fred's voice. With him not there, LaDonna realized that if she wanted to make people understand Indian problems she would have to find her own voice. She still saw herself as a stoic Indian girl and had grown comfortable with Fred acting as their voice and she as their intuition.[33] Over time and with a lot of practice, she became more comfortable speaking to groups of people. The emotion and frustration that caused LaDonna to burst into tears on more than one occasion ultimately became an asset after she learned to channel her strong feelings into action.

The visibility of LaDonna in Fred's work, such as her attendance at the civil rights seminar and her presence on the senate floor, and her campaigning continued to draw

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[31]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September, 2001.

[32]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 9.

[33]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

attention from supporters as well as critics. However, the criticism regarding her visibility in his career at the state level paled in comparison to what they faced in his bid for the United States Senate. Some of the old guard from the Robert S. Kerr camp told Fred there was "too much LaDonna" in his campaign.[34] When Fred gave speeches he typically said, "LaDonna and I did such and such"or "LaDonna and I think this or that." To him and LaDonna this seemed a logical outgrowth of their close relationship; they shared so much that it became second nature for Fred to include her in his speeches.[35] Both Fred and LaDonna ignored the criticism and ultimately helped change the role of political wives in the United States. Despite the objection by some that LaDonna played too big a role in Fred's political career, others praised their teamwork. One newspaper commented, "Even in a town where husband and wife teams are no novelty, the young Fred Harrises (both only 34) stand out as one of the smoothest working combinations to come along."[36]

On the surface, LaDonna did in many ways appear to be a traditional wife. Shortly after Fred became a United States senator, LaDonna criticized congressional wives who were absent from campaign functions: "If she's campaigning with him, if she's standing right back of him, if she's sharing with him, then she's being a real wife. That's what I am and am going to continue to be."[37] Her daughters, Kathryn and Laura, were flabbergasted years later when they came across an old interview in which their mother said she did not

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[34]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 10.

[35]Ibid.

[36]"Sooner Wife Wows Them," *Wichita Eagle*, 20 March 1965, p. 6 B.

[37]Wauhillau La Hay, "Wife Shares Political Triumph," *New York World Telegram and Sun*, 8 January 1965.

help her husband make any decisions and that she just supported him. Laughingly, LaDonna explained, "I was smart enough to know what the general public expected of me at that time." Privately, LaDonna Harris was anything but a traditional wife. Described as "serious and goal oriented" by one friend, it became apparent to many early on that she had no intention of being a stay-at-home wife and mother. In fact, some of her Lawton peers even wondered how the Harris children would turn out given their mother's flurry of political activity.[38] What appeared to be the embodiment of the traditional role of homemaker as a wife and mother was only that, an appearance. Both Fred and LaDonna Harris and those who knew them best in this critical period have described their marriage as a full partnership in every sense of the word.[39] LaDonna became crucial to Fred's career, as he would to hers.

When Fred and LaDonna moved from Lawton to Virginia to be near the nation's capital in the mid 1960s, they were catapulted into a very different world than the one they left behind. Suddenly, they found themselves socializing with President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson. They became good friends with their neighbors, Senator Robert Kennedy and his wife, Ethel, after LaDonna met Ethel at a Senate Ladies Club function. Right after they were introduced, Ethel said to LaDonna, "Kid, stay with me. I hardly know any of these people."[40] Fred believed that LaDonna's warm personality

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[38]Aulena Gibson, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

[39]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001; Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001; Beverly Saffa Stapleton, Interview with the author, 23 September 2001.

[40]Fred R. Harris, *Potomac Fever*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 121-122

attracted Ethel and the two very quickly became good friends.[41] Fred and LaDonna also made friends with Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his wife Muriel as well as Senator Walter Mondale from Minnesota and his wife Joan. Fred and LaDonna soon were socializing with a veritable who's who of Washington politics. One journalist described Fred Harris as "the only person in Washington who could have breakfast with Lyndon Johnson, lunch with Hubert Humphrey, and dinner with Robert Kennedy."[42]

Socializing aside, Fred faced many demands as he settled into being a senator. LaDonna also confronted a new set of expectations as the wife of a junior senator. She had three children to raise and at times felt unprepared for the expectations of congressional wives. By this point in her life, LaDonna wanted to work on behalf of Native American rights, not attend social functions with other congressional wives.[43] She still struggled to verbalize her passionate feelings about helping Native Americans, and she and Fred both adapted to their life in the nation's capital.

Senator Harris began making a name for himself at a national level as he continued his support of civil rights. After a series of race riots in the summer of 1967, he proposed the establishment of a commission on civil strife. President Lyndon Johnson liked the idea and decided to create such a commission and called Fred at home to give him the news just prior to making the announcement on national television. President Johnson told Fred that he had not only decided to create the commission, later known as the Kerner

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[41]Ibid, 122.

[42]Ibid, 104.

[43]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

Commission, but that he wanted Fred to serve on it. This afforded a considerable opportunity to the young junior senator. Recognizing this, the president encouraged Fred to remember that he was a "Johnson man." In the colorful fashion that made the outspoken president from Texas notorious, Johnson said that if Fred forgot their friendship he would take out his pocket knife and cut off his "pecker."[44] The president followed up his threat by saying that being from Oklahoma, he figured Fred understood that kind of language.[45] Just a few years after arriving in the nation's capital, Fred and LaDonna had indeed come a long, long way from Walters, Oklahoma. While President Johnson could be intimidating, Fred established a good relationship with him and this, in turn, gave Fred and LaDonna a receptive audience to voice their concerns about providing more opportunities for Native Americans.

As Senator Harris became increasingly well known for his work in the area of Native American issues, he drew enormously from the experiences of his wife. As one newspaper succinctly put it, "her heritage is helpful."[46] Early in their relationship Fred learned about Comanche culture and beliefs. He even learned to speak some of the language, which later became a way in which he and LaDonna could communicate privately in a public setting. One friend from Lawton recalled teasing Fred about being more Indian than LaDonna because he expressed such interest in Native Americans and

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[44]Harris, *Potomac Fever*, p. 108.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Jean Simpson, "Sooner Senator's Comanche Spouse Captivates Capital Crowd," *The Tulsa Tribune*, 27 March 1965, p. 2.

would often break out in a Comanche song while driving.[47] In fact, some people believed Fred Harris was Native American. People often asked LaDonna what tribe Fred belonged to, and when she replied that Fred was not Native American, some actually argued with her.[48]

LaDonna Harris shared equally in Fred's concern over problems facing Native Americans and, in fact, opened his eyes to many of these problems. For her the issue was more personal, and as such it became the focal point of her life's work. The time LaDonna spent watching African Americans fighting for civil rights in Norman and her later efforts to help integrate Lawton not only gave her a better understanding of the discrimination she herself had endured, but also motivated her to expose the problems facing Native Americans.[49]

By the mid 1960s when LaDonna determined to enlighten policy makers and the public about the problems facing Native Americans, one of the biggest questions concerning Native Americans was the extent to which they could retain their traditional culture and participate in mainstream American opportunities. LaDonna in many ways represented this struggle: she was half white, married to a white man, and a United States senator at that. But she also grew up in a home that stressed traditional Comanche values and culture along with elements of mainstream American mores. LaDonna wanted Native Americans to maintain cultural autonomy and to have greater access to mainstream

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[47]Aulena Gibson, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

[48]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2001, p. 24.

[49]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 202.

economic and social opportunities. The tension between preservation of heritage and opportunities in dominant society later manifested itself in the founding of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity. Although she was once quoted as saying, "Everyone says to me, 'Why can't you keep your culture?' And my response to that is, it's already lost," Harris later maintained her culture has been a vital part of her life since childhood.[50] She expressed frustration that in Oklahoma history classes discussion of Native Americans centered on the Five Civilized Tribes. "I'm Comanche," LaDonna was fond of saying. "Not a Civilized tribe, I'm wild Comanche."[51] Fred, knowing that this overemphasis on the Five Civilized Tribes bothered her, occasionally teased her about taking her to meet some civilized Indians.[52]

The issue of Indian identity, embodied in the tension between participation in mainstream society and cultural autonomy, permeated both government discourse on Indian assistance and the manifestation and articulation of "Indianness" in society at large. The seeming contradiction between maintaining Native American traditions while functioning in dominant society posed a considerable challenge to Indian rights advocates. LaDonna Harris dismissed the idea that a contradiction existed or that Native Americans could not do both. Instead, she involved herself in mainstream politics and community issues while identifying herself as a "wild Comanche" and working for Indian causes.

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[50]Meryle Secrest, "No Vanishing Comanche," *Washington Post*, 15 December 1964, p. B-1. When asked about this quote, LaDonna Harris indicated that she has no recollection of saying that her culture had been lost.

[51]Malvina Stephenson, "They Communicate in Comanche," *Sunday Star*, 15 November 1964.

[52]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

Despite Harris' own conviction that one could exist in both worlds, it indeed posed a tremendous challenge for her to help others do the same. "I was lucky," Harris recalled. "Somehow, I learned to make it in both worlds-- the white and the Indian."[53]

LaDonna's desire to help Native Americans and her involvement with the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies at the University of Oklahoma led her to speak out about the problems facing Native Americans, including having the highest rates of infant mortality, illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty of any group in the United States. LaDonna's determination led her to help organize a conference in the summer of 1965 on Indian opportunity at the University of Oklahoma. Out of this conference came the creation of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO). Approximately 1,500 Oklahomans, both Indians and non Indians, were invited to participate in the initial meeting, and about 500 attended.[54]

Backed from its inception by Senator Fred Harris, OIO gained funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity and became a significant asset in President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Senator Harris's position and the election of LaDonna as the first president of OIO lent a level of visibility to the organization that proved crucial to its success. Yet Senator Harris' position alone did not enable LaDonna to emerge as a respected Indian rights advocate. John O'Hara, Director of the University of Oklahoma Southwest Center for Human Relations, wrote LaDonna suggesting that she be appointed

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[53]LaDonna Harris, Draft of biographical profile, p. 2, Series 1, Box 4, LHC, NAES.

[54]Minutes of the initial meeting of members of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, 7 August 1965, Folder 33, Box 282, Fred R. Harris Collection (hereafter FHC),Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center (hereafter CACRSC), University of Oklahoma (hereafter OU).

in her own right and paid a consulting fee as an expert on Indian problems in Oklahoma. O'Hara explained, "This arrangement would clearly differentiate between your role as an expert in Indian problems working for the OIO and your role as the wife of an United States Senator."[55]

While O'Hara voiced concern that LaDonna establish her role in OIO as separate from her position as Fred's wife, the publicity generated by the involvement of both the senator and LaDonna contributed a higher profile than OIO would have otherwise enjoyed. Moreover, the initial goals of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity were in keeping with federal Indian policy, which encouraged Native Americans to avail themselves of the possibilities in mainstream society. The tension between integration and cultural autonomy that characterized the lives of many Native Americans also manifested itself in the beginning of OIO. The organization struggled to find how it could best serve Native Americans by helping them achieve greater access to mainstream opportunities.

Implicit from the very beginning in the goals of OIO were the competing impulses of cultural preservation and integration. The stated purpose of the creation of OIO was as follows:

> To improve social and economic opportunities of Oklahoma and American Indians and draw them more fully into the Oklahoma and American economy and culture; to preserve and perpetuate the history and heritage of Oklahoman and American Indians; and to promote brotherhood and harmonious human relations and communication among all Oklahomans

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[55]John B. O'Hara to LaDonna Harris, 16 September 1965, Folder 7, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

and Americans.[56]

While the constitution of OIO proclaimed a commitment to integrate Indians into the mainstream as well as to preserve Native American culture, the two objectives seemed difficult to reconcile. In its infancy OIO espoused an agenda which on the surface smacked of assimilation, and in the midst of a radical period of social change appeared quite conservative in doctrine and practice. In order to understand why LaDonna Harris and the organization she established seemed to embrace both assimilation and the retention of native culture requires examination of the legacy of federal Indian policy.

Assimilation, the cornerstone of federal Indian policy since the early nineteenth century, engendered tremendous problems for Native Americans. The 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, which ended the collective ownership of tribal land in an effort to turn Native Americans into yeoman farmers, created a cycle of poverty and a loss of community that shaped much of the twentieth century Native American experience. In the forty years following the implementation of the Dawes Act, Native Americans collectively lost about 65 percent of their land. Assimilation continued to guide federal policy toward Native Americans after World War II. Termination, a policy laid out in the late1940s and 1950s during the administrations of Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, set the tone of federal Indian policy that lasted until the 1970s. The termination of numerous Indian tribes and services ensued from the assumption that Native Americans would benefit from assimilation into mainstream society. Both the

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[56]Constitution and by-laws of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, Inc., Folder 5, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

Truman and Eisenhower administrations believed that getting rid of assistance programs, which contributed to the special status and lingering dependency of Native Americans, constituted the best way to help Indians enter into society.[57] Despite whatever good intentions may have lurked behind the implementation of termination policy, the end result proved terribly detrimental to Native Americans. They plunged further into poverty as they lost numerous services which were vital to their survival. Relocation, another component of termination, provided federal money to help relocate poor Indians in rural areas to metropolitan areas where, in theory, they had greater job opportunities. Instead, it largely created a growing urban population of poor Native Americans who found themselves further alienated from their cultural traditions.

The tension between assimilation and a desire for cultural autonomy became stronger as dissatisfaction with termination policy grew, and by the mid 1960s the policy met with increasing criticism. Both Indians and non-Indians recognized that existing agencies failed to meet the needs of Indians. Self-determination, which has characterized federal Indian policy since the early 1970s, drew support because of the dawning awareness that Indians needed more autonomy over programs and policies which directly affected them. LaDonna Harris is a product of both termination and self-determination policy, and the growth of her activism can best be understood within the context of the shift in federal Indian policy from the former to the latter. The belief that Indians should be more directly involved in the agencies and programs designed to help them facilitated the founding of organizations like Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity.

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[57]Fixico, *Termination and Relocation.*

While the constitution of OIO stressed its commitment to drawing Indians "more fully into the Oklahoman and American economy," as well as to "preserve and perpetuate" their culture, this proved a difficult task.[58] Some Native Americans feared they faced more empty promises from whites and thought not enough was being done to preserve Indian identity, while others saw attempts at establishing "Indian" programs as detrimental to the goals of full participation in the mainstream. For instance, one letter to Fred Harris, commenting on the efforts of LaDonna to help establish an Indian college, stressed the need for Indians to assimilate into the mainstream by saying:

> We cannot afford the time to study dead languages... I have never regretted my grandfather's decision to discard an old culture for American. I am second generation with absolutely no vestige of the old culture. I have never felt any loss.[59]

The minutes from the initial meeting of OIO convey another aspect of this conflict. In the beginning the organization contemplated whether or not the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) should be asked to oversee the running of OIO. One member said that in order for the program to be successful, "We need the advice of these experts from the BIA." This individual went on to add that if the BIA ran the program it would "move faster because they know the Indians and their needs."[60] Only a few years later LaDonna Harris lambasted the BIA as "one of the major problems Indians have."[61] Reflecting back

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[58] Constitution and by-laws of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, Inc., Folder 5, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[59]D. L. Monchil to Fred Harris, 5 October 1965, Folder 7, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[60]Meeting of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, University of Oklahoma, 14 June 1965, Folder 33, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[61]Hal Gulliver, "LaDonna Harris," *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 November 1971, p. 4-A,

on this period, she recalled that since childhood she had maintained a negative image of the BIA. When she first tried to articulate the problems facing Native Americans to a group at the Southwest Center for Human Relations, someone told her that there were no Indian problems in Oklahoma because the BIA took care of them.[62] So frustrated that she burst into tears, Harris later explained that the BIA controlled everything from Indian housing to health care to education. OIO tried to change this so that Indians controlled their own lives.[63]

While Harris viewed the BIA as operating like a colonial government, others in the OIO organization took a very different view.[64] Iola (Taylor) Hayden, one of the founding members of OIO as well as the executive director, described the BIA in a more positive light. Hayden, who grew up in Lawton and attended Fort Sill Indian School, taught at a BIA school before working for OIO. She said that despite problems of incompetency, which she added is something inherent in most bureaucracies and not just the BIA, her experiences were more positive then negative. Despite the poor education she received at the Fort Sill Indian School, she did not recall being mistreated. Instead she compared the experience to belonging to a large family.[65]

While the OIO board ruled out asking the BIA for their direct involvement, they opted to reserve the right to consult them when necessary. Significantly, the meeting then

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[62]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 16.

[63]Ibid.

[64] Ibid., p. 13-14.

[65]Iola Hayden, Interview with the author, 27 March 2001.

turned to a discussion of the most pressing problems among Indians that needed to be addressed. One member voiced a concern about Indians who had the opportunity to work, but did not want to. He then asked, "What do we do about those who don't want to work but would rather live on welfare?" To which LaDonna Harris replied, "You have to show them what an advancement it is to make money."[66] This exchange goes to the heart of problems facing Native Americans and the implicit assumption that mainstream white culture is superior. The tension between the dominant society and Indian culture underscored much of the debate on Indian issues in this period. It proved a difficult balancing act to assess the extent to which Indians could both participate in the mainstream and maintain their traditional culture and customs.

Indians in Oklahoma faced an even more complicated situation than did many Indians living elsewhere because they did not live on reservations and the BIA largely failed to offer assistance to Indians not living on reservation land. As one author explained:

> Because neither the federal nor state government recognized reservations per se, Oklahoma Indians participated as minorities in county and city community action programs. Here, the social and political aspects of 'being Indian' in Oklahoman society collided.[67]

Ironically, the government's longstanding commitment to assimilation proved a double-edged sword to non-reservation Indians because it precluded them from partaking in many

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[66]Meeting of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, University of Oklahoma, 14 June 1965, Folder 33, Box 282, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[67]Daniel M. Cobb, "The Last Indian War: Indian Community Action in the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, 1964-1969," Masters thesis, University of Wyoming, 1998, 117.

of the services offered by the BIA. In theory, the lack of reservations in Oklahoma furthered the ultimate goal of the government to integrate Indians into the mainstream and do away with the need for the Bureau all together. Recognizing this, Senator Harris, articulated this dichotomy in his "American Indians– New Destiny" speech before Congress. He stressed the positive relationship between assimilation goals and the non-reservation status of Oklahoma Indians. He argued, "It has been much easier for Oklahoma Indians to become a part of the total community in Oklahoma than it has in reservation States." He supported his claim by pointing out that Oklahoma had in fact produced "Indian humorists, prima ballerinas, United States Senator's wives, and business executives."[68] Despite Senator Harris' humor and optimism about the benefits of non-reservation status in relation to goals of integration, the ambiguous status of Indians in Oklahoma allowed many to slip through the cracks.

In an attempt to reach these Indians, OIO organized Community Action Programs to inform Indians about services available to them and to encourage their active involvement in bettering their communities. Central to the philosophical approach behind these campaigns lay the recognition that the participation of Indians themselves was crucial to their success. As LaDonna Harris pointed out, "We have been doing things *to* Indians and *for* Indians, rather than *with* Indians."[69] A letter to Iola Taylor, Executive Director of OIO from Virgil Harrington, the Area Director of the BIA, praised their work,

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[68]Fred Harris, "American Indians– New Destiny," Congressional Record– Senate, 21 April 1966, p. 8310.

[69] Statement of Mrs. Fred R. Harris before the Education and Labor Committee, *Congressional Record,* 13 July 1967, Folder 24, Box 283, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

saying, "your organization is one that has moved into new fields of Indian participation that is contributing much progress toward the goal of full assimilation into the mainstream of society of our Oklahoma Indians."[70]

Yet just a few months later, in the summer of 1967, OIO found itself in a hot bed of controversy. Despite support for OIO's efforts to set up community action programs and encouragement from the Johnson Administration, criticism erupted from a number of sources, as a growing tension emerged between tribal governments and OIO over control of funds and communities. At the heart of this tension lay fundamental issues about what constituted "Indianness." For instance, some of the board members of OIO called for the resignation of Executive Director Iola Taylor, accusing her of being hostile toward members of the staff, of exerting unbridled power, and using arbitrary tactics in hiring and firing. They called her "anti-pow-wow, anti-church, anti-Indian, and anti-BIA."[71] The fact that Taylor's critics characterized her in such contrasting terms provides insight into competing notions of Indian identity. Ultimately Taylor remained in office, but concern over this tension lingered. According to one author, "The fear that power struggles might detract from OIO's successes in generating community action was well-founded."[72] While the organization had been praised for its efforts to draw Indians into the mainstream, competition over who would oversee the dispersal of funds and the Community Action

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[70]Letter to Iola Taylor from Virgil Harrington, 27 April 1967, Folder 3, Box 283, FRC, CACRSC, OU. Iola Taylor later changed her name to Iola Hayden.

[71]OIO Special Committee Meeting, 25 July 1967, OIO Corporation Book n. 1, Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity , Norman, Oklahoma.

[72]Cobb, "The Last Indian War, 121.

Programs led to an onslaught of bickering and criticism. The tension between assimilation and cultural autonomy, illustrated by conflicting notions of what constituted Indianness, further exacerbated these power struggles. Both tribal leaders and proponents of the BIA criticized OIO, fearing it had gained too much power. In addition, the Oklahoma Community Action Program Directors Association "clamored against OIO for discouraging Indian participation in their programs."[73]

Both the internal and external criticisms of OIO demonstrated the issues at stake on the larger scale of federal Indian policy. The wider movement underway to secure civil rights for minorities provided some benefits to Native Americans, but it also led many to see them as just another minority, rather than as having a unique relationship to the federal government by virtue of centuries of treaty agreements. A further complication existed in competing notions of Indianness. As policy under the Johnson and Nixon administrations shifted toward self-determination, OIO had a significant role to play in Oklahoma. Yet, divisions continued over jurisdiction, identity, and organizational control. As controversy surrounding OIO continued, LaDonna Harris became increasingly swept up in national politics. The day to day oversight of OIO fell to Executive Director Iola Hayden, as did much of the criticism of the organization, while the Fred and LaDonna Harris found themselves operating in a wider political arena. Fed's career kept him in Washington much of the time and LaDonna found new opportunities to work on behalf of Native Americans at the national level.

Stereotypes of Native Americans further exacerbated the struggle to reconcile

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[73]Ibid., 122.

participation in dominant society with the preservation of cultural identity. At the same time as the founder of OIO clung to her heritage and promoted the entrance of Indians into the mainstream, LaDonna Harris often faced an interested, but often ill-informed audience. An article tellingly entitled, "LaDonna Harris May be Answer to TV Myth," related an anecdote about the first time Fred and LaDonna met Senator Robert Kennedy's five year old daughter, Kerry. The young girl asked LaDonna what it was like to live in a tent. LaDonna assured her that Indians did not live in tents anymore, and the girl's mother, Ethel Kennedy, responded by jokingly telling her not to disillusion the child. LaDonna insisted that she wanted Kerry to have an accurate understanding of what Indians were like, to which Kerry responded by asking if she shot a bow and arrow.[74] While the misconceptions of a child are understandable, the story provides insight into the simultaneous ignorance and fascination that characterized much of America's perceptions of Native Americans. A lack of understanding about Native Americans did not stop with children. In fact, a representative from one of the most well-respected museums in the United States, the Smithsonian Institution, met with LaDonna about sponsoring a Native American heritage project and, in the course of the conversation, asked her if Indians could vote.[75]

Ignorance about the status and culture of Native Americans continued to pose a significant obstacle in the struggle to improve opportunities for Indians. In fact, Fred

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[74]Malvina Stephenson, "LaDonna Harris May Be Answer to TV Myth," *Tulsa Daily World*, 18 May 1965, p. 10.

[75]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September, 2001.

Harris often told people that when LaDonna first voiced her desire to interest people in Indian problems, he responded: "What Indian problems? I've lived all my life among Indians and the only Indian problem I know of is the one I married."[76] In fact, he made these comments in a speech to his fellow United States senators in 1966. Explaining the context of such remarks, the former senator said that this parodied a common response to his and LaDonna's raising the issue of problems facing Native Americans. For instance, a friend of Fred Harris from Oklahoma once told Fred he had gone to school with lots of Indians and they did not seem to him to have any problems. When Fred asked his friend what had happened to those Indian classmates, his friend responded that he was not sure but that he did not think any of them had graduated from high school.[77] Drawing on conversations such as this one, Fred utilized humor as a way to identify with people and put them at ease before turning to the sober facts surrounding the conditions of Native Americans. While today such comments would likely be construed as racist and sexist, in the mid-1960s it allowed Senator Harris to identify with both his peers and his constituents by first relating to their ignorance before educating them on Indian issues. Still, the fact that employing stereotypes of Native Americans seemed a useful tool in educating Congress and the American public speaks volumes.

This use of humor to combat ignorance helps explain why many of his peers in Congress considered Fred Harris to be an expert on Indian issues, and why he

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[76]Fred Harris, "American Indians– New Destiny," *Congressional Record– Senate*, 21 April 1966, p. 8311.

[77]Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

characterized himself as a "self-admitted expert on Comanche Indian history and culture," yet also joked with the media about his wife's background.[78] He commented at times that LaDonna was "fierce and warlike, but I domesticated her."[79] Fred also told one reporter, "When a pretty Indian girl with brains leaves the reservation, watch out!" because "anything can happen."[80] The fact that LaDonna never lived on a reservation and came from a non-reservation state did not prevent Fred from utilizing stereotypes of Native Americans as a public relations tool. He did, however, see them as a way of poking fun at the lack of knowledge about Native Americans rather than with the intention of simply perpetuating stereotypes and ignorance. Nevertheless, the old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions comes to mind.

While this sort of lighthearted commentary may have inspired a few laughs, the ramifications were indeed more significant. Remarks such as these evoked a vivid image in an era of social and political upheaval. The message seemed clear: Indians were not a threat. Moreover, they could be reformed and remade in the image of the white man. So long as assimilation or more appropriately, integration of Native Americans into the mainstream, remained the ultimate goal, the advocacy of Indian rights did not pose a threat. On the surface, Fred and LaDonna's relationship provided the ultimate metaphor for assimilation. She had married a white man, and as the wife of a United States senator

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[78]Fred Harris, "American Indians– New Destiny," *Congressional Record– Senate*, 21 April 1966, p. 8311.

[79]Tom Malone, "Wife Helps Harris on the Warpath," Unidentified Newspaper, Folder 9, Box 286, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[80]"Sooner Senator's Wife Wows Them," *The Wichita Eagle*, 20 March 1965, p. 6B.

represented the epitome of the American dream, right down to their three children and suburban Virginia home located just a few doors down from Robert and Ethel Kennedy's house. Yet LaDonna Harris strongly rejected the notion of assimilation, maintaining that her Comanche values defined her and her life's work.[81]

Regardless of LaDonna Harris' own feelings about assimilation, society in the 1960s did not readily accept or even understand such sentiments. The media interest in LaDonna Harris, the comments about her high cheekbones, the headlines that drew on stereotypes of Native Americans and even to some extent the jokes made by Fred Harris all revealed that underneath the spirit of reform lay an uneasiness about race relations. In the 1960s reform generated conflict, and while the government paid lip service to improving the condition of Native Americans, the assumption that improvement and assimilation were one and the same left little consideration for an alternative view of Native Americans. The "good" Indian or the "progressive" Indian was the one who entered into the mainstream, shedding his or her cultural baggage along the way. Moreover, as a politician from conservative Oklahoma, Fred's use of humor about LaDonna's heritage may have reassured the 'good ole boys' network that neither he nor his wife were a threat to their power structure. Ultimately, both Fred and LaDonna Harris

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[81]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001. It is important to note that LaDonna Harris' own definition of assimilation means to no longer exist. For her, assimilation into mainstream society would be to give up her existence as a Comanche Indian. While there are certainly other ways to define assimilation, out of respect for Ms. Harris' beliefs and because the word assimilation is almost always used in a derogatory manner, the use of the word has been avoided where ever possible. Instead, integration has been used to describe attempts to help Native Americans participate in mainstream society. In places where the assimilation is used by the author it signifies only the participation in mainstream society and is not intended to imply wholesale loss or abandonment of culture.

proved too liberal and indeed too radical for their Oklahoma constituents. Still, the success of Fred and LaDonna at the national level hinged, at least in part, on their insistence that Indians be encouraged to participate in the mainstream society and economy.

As a prominent interracial couple, the image put forth by Fred and LaDonna had significant implications for how society perceived them. Few Indians enjoyed both the high profile and unthreatening role that LaDonna Harris held at the national level during the1960s. It is unlikely she would have reached the audience she did and met with such an enthusiastic response by government officials had her rhetoric had not been in keeping with the ultimate goal of the federal government to integrate Indians. As the epitome of the "good citizen Indian," LaDonna represented a number of positive attributes to the nation. First, she symbolized the beneficial aspects of assimilation as a Native American who had successfully become a part of mainstream society. Second, Harris acted as an advocate for Indians without appearing radical, especially in comparison to the young activists in the American Indian Movement. The pictures of LaDonna that appeared in newspapers and magazines during this period very clearly visually identified her as belonging to the mainstream. Finally, in addition to being a "model" Indian, she also fulfilled the expectations of a congressional wife in a way that facilitated a positive image of both her and Fred.

Their public relationship clearly had important ramifications for both their careers and the Indian advocacy they supported. Hailed early on as a great team, Fred and LaDonna Harris projected a united front that seemed impossible to top. One paper

described LaDonna as a "unique Senatorial asset."[82] She frequently drew praise for helping Fred with his career, enabling her to move forward with her own activism without appearing to threaten her husband.[83] She represented both the ideal wife and a positive image of the assimilated Indian. As one reporter indicated, "Washington must be changing its mind about the Comanche Indian."[84] Here again, while the message in the article paid a compliment to LaDonna on the surface, the premise from which it originated smacked of racially distorted stereotypes of Native Americans. Despite having to contend with such stereotypes, LaDonna managed to use socially constructed notions of both Indianness and femininity to her advantage. The doting and supportive image of LaDonna Harris afforded a certain legitimacy to her own entrance into the political world in the unofficial, but ultimately highly effective role of congressional wife. Furthermore, her public relationship with Fred and the way in which his prominence and her "Indianness" served to reinforce the status and effectiveness of the other are crucial components to their contributions to Indian rights advocacy. She helped legitimize his role as an expert on the problems of Native Americans, but he provided "the muscle behind her convictions."[85] In a period when race relations teetered precariously and radicalism permeated the mainstream, the rise of LaDonna Harris to national prominence illustrates the centrality of

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[82]Jean Simpson, "Sooner Senator's Comanche Spouse Captivates Capital Crowd," *The Tulsa Tribune*, 27 March 1965, p. 2.

[83]"LaDonna Harris Loves Role of Key Aid to Senator," *Oklahoma Journal*, 10 September 1965, p. 5.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Charles Mangel, "Warpaint for the Senator's Wife," *Look*, 4 April 1967, p. 24.

the image she projected to the success of her advocacy. She used her position to gain attention and support for her own work to better the conditions and opportunities of Indians.

Though not an elected official, LaDonna Harris indeed occupied a unique role in the nation's capital. Because her advocacy was tied so intimately with that of her husband's, they reinforced each other's work. People considered Fred an expert on Indian issues, in part, because of his marriage to an Indian. In an address to Congress on Indian policy, Representative Alan Simpson from Wyoming complimented Fred on his marriage to LaDonna: "Although I cannot command a lovely Comanche wife, I can say that my Uncle Dick married a Shoshone Indian. So I can at least I can say that I have an Indian relative."[86] This statement illustrates a glimmer of the emerging emphasis on identity politics and, ultimately, the advent of the politically correct. Predicated on the dawning assumption that to understand fully or identify with the problems of a particular group one must be a member or have intimate knowledge of members of that group, this idea laid the foundation for much of our current understanding of cultural, ethnic, and gender identity.

The language employed by members of Congress and society at large reinforced this growing preoccupation with identity politics. Referring to LaDonna Harris and other Indians as "being on the warpath," "putting on their warpaint," and "holding pow-wows" (instead of meetings) capitalized on stereotypes of Native Americans. Certainly racist by today's politically correct standards, it is important to point out that much of this

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[86]Fred Harris, "American Indians– New Destiny," Congressional Record– Senate, 21 April 1966, p. 8313.

vernacular signified an earnest effort by non-Indians to relate to Indians. Just as Fred Harris used humor to educate the public and his congressional peers about problems facing Native Americans, many newspapers nurtured a serious desire to educate as well. For instance, the article about LaDonna Harris entitled "Warpaint for the Senator's Wife" articulated a litany of problems confronting Native Americans and praised Harris' efforts on their behalf.[87] On the one hand, this language smacks of racism and distorted views of Indians. On the other, the purpose does not seem to have been merely to mock Indians. Beneath headlines such as "Senator's Wife on Warpath" were stories which promoted the cause of Indian issues, rather than simply an attempt to denigrate and dismiss them. In short, embedded in the use of racist stereotypes also lies the effort to identify with Native Americans. That said, the racist imagery of such headlines cannot be ignored. The fact remains that the permissibility of depicting this image of Native Americans hinged on a comfortably ignorant fascination with the quaintness of Indians.

That Native Americans were viewed as relics of the past rather than a group in need of serious consideration explains some of the depictions of LaDonna and other Indians. For even during this same time-fame of the late1960s, it would have been unacceptable to see a comparable newspaper headline about African American, regardless of how supportive the story underneath might have been. Yet because of the historically ambiguous status of Native Americans, a different standard existed. Both literally and figuratively, Native Americans held a mascot-like status in the United States. Journalists no doubt viewed their depictions of the wife of a prominent senator as "going on the

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[87] Charles Mangel, "Warpaint for the Senator's Wife," *Look*, 4 April 1967, p. 24.

warpath" as merely a cute play on words.

While LaDonna endured stereotyping as a Native American, her heritage also helped legitimize Fred's status as an expert on Indians just as his position as a United States senator aided her in achieving an extraordinary level of national prominence. In just a few years LaDonna became a nationally known and respected authority on Native Americans. One magazine article described LaDonna Harris as "tough, smart, angry," and went on to say, "From that anger may grow a national realization that Indians should no longer be considered wards of the nation, but, instead, human beings with very human, basic problems."[88] Articles in national magazines such as this one further propelled LaDonna Harris into the national spotlight and brought the condition of Native Americans to the attention of those in power and the general public.

LaDonna Harris's status as a respected leader on Indian issues continued to grow so that in many ways she ultimately surpassed Fred in both prominence and effectiveness in advocating reforming Indian rights and government legislation. As LaDonna rose in national stature, she at times seemed the biggest competition Fred faced. In fact, in 1967 Ernest Woods, Area Coordinator of the Oklahoma Community Action Program, wrote to Fred Harris praising LaDonna and saying: "Oklahoma is indeed fortunate to have Mrs. Harris, as a virtual third United States Senator."[89] And Robert Kennedy characterized

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[88] Charles Mangel, "Warpaint for the Senator's Wife," *Look*, 4 April 1967, p. 24.

[89]Ernest Woods to Fred Harris, 1 May 1967, emphasis original, Folder 1, Box 68, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

LaDonna as "one of the most ardent champions of justice for the American Indian."[90]

Because of LaDonna's work and prominent status, on July 13, 1967, she testified before the Education and Labor Committee of the United States House of Representatives about the effectiveness of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Oklahoma. She praised OEO, saying she could not overemphasize how important the organization had been in bettering the lives of Oklahoma Indians. LaDonna spoke highly of President Johnson's efforts, stating his War on Poverty "offers the poor the chance to win the struggle to overcome feelings of lack of self-confidence and the hopelessness of poverty."[91] She described OEO as "truly the 'self reliance program'" and said she was "unable to think of the War on Poverty in the abstract." Rather, she thought of all those whose lives were improved through the various programs funded by OEO.[92]

In fact, Fred Harris described this as the major difference between his and LaDonna's approach toward Native American problems. When he heard about a particular issue he tried to figure out what sort of legislation could be passed to remedy the situation. LaDonna, on the other hand, focused on helping individuals who suffered from the problem.[93] LaDonna Harris's compassion for people is one of the things that stands out in the minds of those who have known her. Her empathy for others lent a sincerity to her

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[90]Statement of Robert Kennedy about the testimony of Mrs. Harris on behalf of the American Indian, 13 July 1967, *Congressional record– Senate*, p. 9581.

[91]Statement of Mrs. Fred R. Harris before the Education and Labor Committee, *Congressional Record*, 13 July 1967, Folder 24, Box 283, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

advocacy that was often lacking in the highly political and sometimes disingenuous world of Washington, D.C.

In a relatively short amount of time LaDonna Harris went from being a small town girl from Walters, Oklahoma to testifying before Congress as an expert on Native American problems in Oklahoma. This marked only the beginning, however, for the work that continues to define her. While friends from Lawton never saw LaDonna as a traditional housewife and while Washington newspapers realized she was no "tea party congressional wife," she did in fact utilize assumptions about traditional female roles to affect change for Native Americans as well as women.[94] When she and Fred first arrived in the capital she remembered thinking she would go crazy folding bandages for the Red Cross along with other congressional wives, which was the type of civic service expected and encouraged for political wives. In just a few short years no one would expect to see LaDonna Harris folding bandages or organizing tea parties. She had become a respected leader in her own right. She accomplished this by expanding assumptions about the traditional role of women rather then directly challenging them. The word feminism had not yet crept into LaDonna's vocabulary. That would come later.

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[94]Dan Blackburn, "LaDonna Harris is a Senate Wife with More on Her Mind than Mid-Afternoon Teas," *The Washington Post/Potomac* 24 May 1970, p. 26.

Chapter Two: An Activist in Her Own Right

I always saw LaDonna as a sort of Eleanor Roosevelt.[1]

- Fred Harris

LaDonna Harris's assent to activism at the national level continued in the late 1960s as she and Fred spent more and more of their time in Washington, D.C. They interacted in high profile social circles and became fixtures in capital politics. Yet, as 1968 rolled around, the nation as well as LaDonna Harris saw numerous changes. The year 1968 proved a volatile year in the United States. The Vietnam War lost significant support, as did President Johnson, after the Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre exposed the awful truth that the war was far from over and far from humane.[2] In March of 1968 President Johnson decided not to seek re-election. The following month, on April 4, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the most widely known and respected leader of the civil rights movement, was assassinated. Two months later, the Harris's good friend Robert Kennedy fell to the same fate as King, dying on the campaign trail during his bid for the Democratic nomination for president. In that same year the civil rights movement became more radical and organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) expelled all of its white members. A young generation of African Americans expressed disenchantment with the non-violent approach to civil rights and instead stressed black power and black pride. Similarly, a young generation of Native

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[1]Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

[2]For a good overview of the Vietnam War see David L. Anderson, *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993).

Americans also began talking about red power and voiced profound disgust with the federal government's management of Indian affairs and started the American Indian Movement (AIM).[3]

A different type of change occurred for LaDonna Harris in 1968 as she moved further into mainstream national politics. This year witnessed two significant developments in the activism of Harris. First, she became more involved in women's issues through the War on Poverty. Second, her appointment to the National Council on Indian Opportunity brought national recognition for her work on behalf of Indians. These two aspects of Harris' activism for women and for Native Americans grew simultaneously during this period and converged, foreshadowing LaDonna's legacy as a human rights advocate rather than simply an advocate for one group. Though she at times employed elements of identity politics as a matter of political expediency, LaDonna Harris supported the betterment of all people who suffered from discrimination.

Not knowing that Johnson would soon decide not to seek re-election, LaDonna resigned as president of OIO in January of 1968 to serve as chair of the National Women's Advisory Council on the War on Poverty.[4] While she had become a respected leader in the struggle to provide educational and economic opportunities for Indians, her work fit within the framework of women's roles in the War on Poverty, a logical extension of the

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[3]For a good overview of the radical movements in the 1960s see, Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[4]Minutes from OIO meeting, 20 January 1968, OIO Corporation Book, n. 1, Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, Norman, Oklahoma. Upon the resignation of Mrs. Harris, the board of OIO voted to name her honorary president for life.

role women have historically played in politics and social reform. Concern over education, poverty, and healthcare via Community Action Programs remained acceptable goals for women reformers. As wives and mothers and moral guardians of the home, it made sense for women to concern themselves with reform that affected the family. Despite the emergence of the feminist movement in the mid 1960s, the main focus of reform as it related to women in the Great Society continued to stress the gendered role women should play.

The role of women in the War on Poverty became a valuable part of the Johnson administration's commitment to building the Great Society. One report suggested women could "be the representatives of the invisible poor" and argued that "women should use their particular sensitivity and particular expertise in bringing about changes between human beings in the problem of racism."[5] It encouraged them to start in their hometowns and get out and see for themselves the destructiveness of poverty. The report admonished women not to criticize welfare mothers until they had actually talked with some and seen how they lived. Another publication urged them not to "indulge in idle gossip, not to pass along unverified rumor... to build up, not tare [sic] down."[6] Issues that affected the well-being of families and communities such as education, poverty, housing, healthcare, sanitation, the well-being of children, and even racism came under the umbrella of "female

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[5]"Washington Event Involves Women in the War on Poverty," *The Bridge* (Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federations), September 1968, Folder 22, Box 285, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[6]"What One Woman Can Do ... About Poverty," (A few ideas collected at the May 15-17 War on Poverty meeting), *National Council of Women of the United States Bulletin*, June 1968, Folder 22, Box 285, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

concerns." Within this context, LaDonna Harris exemplified the positive image of women's entrance into the world of reform and politics. Ultimately, it was because she embraced and expanded this role that she achieved such success as a nationally recognized advocate of Native American and women's rights.

Her work with the National Women's Advisory Council on the War on Poverty brought Harris into contact with an aspect of reform that stressed the particular role women should play in government and society. The focus on what women could do *as women* yielded to a liberal feminist strategy that emphasized working within existing social and political structures. The idea that women possessed different sensibilities than men and thus engaged in politics and reform from a different perspective informed the kind of liberal feminism that characterized the activism of LaDonna Harris. For instance, in one interview she expressed her belief that women were better qualified to deal with certain issues because of their gender saying, "It's easier for women to cross racial and political lines. We tend to see the woman first, then her color, and then her party."[7] The notion that women shared common attributes which uniquely qualified them to facilitate certain types of change heightened with the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s.

The feminist movement gained momentum and grew increasingly radical after 1968 and, in one way or another, permeated the consciousness of women like LaDonna Harris. The belief that women had historically been denied access to certain economic and educational opportunities because of their sex became a cornerstone of feminist ideology. Historians argue that the discourse of equality, embodied in the social movements of the

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[7]"LaDonna Harris Indian Powerhouse," *Playboy*, v. 19, n. 2, 2 February 1972, p. 178.

1960s, influenced many women who found themselves in subordinate roles within the very movements that espoused the rhetoric of equality.[8] By no means a radical feminist, LaDonna Harris did not attempt to subvert the existing constructs of gender relations. She did, however, exemplify the attributes of liberal feminism in that she recognized the particular ways in which women could band together to effect change. She also made a conscious effort to play whatever role society expected of her in order to accomplish her goals. Harris grew progressively aware of social limitations placed on women and while she continued to mold her behavior and appearance to accommodate dominant social expectations, she grew less comfortable in this role as the decade progressed.[9]

Addressing a women's group in the early 1970s during Fred's bid for the presidency, she spoke about the aspirations of feminism and urged her listeners to recognize and respect their differences. However, she also encouraged them to pull together, not just as women, but as people to find solutions to the problems facing the nation. Describing herself, she said, "These diverse things I am cannot be dismissed with a wave of a hand. My being an Indian in my forty's [sic] born to a poor family and the wife of a candidate for President are as much a part of me as being a woman."[10] She urged women to "become aware" of their "own divisions" and to "not change them but to

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[8]Evans, *Personal Politics*. Evans argued that the gendered division of labor relegated women to menial tasks and kept them out of the most prominent leadership roles and that the organizational skills women gained from their participation in the New Left and the civil rights movement provided them a framework from which to start their own movement.

[9]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[10]Speech by LaDonna Harris, circa early 1970s, Folder 24, Box 305, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

fashion them into weapons" to meet their goals.[11] She discussed women as a "secret-servant class," whose unpaid wages as homemakers enabled men to work in the marketplace. Urging women to make the nation's issues "women's issues," LaDonna concluded by admonishing, "if we are to reach out to our sisters and brothers who do not yet stand with us, we must understand and speak to their experiences, their problems, their aspirations."[12]

The language employed by Harris in the early 1970s differed markedly from what she used when Fred first won election to the United States Senate in 1964. At that time LaDonna stated that a wife's place was supporting her husband, asserting that she did not help her husband make decisions. Less than a decade later LaDonna used phrases like "secret servant class" to describe housewives. There are two explanations for this shift in LaDonna's language. First, she repeatedly employed a tactic she learned as a shy young girl suffering from dyslexia: she figured out what to say and do to fit in and therefore consciously constructed a persona and language that afforded her acceptance into a given group. As the1960s gave way to the1970s it became more acceptable, and in fact desirable, in some circles to condemn sexism and call for equal opportunities for women. In other words, her rhetoric changed in part because her audience did. Second, and more importantly, times were in fact changing with the expansion of the feminist movement and LaDonna Harris changed as well. She was coming into her own and, by the end of the decade of the 1970s, she would indeed be both an activist in her own right and a feminist.

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[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid, emphasis original.

The words chosen by Harris in her address to that group of women illustrate both the influence of feminism on women in politics in this period and her insight as a leader. Ultimately, the feminist movement splintered and the country moved into a more conservative era. Historians argue that the failure of women to address the differences among them largely contributed to the fate of the movement.[13] Interestingly, the suggestions put forth by LaDonna Harris as to where the movement should have gone are perhaps the very ones that could have saved it. She reminded her listeners that the many components to her identity were as much a part of her as being a woman and urged them to embrace larger "human" issues. These were perhaps the two areas where feminism received the most criticism: diversity and commonality. The particular brand of liberal feminism adhered to by LaDonna illustrated her ability to reach a wide audience of women from all backgrounds. She recognized the importance of conceptualizing and working toward common goals rather than advancing the cause of any one group.

In a speech to the United Steel Workers of America in the early 1970s LaDonna Harris illustrated her ability to connect the particular struggles of one group to larger human issues.

> There is much similarity between the struggle for recognition and power that labor unions went through in the first decades of this century and the

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[13]Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Echols explores the plethora of differences that emerged among radical feminists and illustrates the failure of the movement to address these differences; Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspective*, (1981. Boston: South End Press, 1986). Their emphasis is on the divisiveness of race and class in the movement, concluding that women need to explore, accept, and learn from their difference; Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). Sommers argues that anyone who dared to criticize the movement found themselves dismissed as an enemy of feminism and equated with the conservative right.

> fight that is going on today to secure full citizenship for black people, American Indians, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, other Spanish-speaking Americans – and women."[14]

She went on to discuss the conditions of Native Americans and women, pointing out that Indians were "asserting the basic right to be different and still be entitled to the full promise of America," and that women were still "excluded from many jobs they can perform as well as, or better than, men."[15] She ended her talk by pledging that "we must work together," and that "You need us, and we need you. The vested interests are our common adversary."[16] LaDonna's address to the United Steelworkers of America offers insight into how she used a larger platform to speak out about problems facing both Indians and women. In many ways her speech demonstrated her own struggle to encourage Native Americans to reconcile participation in the mainstream and a desire to maintain cultural autonomy. She situated the tension into a broad context of the historical struggle of particular groups to hang on to their own identity while participating in the mainstream economy and society of America.

LaDonna's language, which conveyed the interconnectedness and universality of human struggles for recognition and acceptance, evolved over time. Her awareness of women's issues became more pronounced as did her sense of problems facing Native Americans. When she first began her work on behalf of Native American's in the mid

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[14]Statement of LaDonna Harris, President of Americans for Indian Opportunity, to the United Steelworkers of America, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 30 September 1970, Folder 8, Box 286, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

1960s, the only voice she had was Fred's. It is quite significant that she searched for her own voice and her own language in the midst of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the dawning of the Native American rights movement. Her exposure to the discrimination against African Americans in Norman and Lawton in the 1950s awakened her to the racism she had experienced in her own life. As she dealt with discrimination at an intimate level, her own sense of Indianness became heightened and clarified. Similarly, living in the nation's capital in the late 1960s and early 1970s LaDonna could not help but be exposed to elements of feminism and instances of sexism, in very much the same way as she had become more aware of racism. The LaDonna Harris who cheerfully poured drinks and emptied ashtrays in the Oklahoma State Senate in the late1950s and early 1960s clearly differed from the one who talked with steel workers about the shared struggle of women, Native Americans, and laborers in 1970. LaDonna's sense of self continued to evolve during this period just as her activism did.

The year 1968 which had marked the beginning of LaDonna's advocacy of women's rights and ultimately led to a deepening in her understanding of sexism paralleled her work on Indian rights in a notable way. As she strove to understand the extent to which Native Americans could integrate into the mainstream and still preserve their heritage, her experience as an Indian rights advocate blossomed. In 1968 Harris still seemed determined to work within government bureaucracy to affect change for Native Americans. According to R.C. Gordon-McCutchan, LaDonna and Fred Harris along with Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs Bill Carmack, convinced President Johnson to create a cabinet council designed to address

Native American issues.[17] As a result, Johnson issued an executive order which called for the creation of the National Council on Indian Opportunity March 6,1968. Chaired by the vice president of the United States, the establishment of NCIO purported to give Native Americans a greater voice and to make sure that programs designed to aid Indians did in fact work to their benefit.[18] LaDonna Harris accepted an appointment as one of six Indian members of NCIO.[19] She recalled that all of the members of the council with the exception of herself had served in an elected capacity, again underscoring her success at utilizing the unofficial role of a congressional wife to affect changes to official policy.[20] Despite not being an elected official, LaDonna had considerable experience that she brought to the council. She had, after all, founded OIO and through Fred been exposed to more political wrangling than many Indian rights advocates.

The Indian members of the council vocalized the sentiments of many Native Americans when they criticized the BIA and emphasized the desire for self-determination. "In short," the council explained, "the Indian people want more services, more self-

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[17]R.C. Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake* (Santa Fe: Red Crane Books, 1991), p. 151.

[18] Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake*, p. 151-152; Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (New York: American Heritage Pres, 1971), p. 203.

[19] The other Indian members of NCIO included Raymond Nakai (chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council), Roger Jourdain (chairman of the Red Lake Chippewa Tribal Council), William Hensley (an Eskimo member of the Alaska State Legislature), Wendell Chino (chairman of the Mescalero Apache Tribal Council), Cato Valandra (member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe of South Dakota).

[20]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 81.

determination and relief from the hovering specter of termination."[21] The significance of this council in part stemmed from the fact that it was "the first agency of the Federal Government where Indian leaders sit as equals with the members of the President's Cabinet in overseeing Federal Indian policy."[22]

In 1969 after the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon as president, the duties of presiding over NCIO fell to the new vice president, Spiro Agnew. Even before becoming vice president, Agnew flirted with the idea of helping Native Americans and certainly paid lip service to the emerging concept of self-determination, which would give Indians greater control over administering their own programs. He voiced support of self-determination saying it sounded "like a good old Republican philosophy."[23] Yet Agnew would prove slow to act and would eventually come under fire from LaDonna Harris for that very reason.

Despite the outward support of Native Americans promised by Nixon and Agnew, direct action came too slowly for some. The initial excitement over NCIO by Indians and non-Indians alike waned because the council did not convene again for some time. LaDonna Harris grew frustrated with the inactivity of the council and the failure of Vice President Agnew to call a meeting. According to an article in the *Washington Daily News* entitled "Agnew Better Watch Out for Those Comanches," LaDonna Harris had grown angry over the lapsed time since the last meeting. "A war between the Comanches and

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[21]Statement of the Indian Members of the National Council on Indian Opportunity, 26 January 1970, in Josephy, *Red Power*, p. 206.

[22]Ibid, 205.

[23]Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake*, p. 151.

Vice President Spiro T. Agnew may flare up any minute," the article quipped, warning that "A pretty Comanche girl is already putting on her war paint."[24] It depicted Harris as "ready to lead the five other Indians on the council on the war path."[25] The article made clear LaDonna's displeasure with the vice president and quoted her saying that Agnew's indifference caused the council to lose its operating funds in a House committee.[26] To that end, the *Washington Daily News* depicted her as a force to be reckoned with, even when it came to the vice president. But whether it intended to or not, the paper drew on stereotypes of Native Americans as warring savages thus trivializing the real issues at stake. Harris' frustration with Agnew continued to deepen in the latter half of 1969 as still no meeting of NCIO was called by the vice president.

LaDonna and Spirio Agnew did, however, end up on the same side in one of the most poignant and significant victories for a Native American tribe in the twentieth century: the return of the sacred Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo Indians.[27] The Taos Indians lost possession of Blue Lake in 1906 during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. President Roosevelt established the Department of Forestry in 1902 and made conservation one of his top priorities.[28] He set aside millions of acres of land for

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[24]Wauhillau La Hay, "Agnew Better Watch Out for Those Comanches," *Washington Daily News*, 4 August 1969.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]See Marcia Keegan, *Taos Pueblo and its Sacred Blue Lake* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1991); Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake.*

[28]See Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

national parks and in the midst of his conservation efforts, the Taos Indians were robbed of their sacred Blue Lake and thousands of acres of land in what became the Carson National Forest in New Mexico. This began a struggle that lasted for 65 years as the Taos Indians fought for the restoration of their land and their lake.

In the late 1960s several factors converged that paved the way for Taos victory. First, both President Nixon and Vice President Agnew supported greater self-determination for Native Americans and voiced sympathy for the historic mistreatment of Indian people. Second, LaDonna Harris made sure the struggle of Blue Lake got national attention as a human rights issue.[29] LaDonna's friend, John Rainer, a Taos Pueblo activist, shared with her the struggle of his people for the return of their sacred lake.[30] Taos representatives also met with Fred to discuss Blue Lake and he became convinced that he should do something about it.[31] LaDonna and Fred worked together on the issue like they had done so many times in the past, Fred as a policy maker and LaDonna as an activist, although this time the activist was also a member of NCIO. Knowing that President Nixon had voiced support for Native Americans and self-determination in the1968 election, Fred and LaDonna used that as an opportunity to try and get White House support of House Resolution 471, which would return Blue Lake to the Taos Indians.[32] United States Senator Clinton Anderson from New Mexico voiced serious objections to

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[29]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 2002.

[30]Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake*, p. 168.

[31]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 88.

[32]Ibid., p. 89.

this effort and LaDonna recalled his anger at Fred over their perceived interference. Senator Anderson said: "By God, Fred, I don't mess with your Indians in Oklahoma and you shouldn't mess with mine in New Mexico."[33] Anderson's statement is significant in part because of his objection to H.R. 471, but even more so because of his perception of Native Americans. Here again, the dependent and mascot-like status of Indian people influenced the thinking of policy makers like Anderson, as did the defacto state sovereignty exercised over Indians in each state.

Nonetheless, the bi-partisan effort to restore Blue Lake to the Taos Indians proceeded over the objections of Senator Anderson. LaDonna worked to gain the support of African Americans and other groups in order to cast the Taos struggle as a civil rights and human rights issue.[34] Her efforts moved forward on another front as well. LaDonna made sure the White House did not ignore or forget about Blue Lake. According to Gordon-McCutchan, LaDonna befriended Bobbie Green, a young Navajo woman who was a White House Fellow. Green worked on formulating the Nixon Administration's policy on Native Americans and worked with Harris in connection with NCIO. LaDonna worked with Green to compile a report on the status of Native Americans.[35] The report made a variety of recommendations about Indian housing and education. The report also called for the support of the return of Blue Lake to the Taos Indians. Gordon-McCutchan credits Harris and her friendship with John Rainer for the inclusion of the Blue Lake issue

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[33]Ibid.

[34]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 2002.

[35]Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake*, p. 166.

in the report.[36] Once the issue made its way into NCIO's report, it gained considerable publicity and ultimately support from key policy makers. Influential leaders such as Ted Kennedy, George McGovern, and even conservative Republican Barry Goldwater supported the H.R. 471.[37]

In January of 1970, Bobbie Green and the Indian members of NCIO submitted the findings of their report when Agnew finally called a meeting of all the members of the council. This would be the first time NCIO had met since Nixon and Agnew came to office a year earlier. There were two significant outcomes of this meeting. The first relates to H.R. 471. The effort to return Blue Lake to the Taos Indians gained substantial attention and support as a result of this meeting. In fact, Gordon-McCutchan argues that "the significance of this meeting cannot be overstated."[38] This proved a fair assessment of the meeting in terms of Blue Lake. While political wrangling continued for several more months, this meeting marked a turning point and, on December 15, 1970, President Nixon signed a bill into law which restored Blue Lake and the surrounding 48,000 acres to the Taos Indians.[39] Fred Harris called LaDonna's role in the return of Blue Lake "her biggest accomplishment."[40] That John Rainer told his family to always remember Fred and LaDonna Harris in their prayers because of the role they played in the restoration of Blue

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[36]Ibid., p. 168.

[37]Iverson, *"We Are Still Here,"* p. 140.

[38]Gordon-McCutchan, *The Taos Indians and the Battle for Blue Lake*, 169.

[39]Iverson, *"We Are Still Here,"* p. 140.

[40]Fred Harris, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

Lake serves as a poignant testament to their significant contribution.[41] Indeed, Blue Lake became a landmark restoration case that marked a significant shift in federal policy, religious freedom, and the rights of Native American people.

The return of Blue Lake, however, did not happen immediately after NCIO's meeting. The second significant, and more immediate, outcome of that January meeting had to do with the other recommendations in the report and LaDonna's subsequent disillusionment. The cabinet members on the council had 30 days to respond to the proposals in the report. When they failed to do so in the allotted time, LaDonna's anger over the seeming indifference of Nixon's cabinet reached a breaking point because virtually nothing came of the recommendations of Harris and the other Indian members of the council.[42] LaDonna resolved to take action. In large part because of the inaction of NCIO and Spiro Agnew, LaDonna founded a new national organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO), in the spring of 1970 to advocate for Native American rights.[43]

A few months later LaDonna Harris, now president of the newly founded AIO, offered harsh words of criticism for Spiro Agnew's handling of NCIO. In a *Washington Post* interview LaDonna unequivocally blamed Agnew for doing nothing. She said that the cabinet members on the council needed "knocking around by the vice president" and

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[41]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 2002.

[42]Dan Blackburn, "LaDonna Harris is a Senate Wife With More on Her Mind Than Mid-Afternoon Teas," *Washington Post/Potomac*, 24 May 1970, p. 31.

[43]"LaDonna Eyes 'Red Power,'" 26 March 1970, *Times*.

suggested he should criticize them and their staffs for doing a "crummy job."[44] She also refused to accept reappointment to the council when her two year term expired that same spring, saying if she stayed she would inevitably clash with the vice president over his inaction.[45] LaDonna indicated that the Nixon Administration would not do anything unless someone stayed after them. Being the wife of a United States senator had opened a lot of doors to LaDonna Harris and likely contributed to President Johnson's decision to appoint her to NCIO to begin with, but she had finally reached the limit afforded her by that role. She needed a new role and in fact a new organization. Explaining that "Federal agencies were responding sluggishly to proposals to help Indians," clearly the time had come for LaDonna to work on Indian issues from another angle- one over which she could exercise greater control.[46]

The publicity generated by LaDonna's anger over Agnew and NICO's failure to take action illustrates both her growing prominence and her frustration with the slow pace at which bureaucracies move. While Harris later said that Agnew's inaction likely had more to do with his own political and legal problems than simply a lack of interest in the National Council on Indian Opportunity, at the time it inspired her to form a national Indian rights advocacy organization. LaDonna's respected position among the political elite and her leadership role made her disillusionment with government claims of Indian

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[44] Dan Blackburn, "LaDonna Harris is a Senate Wife with More on Her Mind Than Mid-Afternoon Teas," *Washington Post/Potomac*, 24 May 1970, p. 31.

[45] Ibid, p. 26.

[46] "Champion of the Indian– LaDonna Crawford Harris," *New York Times*, 11 July 1970, Section L, p. 16.

advocacy all the more significant. Her criticism of NCIO would later be vindicated. Two years after Harris left NCIO a committee report from the New Directions Conference lent substantial support to her concerns. According to the committee, the National Council on Indian Opportunity had "failed in every major sense in its intended mission."[47] The committee went on to add that NCIO had not been "truly representative" of the Indian community, had not addressed the needs of the "total Indian community," and had failed to coordinate properly with other agencies to ensure implementation of goals.[48]

Both the resignation of LaDonna Harris from the National Council for Indian Opportunity and the criticism of it by others demonstrated the growing disenchantment with the effectiveness of government agencies in helping Indians. Criticism of federal management of Indian affairs was hardly new. What was new was government's assertion that it would do more to work with Indian people directly. The slow pace at which this occurred made the criticism of the government more glaring. In the meantime, LaDonna's newly founded organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity, afforded her an alternate way to advocate for Native American rights.

Harris used AIO to fill some of the gaps and said they "hoped to work with Indian tribes groups not reached by existing agencies and programs."[49] Geared toward similar goals as OIO, this new organization seemed the best solution to Harris' dissatisfaction

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[47]"Reports of Committees at New Directions Conference," June 1972, Series 1, Box 3, LHC, NAES.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Minutes from AIO meeting, 16 January 1971, OIO Corporation Book n. 2, Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, Norman, Oklahoma.

with both the BIA and other government programs. She hardly stood alone in her criticism of the federal government's handling of Native Americans. In fact, the same year Harris left NCIO, President Richard M. Nixon made similar criticisms in a speech on Indian affairs. Nixon's speech shaped the dialogue on federal Indian policy that continues to this day. He advocated a shift in BIA policy and embraced the concept of Native Americans shaping their own destiny and administering their own programs.[50]

Nixon said changes in federal Indian policy were long overdue and argued, "The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions."[51] He laid out his administration's plans to make Indians more autonomous without undermining their relationship to and their participation in the wider community. The philosophy behind Nixon's plan resembled that of the founding members of OIO; the direct participation of Indians remained crucial to the success of government programs intended to aid them. Condemning termination as "morally and legally unacceptable," Nixon explained: "In my judgement, it should be up to the Indian tribe to determine whether it is willing and able to assume administrative responsibility for a service program which is presently administered by a federal agency."[52]

Nixon's articulation of the right of Native Americans to self-determination intensified the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation that shaped both the

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[50]See Castile, *To Show Heart*.

[51]President Richard Nixon's message to Congress on Indian affairs, 8 July 1970 in Josephy, *Red Power*, p. 225.

[52]Ibid., p. 228-229.

discourse on Indian affairs and the activism of LaDonna Harris. This tension must be understood within the context of the radicalism in the volatile period of the 1960s and early 1970s. Harris functioned as part of a movement which recognized the need for more Indian autonomy. Her disillusionment with the BIA and with the government's handling of Native Americans in general only continued to grow. One interviewer related, "Perhaps the worst thing is the hopelessness and demoralization of these people, Mrs. Harris told me– 'the result of spirit-destroying prejudice' and the 'slow, ineffective, paternalistic' handling of Indian problems by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs."[53] LaDonna Harris condemned the BIA and lamented that "generally BIA policy is to try to make white people out of Indians."[54] Indeed, the federal government had repeatedly made the mistake of treating Native Americans as if they were all alike, while concurrently trying to assimilate them into mainstream white society.

In April of 1973 LaDonna Harris articulated the disillusionment many Native Americans felt with the federal government's handling of Indian affairs in her testimony to the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs in the United States House of Representatives. She explained:

> We have come to this point in history along a trail of broken treaties. But over and over again we have believed in the basic sincerity of the government. Even now we are taking seriously the policy of self-determination as avowed by the last two administrations. Yet all our instincts-- and much

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[53]Terry Morris, "LaDonna Harris: A Woman Who Gives a Damn," *Redbook Magazine*, February 1970, p. 117.

[54]Ibid.

actual evidence -- tells us that it is only rhetoric.[55]

LaDonna Harris did not stop her efforts to improve the conditions of Native Americans by working with policy makers but her words of criticism grew increasingly harsh. She and other Native Americans remained emphatic in their demand that the government do more that simply pay lip service to the new policy of self-determination. However, not everyone agreed as to the meaning and even implementation of self-determination. The basic issue of reconciling the preservation of native traditions and access to mainstream opportunities persisted.

Along with the increasing emphasis on cultural autonomy and restoration came a changing dialogue on the nature of Indian identity. Harris dismissed the melting pot as a myth citing as evidence the continued growth of the Americans Indian population. She added that with the increase in population had also come a greater sense of national Indianness. She explained "I am a Comanche first and an Indian second."[56] The resurgence in Indian pride and identity exacerbated the demand for greater self-determination among Native Americans. The federal government had suppressed considerable knowledge of tribal languages and cultural beliefs as a part of Indian policy since the 1800s. With the shift toward a policy of self-determination, Indian rights advocates began efforts at preserving and revitalizing Indian heritage. A close connection developed between cultural restoration and the rising demand for self-governance among

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[55]LaDonna Harris, Testimony submitted to the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, House of Representatives, 11 April 1973, p. 3-4, Series 1, Box 32, LHC, NAES.

[56] Statement by LaDonna Harris on "Speaking Freely," 28 March 1971, Series 2, Box 35, LHC, NAES.

Indians.

In many ways LaDonna Harris and the two organizations she helped found, Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity and Americans for Indian Opportunity, foreshadowed the problems that President Nixon laid out and the problems with which Native American groups continued to struggle. While Harris no longer played a role in OIO after her resignation in1968, her work with AIO remained a vital link between Native American tribes and the federal government. In the decade following the founding of AIO in1970, the organization sponsored numerous symposiums on tribal issues and facilitated change that touched virtually every tribe in the United States.

An analysis of Americans for Indian Opportunity in the first decade of its existence provides a vehicle through which to understand both the advocacy and beliefs of LaDonna Harris and the changing nature of tribal needs, stemming from the shift in federal policy. Harris' own background and experience as both an activist and a politician's wife provided her with unique qualifications and insights to act as a liaison of sorts between Native Americans and the federal government. If Native Americans were in fact to exercise greater control over administering their own programs and if they were to attain any measure of sovereignty, tribal leaders would have to learn more about the government and their rights. Here is where AIO had a significant role to play. Explaining that AIO "is primarily concerned with governance issues," LaDonna Harris said the organization was especially interested in helping Native American tribes "maintain their identities and cultural and political autonomy" within the larger system of the United States federal

government.[57] In addition, AIO addressed environmental problems, tribal leadership issues, education and federal Indian law and policy.

While AIO accomplished a number of notable feats, the most important contribution of this organization came in the form of education. It played a tremendous role in educating Native Americans tribes, individuals, and organizations about their relationship to the federal government and the types of services available to them. AIO also tried to educate politicians about the status of Native Americans. LaDonna Harris and her organization addressed leaders at every level of the political structure, from local lawmakers to governors, United States senators, and presidents. In fact, Harris remarked that each time a new president got elected she felt like she had to teach "Indian 101" all over again.[58] Just when it seemed that the Nixon administration had demonstrated a serious commitment to Native Americans, scandal ensued. First, in late 1973, Agnew resigned under a cloud of suspicion stemming from allegations that he had accepted bribes while serving as governor of Maryland. Nixon resigned the following summer to avoid impeachment after the discovery of his role in covering up the notorious Watergate debacle.[59] The next two administrations under Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, provided new and not entirely welcome challenges to LaDonna Harris and her organization. The

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[57]Statement by LaDonna Harris on Contributions of Tribal People to the Contemporary World, date unknown, Series 1, Box 29, LHC, NAES.

[58]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[59]Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

inauguration of each marked a new task of explaining the same old issues all over again.[60] The best weapon available to AIO combined persistence and knowledge.

One innovative aspect of AIO's work to educate both Native Americans and government officials came in the form of emergency newsletters called "Red Alerts." Native Americans, including tribal leaders, were often ill informed when it came to national politics. AIO began sending out Red Alerts to notify Native American tribes and organizations about urgent national matters which directly affected them. AIO also sent Red Alerts to government officials and employees in an effort to inform them better about the needs and concern facing Native Americans. For instance, in a letter to Albert Miller, the deputy under secretary for Field Coordination for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, LaDonna Harris explained her purpose in sending him a Red Alert which described the "distinction of tribes as units of government."[61] She said that in many cases government agencies tended to treat tribal governments as minorities, failing to recognize the "governmental nature of tribes."[62] In keeping with typical AIO emphasis on educating people, Harris included information on recent Supreme Court cases dealing with related Native American issues and responses from various government officials to AIO's Red Alert.

A further example of AIO's use of Red Alerts is evident in the newsletter announcing the use of population figures in the allocation of general revenue sharing

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[60]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[61]LaDonna Harris to Albert M. Miller, 2 June 1978, Series 1, Box 8, LHC, NAES.

[62]Ibid.

funds. The Red Alert informed tribal governments what to do if they suspected inaccuracies in their population figures, including whom to contact for further information and how long they had to challenge the accuracy of population figures.[63] Though perhaps unremarkable on the surface, the service provided by AIO bridged an important gap between federal policy of self-determination and the actual implementation of it by tribes themselves. Other Red Alerts brought to the attention of tribal leaders and government officials issues such as the Indian Child Welfare Act, the recruitment of Native American students by ivy league schools, federal budget cuts, environmental legislation, and the Oliphant case in which the Supreme Court declared tribal courts do not have the jurisdiction to try non-Indians for crimes committed on reservations.[64] AIO sent these Red Alerts to tribes throughout the United States, and has often received praise from tribal communities.

In addition to Red Alerts, AIO published numerous "Red Papers," or position papers, written by Harris and other AIO staff members. Here again, education of both Native Americans and policy makers in the federal government remained the primary goal. These Red Papers addressed a number of both volatile and complex issues, including federal management of Indian forest lands, environmental hazzards, and the relationship of Indian communities to federal policy. They are similar to the Red Alerts in the use of basic information but tend to be longer and somewhat more complex. For instance, "A

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[63]Americans for Indian Opportunity, "Red Alert," 1976, Series 1, Box 9, LHC, NAES.

[64]Each of the issues mentioned were specific topics in AIO Red Alert papers, Series 3, Box 9-10, LHC, NAES.

Violation of Trust: Federal Management of Indian Forest Lands" described the failure of the federal government to oversee adequately and honestly the timber industry's use of Indian land.[65]

AIO helped establish the Native American Legal Defense and Education Fund to provide assistance to those who needed it most. The need for special legal assistance for Native Americans seemed particularly acute given the complex relationship between themselves and the federal government. According to one article which profiled AIO's activities in the early 1970s, the lives of Native Americans were governed by "more than 2000 regulations, 389 treaties, 5000 statutes, 2000 Federal court decisions , 5000 Attorney Generals' opinions, and 33 volumes of the Indian Affairs Manual."[66] The article explained that the primary role of the fund consisted of making sure government programs responded to the needs of the Indian people as they were intended to do.[67] The legal fund set up by Americans for Indian Opportunity functioned in conjunction with other programs designed to promote overall social welfare and economic stimulation. The American Indian Investment Opportunities Inc., jointly owned and operated by Americans for Indian Opportunity and Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, aided Native Americans in owning their own businesses.

Being president of AIO afforded LaDonna Harris a prominent platform to ensure that her message was heard. She brought notoriety to AIO because of her past work and

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[65]Rich Nafziger, "A Violation of Trust: Federal Management of Indian Forest Lands," Red Paper, Americans for Indian Opportunity, 1976, Series 3, Box 10, LHC, NAES.

[66]"Americans for Indian Opportunity" in *Civil Rights Digest*, Spring 1971, p. 17.

[67]Ibid.

because of the Harris name. While LaDonna's primary focus centered on Indian advocacy, she continued to merge that advocacy with what she saw as larger human rights advocacy. She supported efforts to stop discrimination against aging Americans and women. She lent her whole-hearted support to Benjamin Rosenthal and Paul Findley in their effort to do away with mandatory retirement. While acknowledging that as a non-profit organization AIO could not participate in the legislation, she added that she would "be proud to be listed" in support of the legislation.[68] She lobbied for an extension on the time allocated for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment as well. Despite the fact that United States Representative Manuel Lujan from New Mexico responded negatively to her request for his support by saying "I feel that changing the rules can cause some serious problems with future Constitutional amendments," she continued to work in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment.[69] Her support for such varied causes demonstrates her lifelong commitment to bettering the conditions of all people.

Although LaDonna Harris could not always affect change as quickly as she wanted, her prominent status contributed to countless gains for women, Native Americans, and other minorities. She explained that Fred's status had a lot to do with her voice being heard: "they could not ignore me because of Fred."[70] The prominence of both Fred and LaDonna Harris aided in accomplishing gains for Native Americans, but as the decade wore on, it became increasingly clear that policy makers could not ignore LaDonna

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[68]LaDonna Harris to Benjamin S. Rosenthal and Paul Findley, 30 August 1976, Series 1, Box 32, LHC, NAES.

[69]Manuel Lujan, Jr. to LaDonna Harris, 24 July 1978, Series 1, Box 32, LHC, NAES.

[70]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 40.

because of her own status and accomplishments. In fact, whenever her name was attached to an issue involving Native Americans, it brought considerable credibility to it.

LaDonna recalled a friend telling her that she accomplished more by accident than on purpose simply because of the activism associated with her name. She related an experience several years ago in which she and two associates had a meeting scheduled with the commissioner of Indian Affairs. She and her associates were so busy chatting at lunch that they forgot to put together their presentation for the meeting. As they walked into the meeting with the commissioner of Indian Affairs, LaDonna tried to figure out what she would say but the commissioner never gave her the chance. He told her he knew why she was there and explained that they had reversed their plan to treat Indian lands like public lands on mining regulation. Harris laughingly said that, to this day, she cannot remember why they had scheduled that meeting.[71] Still, the national reputation of LaDonna Harris reflected the extent to which her very presence facilitated the protection of rights for Native Americans.

Clearly, LaDonna Harris's ability to reach such a wide audience stemmed in part from her focus on issues which united, rather than separated people. Ever conscious of the bigger picture, her commitment to human rights enabled her to make both "Indian issues" and "women's issues" into human issues. The implicit liberalism in her activism informed both her articulation of issues and the avenues through which she sought to effect change. By the beginning of the 1970s after her disillusioning experience with Agnew and NCIO, she became outspoken in her criticism of the federal government's

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[71]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 39.

handling of Indian policy and programs. The Department of the Interior, in particular, disgusted LaDonna because it tended to treat Native Americans like property, as if they were no different than the trees and land that the department managed. In spite of Harris' critique of the Department of Interior and her description of it as a "good old boys network," she still worked to effect change within the existing legal, social, and political structure.[72] She advocated reforming the system, without attacking the fundamental principles of its existence. By the end of that decade she had indeed come into her own as one of the leading advocates of Native American rights.

LaDonna Harris continued to serve as President of Americans for Indian Opportunity, testify before Congress on Indian issues, and work with government agencies to better the conditions and opportunities for Native Americans. She actively supported the preservation and perpetuation of Indian heritage as well. Both the identity and image of LaDonna Harris along with how she changed over time, is indicative of larger tensions in the movement to protect the rights of Native Americans. Harris played a crucial role at a very critical stage in federal Indian policy. She helped define the changing dialectic of both what it meant to be an Indian and how that concept pertained to the relationship and responsibilities of the federal government to Native Americans.

When Congress established the Indian Policy Review Commission in 1975 because of the growing criticism of the BIA and federal Indian policy, LaDonna Harris wrote to Speaker of the House Carl Albert (also from Oklahoma), enthusiastically describing it as

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[72]Ibid., p. 17-18.

"the most important thing [that is] going to happen in Indian country for years to come."[73] While the Indian Policy Review Commission did not report its findings until two years later in 1977, the fact that the government recognized a need for it indicated the impact of Indian rights advocates like LaDonna Harris on affecting federal policy. While Nixon laid the foundation for the era of self-determination in his 1970 speech, the findings of the Indian Policy Review Commission provided the context needed to implement policy in keeping with Indian autonomy.

The decade of the 1970s did indeed constitute a period of both great change and growth for LaDonna Harris. She founded Americans for Indian Opportunity in 1970. Fred ran for president in both 1972 and 1976, although the latter of the two elections was the more serious attempt. Fred Harris's 1976 presidential campaign marked his last bid for elected office. It also exemplified the political partnership of Fred and LaDonna that had defined their careers and their lives. In fact, this idea that people got a sort of two-for-one deal when Fred held office is further reflected in the campaign buttons that said "LaDonna Harris for First Lady." LaDonna Harris mastered the delicate balancing act of appearing strong but not domineering. Even though Fred included LaDonna and they both projected an image of partnership and team work, it still remained clear that she was, after all, the candidate's wife, not the candidate.

When his second bid for the presidency failed, Fred Harris was ready to retreat from the hectic world of politics and move away from Washington, DC. LaDonna, on the

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[73]LaDonna Harris to Carl Albert, 27 January 1975, Folder 16, Box 215, Carl Albert Collection (hereafter CAC), CACRSC, OU.

other hand, wanted to remain in Washington and continue the work of Americans for Indian Opportunity in the exciting and volatile climate of the nation's capital. As one friend described it, Fred wanted to can tomatoes and LaDonna wanted to lobby for Native American rights.[74] As Fred's political career came to an end, LaDonna's had really just begun. Fred left the United States Senate in January of 1973 and his unsuccessful campaign for the presidency marked his official retreat from national politics in 1976. No longer the wife of a leading politician, LaDonna Harris instead presided over her own nationally renowned organization and had earned a reputation as a respected activist in her own right.

Fred and LaDonna Harris attempted to accommodate the changes in both of their lives but it proved an arduous challenge. They moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1976 where Fred taught in the political science department at the University of New Mexico. Shortly after moving to Albuquerque Fred wrote an "anecdotal account" of the 12 years he and LaDonna spent in Washington, D.C. In the introduction of *Potomac Fever*, Fred Harris indicated that both he and LaDonna were ready to "trade the steamy banks of the Potomac River for the cottonwood shade of the Rio Grande," and said that they "felt it was time to move on to a new phase" in their lives.[75] Both Fred and LaDonna Harris were nearing new phases in their lives, but not the one described by Fred. LaDonna had little time to spend "in the shade." Their children had reached adulthood, her commitments as a senator's wife had ended and she wanted to focus her energies on

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[74]Beverly Saffa Stapleton, Interview with the author, 23 September 2001.

[75]Harris, *Potomac Fever*, p. x.

activism rather than having a relaxed semi-retired lifestyle. She continued to run AIO but moved the offices to New Mexico. Indicative of her desire to stay involved in politics, LaDonna made her own bid for elected office in 1980 running as the vice presidential candidate for the newly founded Citizen's Party. Among other things the Citizen's Party criticized the similarities between the Republican and Democratic parties and called for "the creation of a safer environment." LaDonna described this experience as "one of the best and worst things that ever happened" to her because, while tremendously demanding, it also pushed her out on her own in a way she had not been before.[76] She recounted an experience during the campaign in which her daughter Katheryn told her she was being treated like a candidate's wife, to which a friend and AIO staff member added that LaDonna acted like a candidate's wife. LaDonna realized that she had been acting like a candidate's wife because it was comfortable and familiar.[77]

Regardless of the fact that LaDonna and her running mate, Barry Commoner, did not have any real chance at winning the election, the experience proved a turning point for Harris. For the first time in her life, she was the candidate and she had to learn how to talk about herself, her beliefs, her accomplishment, her goals and not simply those of someone else. She viewed her nomination for vice president as "an additional opportunity to do more" for what she believed in.[78] While her experience with the election aided her in coming in to her own politically, it also came at the expense of her marriage. Regardless

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[76]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 111.

[77]Ibid.

[78]LaDonna Harris to Joe Sando, 13 April 1980, Series 2, Box 23, LHC, NAES.

of the efforts LaDonna and Fred made to accommodate each other's changing needs, the strain caused by their lives moving in two different directions finally resulted in divorce in 1980, just four years after moving to Albuquerque.[79] They remained close friends, but not before going through a strenuous and awkward period of adjustment. LaDonna recalled this difficult time in her life:

> Everything seemed to be going peachy keen in my marriage, but it wasn't, and I could tell. Somewhere I couldn't let go and stop my work and pay attention to my marriage. I was also very much involved in the women's movement and was helping to start the Women's Political Caucus. I was just moving into my own world. Still, when the end came, I was surprised.[80]

After her divorce, LaDonna moved AIO back to Washington, D.C., where she ran the organization for the next decade. In 1990 she, along with AIO, returned to New Mexico. She faced a difficult transition after being married for over thirty years. The divorce of Fred and LaDonna Harris marked a turning point in not just her own personal identity, but also in her life's work. It provided a greater challenge because her work had been tied so closely to her marriage to Fred. LaDonna's advocacy on behalf of Native Americans and other groups grew and matured just as she did. Feminism also resonated with her to a greater degree after her marriage ended. One friend said LaDonna did not appear to be a feminist until her divorce, and Harris herself remembered becoming more aware of the

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[79]That Fred and LaDonna Harris found themselves at alarmingly different places in the life cycle is perhaps not surprising. Historically, married women with children have quite often not come into their own until after their children have grown and left home. With their children gone, women tended to have more time on their hands to cultivate outside interests and skills. Yet, this time also coincided with when their husbands began considering retirement or at least cutting back since they no longer had a growing family to support.

[80]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 112.

women's movement around this time.[81]

LaDonna not only came into her own as a leader but found herself on her own quite literally for the first time in her life. In an interview with Rusty Brown from *The Albuquerque Tribune*, LaDonna admitted being scared about the big change in her life but described her divorce as amicable. Brown captured the sentiment of many friends of Fred and LaDonna Harris: "Thus comes to an end one of the best husband-wife political teams ever to stump the Oklahoma cornfields or crack the Washington power structure."[82] Indeed, many expressed surprise and sadness at the split between Fred and LaDonna Harris, but said that the fact that the two remained close illustrated the strength and depth of the bond they shared.[83] The decade of the 1970s saw LaDonna Harris become an activist in her own right. She became more confident and sure of herself. Her work, which so neatly dovetailed with Fred's while he served in the United States Senate, evolved and took on a life of its own. By the end of the decade he was a former senator and she a former wife. Her activism transcended and surpassed both roles. She had indeed found her own voice.

After her divorce LaDonna focused on putting her life back together and continued her work to help Native Americans and other disadvantaged groups. She was, however, not alone in her struggle to adjust to life after divorce. The divorce rate had skyrocketed

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[81]Iola Hayden, Interview with the author, 27 March 2001; LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[82]Rusty Brown, "How LaDonna Harris Faces a Turning Point in Life," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, 12 January 1982, p. A-6.

[83]Kathy Newcombe, Interview with author, 12 September 2001; Aulena Gibson, Interview with the author, 02 October 2001.

in the United States by 1980, and the women's movement opened up a host of new possibilities for women. As women in the professions and even in politics became more common place, the experience of LaDonna Harris at this crossroads in her life resembled the lives of other women as well.

LaDonna Harris spent much of the 1960s and 1970s in the national political limelight as a prominent United States senator's wife, candidate for "first lady" in 1972 and 1976, and as one of the best known advocates of Native American issues. Wilma Mankiller, on the other hand, took a somewhat different path to national prominence. While Harris used her traditional role as a wife to move her activism forward, Mankiller became an elected official in her own right. In fact, Wilma Mankiller also struggled to find order and stability in a rapidly changing world. She too became deeply influenced by the feminist movement and divorced just a few years before LaDonna. The point is not to suggest identical circumstances in the divorces of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller but rather to illustrate the impact divorce had in shaping the transition of each as they came into their own as both leaders and as women. The story of how she came to hold the highest political office in the second largest tribe in the United States is one which bears examination. The way in which Wilma Mankiller drew on her sense of Indian identity as well as feminist ideals as her political activism grew is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Beloved Woman Politicized

I couldn't imagine myself in a political office and having to go out and sell myself like a tube of toothpaste or something.[1]

-Wilma Mankiller

Wilma Mankiller became the first female deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1983 and, in1985 when Chief Ross Swimmer resigned, she became the first female principal chief, a position she held for the next decade. Both a self-identified feminist and an outspoken proponent of Native American rights, these two components of her identity held significant ramifications both for the image that she projected to mainstream society as well as within Cherokee politics.[2] An examination of Mankiller's heritage, her awakening political consciousness, her work with the Cherokee Nation, and her first election in 1983 demonstrates the process of image formation that ultimately played a vital role in her career. Two central themes emerge this analysis of Mankiller's career. One theme concerns her identity or self-image, which formed over time and was influenced by her heritage and experience. The second theme pertains to the image Mankiller projected to society as a political figure. A connection obviously exists between her identity and her public image but the latter evolved to fit a particular set of political circumstances. An evaluation of both underscores the path Mankiller took from becoming an activist to holding elected office. Her bid for election in1983and in1987 have been described as

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[1]Wilma Mankiller/Michael Wallis interview for autobiography, 5 January 1992, p.3, Folder 6, Box 43, Wilma Mankiller Collection (hereafter WMC), Western History Collection (hereafter, WHC), University of Oklahoma (hereafter OU).

[2]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 1. Mankiller defines a feminist as follows: "Someone who believes in the equality of woman in all sectors of society and works for the advancement of the role of women."

fraught with gender bias. The way in which both she and her opponents used this is examined in detail.

In recent years scholars have attempted to restore agency to Native American women and to debunk the notion that they exercised little or no power in their communities. As a part of this effort, increasing attention to the status of Cherokee women prior to Euro-American influence revealed that Cherokee women did in fact enjoy a greater degree of freedom than did many other women. Cherokee women experienced relative sexual freedom, they could attain a divorce as easily as men and they had a women's council.[3] The most powerful role afforded to Cherokee women was the status of "War Woman" or "Beloved Woman." In *Cherokee Women*, historian Theda Purdue notes that at times the two terms appear interchangeable in sources although it seems likely that War Women became Beloved Women after menopause. War Women attained an elevated status in the tribe by distinguishing themselves in battle and consequently exercised authority over the fate of war captives and other matters of import to the tribe.[4] Nancy Ward, the last known Beloved Woman of the Cherokee, died in 1824 and since that time the status of women among the Cherokee increasingly resembled that of American women.

Perdue, however, emphasizes the harmonious nature of gender relations among the Cherokee, despite the changes their culture underwent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She argues that while Cherokee women maintained "considerably more

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[3]Klein and Ackerman, *Women and Power in Native North America*, p. 222-229.

[4]Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, p. 38-39.

autonomy than elite Anglo-American women, they usually did not approach any sort of gender equity."[5] Even so, Perdue explains that Cherokee men and women continued to adhere to their traditional world view which "sanctioned the autonomy, complementarity, prestige, and even power of women."[6] She describes the traditionally gendered division of work among the Cherokee and stated that "Native men and women lived remarkably separate lives," but this did not lead to sexism because of the belief in balance and harmony.[7] In other words, men and women filled different roles, but their roles complimented each other. Perdue chronicles the impact of change on Cherokee society and maintained that despite the influence of white culture, many Cherokees adapted to this change while hanging onto their traditional beliefs. The election of Wilma Mankiller as chief of the Cherokee Nation, concludes Perdue, further illustrates the endurance of a culture in which women played a vital role. "The story of Cherokee women, therefore, is not one of declining status and lost culture, but one of persistence and change, conservatism and adaption, tragedy and survival."[8]

Mankiller's election brought with it considerable attention to and interest in the historic role of women not only in Cherokee society but among other native societies as well. Scholarship reveals that women in many native societies, including the Cherokee, enjoyed more autonomy than in European cultures. However, some writers romanticized

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[5]Ibid., p. 185.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., p. 3.

[8]Ibid., p. 195.

and exalted femininity and rejected historical accuracy in favor of glorifying indigenous gender roles.[9] For instance, one writer emphasized the harmony of gender relations among Indian tribes, stating: "In many communities, particularly among the Iroquois, women and men enjoyed mutual respect, sharing of power and balance in the social life of the community." The author went on to explain "Since there was no evidence for the subordination of women, there was no basis for even the conceptualization of feminism." The essay concluded with a suggestion that perhaps now all cultures can learn from the sort of implicit feminism apparent in the gender equity of indigenous tribal cultures.[10]

Yet, what does this mean for the notion that sexism was a European import? By definition sexism means prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex. If cultures divide work along gender lines, is that not a type of sexism? Or perhaps it is the value assigned to that division which connotes sexism. For instance, if women and men do separate work, but both are equally valued, perhaps that negates the implications of sexism. It seems dubious to suggest that while both Europeans and Native Americans (and most other cultures for that matter) divided work by gender, it was the Europeans who introduced sexism to otherwise harmonious gender relations among Indians. Clearly a danger exists in applying modern notions about what signifies sexism and oppression to

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[9] For a critique of this tendency see Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

[10]Title and Author Unknown, p. 2, Folder 25, Box 45, WMC, WHC, OU. For a critique of this static view of gender relations among Indians see, Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Saunt argues that "Balance, harmony, and tradition, so often used to describe Native American gender relations before the incursion of Western patriarchy, fail to describe the dynamic relationship between Creek men and women in the eighteenth century." p. 140.

cultures which perhaps judged power relations by different criteria, especially since the word sexism did not even exist at the point of contact. It is a modern construction that reveals more about the period in which it came into use than the time preceding it. Division of labor based on sex does not necessarily reflect an inherent denigration of women (despite the current connotation of sexism). In short, the argument that sexism did not exist among Indians until contact with whites obscures and distorts more than it illuminates. The debate over sexism is however, important to the extent that it offers insight into how Wilma Mankiller viewed herself, her career, her relationship to dominant society, and her understanding of Cherokee culture.

The belief that women in Cherokee society enjoyed gender equity and a greater degree of autonomy than did many Euro-American women later justified Mankiller's assent to the highest elected office in the Cherokee Nation. Here, the historical validity of such a claim became obscured by the politics involved on all sides of the issue. Mankiller's role in Cherokee politics received significant media attention. The image of Wilma Mankiller triumphing over sexism to become the first female chief of a major Native American tribe is one that appeared in countless newspaper articles, magazines, and even children's stories. Indeed, it makes for a compelling story. Her last name alone sparked considerable interest among non-Indians. Add to that her being a feminist, a Cherokee (the tribe most readily recognized by most Americans), and someone who overcame tremendous health problems, and all the ingredients converged in a story of great triumph. The phrase "first female chief of a *major* Native American tribe" appeared

in print repeatedly in reference to Mankiller.[11] This is because she was by no means the first female chief of *a* tribe. She was not even the first female chief of an Indian tribe in Oklahoma or the second for that matter. The Sac and Fox Indian tribe of Oklahoma chose a female chief almost a decade before Mankiller began her political career. Aside from mention in a few local newspapers, Dora Schexnider got very little publicity for her role as a female chief.[12] Her sister, Mary McCormick, also served as chief but received no more publicity than did Schexnider. Perhaps this happened because the chief headed a tribe that only boasted a membership of 2,000 or perhaps it just did not make for as good a story. When Mary McCormick became chief in December of 1975 she said she had "mixed emotions" about her new position. "Probably I would rather have seen a man chosen," she explained.[13] Clearly, McCormick's tenure as chief lacked the magical ingredients that Mankiller's story had. And so, even though Mankiller did not become the first female chief of a Native American tribe, the name Wilma Mankiller still resonates with people when they think of female chiefs. Fond of telling people that she earned her name, Mankiller quite obviously enjoyed enormous success in gaining the interest of the media as

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[11]See for instance, Connie Koenenn, " Heart of a Nation," *Los Angeles Times*, November 1993, p. E 1; Ross Swimmer, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001. According to Swimmer reporters wanted to refer to her as the first female chief of an Indian tribe but instead agreed to the wording "first female chief of a major Indian tribe" or "first female chief of the second largest Indian tribe"after learning that a number of other women served as chief or chairperson of their tribes.

[12]"Chief of Tribe Eyes New Term" *The Daily Oklahoman*, 21 July 1975, p. 16.

[13]"The Men Picked Her as Chief," unidentified newspaper, 13 February 1976, Series 1, Box 5, LHC, NAES.

well as writers of children's stories.[14]

While children's books can hardly be held to the same standards of scholarship as historical monographs, the children's stories written about Wilma Mankiller provide a useful lens through which to view the use of sexism in political image formation. One story in particular, which followed a format similar to that of her autobiography, explained the difficulty Wilma faced when she agreed to run for deputy chief. After making her decision to run in 1983, the story describes people being "unfriendly" to Mankiller. "Something was very wrong. Wilma could feel it. Soon the truth came out. People were talking behind Wilma's back. 'We Cherokees never had a woman as deputy chief,' they said. 'It's a job for a man' they said."[15] This book did not go on to explain any other reasons why Wilma encountered criticism, or the contentious atmosphere of tribal politics.

Still another story, this one targeted at slightly older children, delved even further into emphasizing gender-based opposition to Wilma's decision to run for deputy chief: "Fellow Cherokees were not greeting her with open arms. And their disapproval was not of her stand on issues. Nor was it of her running mate. The problem they had was with Wilma's gender." The story then described some of the bad things that happened to Mankiller in the 1983 election, including slashed tires, destruction of campaign posters, and threatening phone calls. The only context given to explain why such things happened

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[14]Jo Sandin, "Cherokee Chief Personifies New Face of Leadership," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 14 November 1993. In this interview, as in many others, Mankiller jokingly insisted that she earned the name "Mankiller." She also related a story in which a young man, uncertain as to how to address her, suggested he call her "chiefette" because he believed "chief" was a masculine term. Instead, Mankiller suggested he address her as "Ms. Chief" or "mischief."

[15]Linda Lowery, *Wilma Mankiller*, illustrations by Janice Lee Porter (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1996) p. 41-42.

to her implied opposition to female leadership.[16] No mention was given to the other female candidate for deputy chief or the fact that the same types of things that happened to Wilma in that election often happened to male candidates in tribal elections. Ironically, this came from a book in The Library of Famous Women Series. Why not a story about an election in which the leading contenders were both women? One in which the male opponent, who said women should not be chief, got less than 25 percent of the vote. If the purpose had been to demonstrate a meaningful triumph over sexism, both for women and the Cherokee, the actual story was better than the one perpetuated in these books.

The November 1999 issue of *Oklahoma Woman* contained an interview with Mankiller, who at the time was recovering from radiation treatments for breast cancer. In the interview Mankiller said she did not plan to get involved in politics again. She described herself as "a very ordinary woman... who happened to be exposed to a very extraordinary set of circumstances."[17] Her understated characterization of her life and role in politics left researchers with the task of placing Mankiller in historical context. Though lacking political experience when she first ran for office in 1983, she indeed became a skilled politician. In fact, her autobiography can be understood, in part, as a manifestation of her skills as a politician. The story Mankiller told depicted adversity and hardship followed by triumph and restoration; both for herself and her tribe. One cannot understand Wilma Mankiller or her contribution to history without first examining the way

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[16]Bruce Glassman, *Wilma Mankiller: Chief of the Cherokee Nation* in *The Library of Famous Women* series. (New York: Blackbirch Press, 1992), p. 39.

[17]Susan Allison Gimmel, "Wilma Mankiller: A Chief and her People," *Oklahoma Woman*, November 1999, p. 4.

in which feminism and Indianness shaped her sense of self, her perceptions of the 1983 and 1987 elections, and her career in politics.

She was born to a Cherokee father, Charley Mankiller, and Dutch-Irish mother, Clara Irene Sitton Mankiller, in the W. W. Hastings Indian Hospital on November 18, 1945 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Wilma was the sixth of eleven children born to Charley and Irene Mankiller. Her birth came shortly after the end of World War II and in the early stages of the baby boom. While the 25 years following the end of the war ushered in an unprecedented level of prosperity in the United States, that prosperity did not touch all Americans. In fact, 1/5 of Americans continued to live below the poverty line and Wilma Mankiller came from just such a family. Wilma spent the first decade of her life living in rural southeastern Oklahoma on her father's family's Dawes allotment called Mankiller Flats in Adair County, just east of Tahlequah. The family hunted and grew what food they could. Her father and oldest brother, Don, cut railroad ties and did other odd jobs to make ends meet. They also worked each year in Colorado to help harvest broom corn and earn extra money for the family.[18]

The Mankillers struggled financially but Wilma recalled her family being close and affectionate and surrounded by other Cherokees. Wilma said she used to hide when she saw white people because she did not like the way some of them looked down on her and other Cherokees. She grew up learning to speak Cherokee and even though her mother was not Cherokee, she too learned to speak the language. Wilma also learned about Cherokee history and culture in that first decade of her life. She credited both her parents

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[18]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 34-35.

and other Cherokees in her community for instilling in her a love of traditional stories and a knowledge of Cherokee history.[19]

Even though Wilma recalled the early years of her childhood with fondness and a sense of security, the financial burden of caring for a large family on a limited and unstable income finally caused the Mankillers to take drastic measures. Her family moved to San Francisco in the mid 1950s as a part of the federal government's relocation program- an extension of termination policy.[20] This program helped Native Americans move to urban areas, where at least in theory, they could find better employment opportunities. Wilma objected to the move and described the experience as her own personal trail of tears. The adjustment proved difficult for Wilma.[21] She recalled feeling sad as her family drove to the train that would take them to San Francisco. Wilma tried to memorize the landscape she would not return to for another twenty years; her school, the trees and even the flowers blooming in her grandfather's yard.[22]

Once the Mankiller family arrived in San Francisco, everything seemed so different from the small rural community that she had known all her life. She and her family no longer found themselves surrounded by other Cherokees. Wilma felt at odds with her new surroundings and quite often like a fish out of water. Like LaDonna Harris, she too

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[19] Ibid., p. 37-38, p. 44.

[20]See Fixico, *Termination and Relocation.*

[21]Sam Howe Verhovek, "Mankiller's Life Chronicled in New Book: Chief of Cherokee Nation Went on Own Trail of Tears," *The Journal Record*, 5 November 1993.

[22]Sam Howe Verhovek, "The Name's the Most and Least of Her," *New York Times*, 4 November 1993, p. C 1.

experienced racism at a young age. She recalled a woman in San Francisco calling her and her siblings "nigger children" and her mother a "nigger lover."[23] She felt alienated from other children: "I was uncomfortable. I felt stigmatized."[24] Wilma eventually adjusted to life in San Francisco but never became very involved in school. Instead, she spent a fair amount of time at the American Indian Center, where some of her fondest memories of her San Francisco childhood were made.[25] The San Francisco Indian Center was one of many Indian centers established beginning in the 1960s to meet the cultural needs of the growing population of urban Indians.[26]

Mankiller, like many Native Americans in urban areas, confronted the difficult process of trying to fit into mainstream America while maintaining her heritage and cultural traditions. That she compared her family's move to San Francisco to the Cherokee Trail of Tears shows that she made sense of the world around her through her tribe's history. It is, however, difficult at best to ascertain fully when this connection emerged. Her autobiography, which provides the best insight into her life and identity to date, was written from the perspective of a grown woman whose Cherokee identity may in fact have become more pronounced than when she actually had the experiences. That said, Mankiller maintained that her family stressed traditional Cherokee values during her growing up years which seems consistent with the experiences of a number of Indian

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[23]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 99.

[24]Ibid., p. 103.

[25]Ibid., p. 115.

[26]Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, p. 24.

children. One scholar noted that 54 percent of Native American children living in San Francisco in the 1970s said that they learned native traditions in their homes.[27] It is important to remember that Wilma's experience of moving to a large city as a part of relocation resembled that of numerous Indian youths. The re-location of thousands of Indians from all different tribes to large urban areas helped lay the groundwork for the Pan Indian movement of the 1960s and 70s. As a young adult Wilma clearly identified heavily with other minority groups and felt alienated. Those feelings laid the foundation for the way in which Wilma experienced San Francisco in the 1960s.[28]

After finishing high school in 1963, Wilma began dating Hugo Olaya, a young Ecuadorian man four years older than she. They married that fall just a few days before Wilma's eighteenth birthday. Her parents voiced some objection because of her young age but she had a job and no one expected her to go to college. After her marriage both she and Hugo continued to work while he finished taking college courses. After giving birth to her first child, Felicia, at nineteen, Wilma stayed home and took care of her. Less than two years later, she had a second child, Gina, to care for as well. Wilma recalled feeling tension in her marriage after about three years. She and Hugo wanted different things and increasingly moved in opposing directions. They continued living in San Francisco and were engulfed in the swirling changes that characterized that decade. Wilma in particular found herself caught up in the idealism and activism of the 1960s. She

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[27]Ibid., p. 58.

[28]David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons about Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Temple, 1991).

cheered for Cesar Chavez when she heard about his efforts with the National Farm Workers Association.[29] Wilma also related to the issues raised by the Black Panthers. She admired the way in which they stood up for the rights of African Americans. [30]

By the late 1960s, Wilma began taking college courses and grew more and more interested in the activism around her. Then in 1969, two events occurred which altered her life. The first involved the San Francisco American Indian Center where Wilma spent a substantial amount of time as a youth and even after her marriage. Much of her exposure to Indian activists and AIM rhetoric took place at this center. It was there where she met Richard Oakes and became deeply influenced by him. In October of 1969 the center caught fire and burned to the ground. Wilma felt devastated by the fire and described the center as a home away from home for thousands of Native Americans.[31] Others shared Wilma's sentiments and the fire quite literally fueled a desire to make a public stand in support of greater tribal sovereignty. Plans were already underway to seize Alcatraz Island, the former federal prison, in the name of Indian sovereignty but the fire that destroyed the Indian Center lent a new urgency to the cause.[32] The group of young Indian activists who lost their center spent hours plotting and planning. Finally on November 20, 1969 they made their move.

Richard Oakes led a group of 78 Native Americans through the cold waters off the

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[29]Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. Garcia, *Caesar Chavez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

[30]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 148-154

[31]Ibid., p. 190.

[32]Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 12-13.

San Francisco Bay and headed for Alcatraz. The occupation lasted 19 months and brought considerable attention from the media. The new occupants of Alcatraz likened the former federal prison to an Indian reservation. They condemned the treatment of Indians at the hands of the white government and called for greater self-determination. In effect, the Indian occupation of Alcatraz represented a reassertion of tribal sovereignty.[33] People came and went from Alcatraz during the year and a half long occupation. The conditions on the island deteriorated with each passing month. One of the worst moments on the island came in January of 1971 when Richard Oakes' twelve year old daughter, Yvonne, fell three stories while playing on a stairwell. She later died from her injuries. Rumors abounded regarding the young girl's death. Some people speculated that she had been pushed to her death and others suggested that the Oakes children ran wild on the island with little or no supervision and that they used drugs, possibly contributing to Yvonne's death.[34]

The Occupation of Alcatraz certainly saw its share of problems including unsafe conditions and intense divisions in the leadership, but it was what Alcatraz represented to thousands of Native Americans that made it so significant. Donald Fixico described the occupation as igniting a greater critique of white society by Indians living in San Francisco as their group sense of Indianness became more heightened.[35] The occupation also deeply affected Wilma's life and her own perception of Indianness. Four of Wilma's brothers and

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[33]Ibid; Iverson, *"We Are Still Here,"* p. 149-151.

[34]Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 65-66.

[35]Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, p. 180.

sisters lived on the island at different times. Although Wilma rode out to the island once to accompany her sister, she never stayed. Instead she believed she could do more for the cause back in San Francisco at the Indian Center.[36] The Occupation of Alcatraz marked the beginning of Wilma's political activism. She lent her wholehearted support to the movement by working indirectly to support the occupation.[37] In fact, Wilma never even voted prior to the occupation, which she credited for awakening her to the importance of politics.[38] Her characterization of Alcatraz mirrored that of other Indian activists who felt the impact of Alcatraz on shaping both their activism and their sense of Indianness.[39] The occupation came to an end in June of 1971, but the American Indian Movement continued as did Wilma's activism.

In addition to her budding political consciousness, or perhaps because of it, Mankiller found herself struggling with her role as a woman and her own sort of 'feminine mystique.'[40] Wilma wanted to continue her work on behalf of Native Americans and to keep taking college classes. She criticized suburbia and the lifestyle it represented, saying "I knew I did not want to live like that." She added "I had no wish to become the kind of woman who would later be called a 'Stepford wife.'"[41] She felt an increasing tension

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[36]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 192-193.

[37] Ibid., p. 157.

[38]Mankiller/Wallis interview, 5 November 1991, p. 10, Folder 5, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[39]Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne, eds., *American Indian Activism*, p. 30-31.

[40]Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. In this best-selling work, Friedan challenged the notion that women's greatest sense of fulfillment should come from being wives and mothers and articulated the sense many women had that their lives were incomplete.

[41]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, 157.

between her desire to be involved as an activist for Indian issues and her role as a wife and mother. After the Occupation of Alcatraz ended, Wilma worked as the acting director of the Native American Youth Center in East Oakland. She and the other employees sought to instill a knowledge and appreciation of native cultures in the children with whom they worked. Wilma recalled learning about the importance of self-help while working at the youth center, a lesson that guided her later work with the Cherokee Nation.[42]

Wilma also began doing volunteer work with the Pit River tribe in Northern California after watching a story about them on the news regarding their efforts to regain their land from the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. The Pit River's struggle to regain their land began in earnest in October of 1970, with the Occupation of Alcatraz still underway. Close to 60 Pit Rivers re-occupied their land and were told by the Forest Service that they had to leave. On October 27 about 150 federal agents appeared to remove them. A fight between the natives and the federal agents ensued and resulted in the arrest of about 30 Pit Rivers.[43] In the early part of their efforts, before he became ill, Richard Oakes tried to help the Pit Rivers in their struggle. Others from Alcatraz rushed to their aid as well because their struggle represented both a condemnation of the federal government's treatment of Native Americans and a reassertion of tribal sovereignty. Through Wilma's work with the Pit River Indians she learned about treaty rights and sovereignty issues. As she helped compile research for the Pit River Legal Defense, she

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[42]Ibid., p. 202-203.

[43]For a first-hand account of the events of October 27, 1970 see Daryl B. Wilson, "The Pit River Challenge," *Chronicles of American Indian Protest*. ed., The Council on Interracial Books for Children (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1971), p. 322-327.

also developed stronger research skills, and her sense of urgency regarding activism on behalf of Native Americans grew.[44] But the significance of her contact with the Pit Rivers goes beyond learning about treaty rights. In fact, Vine Deloria argued that the whole sense of Indianness during this period was judged by whether or not people participated in events like Alcatraz and Pit River.[45] In short, the significance of Wilma's contact with other activists and her own activism in support of Alcatraz and Pit River shaped her understanding of Indianness, just as it did for the other Indian activists involved in California and around the country. Events such as the Occupation of Alcatraz and the Pit River struggle cannot be overstated in terms of their impact on shaping Wilma's understanding of Indian identity and self-determination.

Despite the strain her activism put on her marriage, Mankiller explained, "I wanted to set my own limits and control my destiny."[46] Wilma and her husband separated and then divorced in 1974. Wilma described what happened: "there was this contrast between staid sort of marriage and home and then this world of change and activism swirling around me." Wilma wanted "to be a part of that world and that change" and ultimately, "that world and that change won out."[47] Wilma said that while feminism had a "subtle impact" on her marriage, her divorce had more to do with her desire to be involved

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[44]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 4.

[45]Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne, eds., *American Indian Activism*, p. 30.

[46]Ibid., p.161.

[47]Mankiller/Wallis interview, 5 November 1991, p. 14-15, Folder 5, Box 43, WMC, WHC OU.

in social and political issues that affected Native Americans.[48] Prior to her exposure to feminism Wilma felt that something must be wrong with her because she did not find being a housewife fully satisfying.[49] After she and Hugo divorced, the feminist movement had a profound impact on her life and she struggled to find autonomy and her own sense of self.[50]

The second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to shape Mankiller's attitudes about women's issues throughout her political career. She described her exposure to second-wave feminism while living in San Francisco, writing: "I eventually discovered that many of those women were wives, mothers, students, bright dropouts, and others who met to discuss their sexuality, employment opportunities, and male tyranny." She further described the movement as having a tremendous impact on both her life and the lives of other women.[51] After moving back to Oklahoma in the mid 1970s, she joined the Ms. Foundation for Women and became an ardent supporter of women's rights. Ultimately, Wilma's own feminism played a key role in defining how she thought about women and politics.

The decision to return to Oklahoma after living in San Francisco for two decades seemed to Wilma the right thing to do for a variety of reasons. She feared her ex-husband, Hugo, would take one or both of her daughters. He had kept her daughter Gina

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[48]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 November 2001, p.1

[49]Unidentified newspaper article, Folder 1, Box 5, WMC, WHC, OU.

[50]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p.159.

[51]Ibid.

away from her for an entire year and even after Gina returned home, Wilma worried that Hugo would make good on his threats to separate her from her daughters. She and her two daughters visited Oklahoma in the summer of 1976 and then moved there permanently the following summer. By the time Wilma returned to Oklahoma, her father had passed away and her mother was again living in Adair county, not far from where the family lived prior to moving to San Francisco. Many of her brothers and sisters also moved back to Oklahoma.[52] Wilma's decision to return to her family's home in Oklahoma began a new phase in her life. She took with her the lessons she learned during the time she spent in San Francisco and returned as a veteran of 1960s activism in San Francisco.

Upon returning to Oklahoma, Wilma went to work for the Cherokee Nation as the economic stimulus coordinator, then moved up to the Central Planning Department, and oversaw the Bell Community Revitalization Project. In fact, this project played a definitive role in shaping Mankiller's outlook on community development and in propelling her into Cherokee politics. Tremendously successful, it laid sixteen miles of water line in addition to building and remodeling dozens of homes. Cherokees living in the Bell community did the work themselves and Mankiller oversaw the whole process. If families did not show up to work, they faced being dropped from the project. According to one letter sent to the families in Bell, only 5 out of 103 families had failed to do any work by March of 1983.[53] By the time those in Bell completed the project in mid 1984,

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[52]Ibid., *Mankiller*, p. 213-216.

[53]Charlie Soap and Thomas Muskrat to Applicants, 24 March 1983, Folder 3, Box 37, WMC, WHC, OU.

some families had been dropped from the project for not working on the water line or for not putting in the required 350 hours on housing construction.[54] Mankiller said "some people did not think they really had to work." Still, a vast majority participated in improving their community and "had a lot to be proud of."[55]

Bell served as a model for Mankiller and the Cherokee Nation in a number of other communities. In fact, her experience with the people in Bell deepened her desire to help Cherokees in other poor communities, such as Kenwood. In the poor rural area known as Kenwood, Wilma described talking with Cherokees who lived in buses, lean-tos, and homes with no modern facilities. This, in part, inspired her involvement in Cherokee politics.[56] She said she greatly esteemed the Bell project because it "proved once and for all that poor people are resourceful, intelligent, and have enormous untapped leadership ability."[57] Bell, which many described as the Harlem of eastern Oklahoma, had been the poorest community in Oklahoma prior to Mankiller's efforts.[58] This project brought considerable attention to Mankiller and opened the door to her political involvement. To Swimmer's credit, he brought in people to train Mankiller in community development. He also created the new Department of Community Development and asked Wilma to serve as the first director. She worked as the director of Community Development until she

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[54]Wilma Mankiller to Housing Participants, 6 October 1983, Folder 3, Box 37, WMC, WHC, OU.

[55] Wilma Mankiller to Housing Participants, 11 May 1984, Folder 3, Box 37, WMC, WHC, OU.

[56]Wilma Mankiller, sample chapter from "Coming Into Office," p. 4, Folder 10, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[57]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 4.

[58]Ross O. Swimmer, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001.

resigned to run for deputy chief in1983.[59]

By 1982 it became clear that Ross Swimmer's deputy chief, Perry Wheeler, intended to challenge Swimmer for the position of principal chief in the1983 election. Swimmer, who was battling cancer, had not planned to run for re-election in1983, but changed his mind because of apprehension over the type of leadership he feared Wheeler would bring to the tribe. Swimmer consulted with friends and colleagues for advice on a running mate to little avail. He wanted someone active in the community who would take on the responsibilities of deputy chief as a full time job. His attention turned to Wilma because of her success with the Bell project and her work as director of Community Development for the tribe.[60]

Swimmer asked Wilma to run as his deputy chief but faced criticism by some of his associates who questioned the wisdom of such a decision. A number of people had hoped he would select Gary Chapman, a member of the tribal council and a long time friend of Swimmer; they were more than a little surprised when he did not.[61] Mankiller explained that people assumed Ross "by-passed all the male executives to ask me to take on a few more responsibilities during this period because of his admiration for me."[62] She admitted that this may have been the case, but added, "Perhaps he had little choice" because he

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[59]Ross O. Swimmer, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[62]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 5 January 1992, p. 2, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

needed someone he could trust.[63] While trust certainly factored into his decision, he also believed that he and Wilma would compliment each other well. Swimmer spent a lot of time traveling to Washington and wanted a deputy chief who would go out into the communities and work with those who most needed help. He felt that Mankiller had already demonstrated her ability to do this type of work.[64]

Still, Wilma recalled her reluctance when Swimmer approached her about being his running mate. "When he first asked me to run for Deputy Chief, I was very flattered but I also thought it was a ridiculous idea." She saw herself as an activist, not a politician.[65] Despite these misgivings, she decided to run for office because it offered her another opportunity to battle the poverty she saw among the Cherokees.[66] The early criticism of Swimmer's selection of Wilma as his deputy chief only intensified. According to Mankiller, all fifteen council members on Swimmer's slate threatened to withdraw their support for him if he did not drop her as his deputy chief candidate.[67] The opposition to Mankiller did not stop with the council members. When they went out on the campaign trail, Wilma remarked, "He [Ross Swimmer] would introduce me and people would virtually ignore me."[68]

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[63]Ibid.

[64]Ross O. Swimmer, interview with the author, 21 June 2001.

[65]Mankiller/Wallis interview, 5 January 1992, p. 3, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., p. 5.

[68]Ibid., 6.

She explained the extent of the criticism against her: "People complained to him because I am female, because I am a Democrat, because they didn't like the way I dressed, because I had not paid my political dues by serving on council on something first." She concluded, "But the big issue seemed to be my being a woman."[69] Both in her autobiography and in speeches, Mankiller maintained that she encountered a great deal of opposition because of her gender during and after the 1983 election. She said she had been prepared to debate whatever issues came up except the one over whether or not women should hold office. Mankiller did not consider it an issue: "The thing that was a surprise to me was the number of people who opposed me simply because I am female." She expressed shock and frustration and said, "In my entire life I had gotten through all these things without having that kind of overt in-your-face kind of opposition simply because of my gender."[70] While Mankiller later said that she did not characterize the opposition to her election as "sexism," the issue of her gender certainly received a great deal of attention both in newspapers and in her autobiography.[71] One article described Mankiller's experience stating, "By far the greatest prejudice she encountered as a rising political force among the Cherokee was because she was a woman."[72]

Despite the contention that sexism constituted one of the biggest campaign issues Mankiller faced, her opponents for deputy chief were a man, J.B. Dreadfulwater, and a

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[69]Ibid., p. 4.

[70]Ibid., p. 9.

[71]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 1.

[72]"Cherokee Chief Fills Many Roles in Life," unidentified newspaper, circa 1992, Folder 11, Box 10 WMC, WHC, OU.

woman, Agnes Cowen. Dreadfulwater openly opposed the idea of women in leadership positions but was soundly defeated in the July election. Of the total 11,069 votes cast for the office of deputy chief, Dreadfulwater received only 2,785 votes, while Cowen got 3,157 and Mankiller pulled in the most with 5,127 votes.[73] Though not enough to give Mankiller the fifty percent majority needed to win the election outright, the election made it clear that sexism did not inform the decision of a vast majority of the voters. The defeat of Dreadfulwater in the July election left Mankiller in a run-off for deputy chief against Agnes Cowen. Dreadfulwater refused to support either woman in the run-off election, again citing his belief that women should not hold the position.[74]

When Michael Wallis asked Mankiller if Agnes Cowen encountered the same sexism, she speculated that there were probably some who objected to Cowen because of her gender, but said she doubted as many people confronted her because of the kind of demeanor she possessed. Mankiller explained, "She was politically savvy."[75] Cowen was also in her fifties while Mankiller was only thirty-seven. Cowen had far more experience in politics and with the Cherokee Nation than did Wilma which raises the question as to what other factors influenced the opposition against Mankiller.

Certainly some tribal members opposed Wilma Mankiller because she was a woman. Similarly, there were those who also opposed Agnes Cowen because of her gender. Wilma suggested that on the day of the run off election, those voters simply

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[73] *Cherokee Advocate* v. VII n. 3, Election 83, p. 2

[74]"Dreadfulwater is Neutral in Runoff," 1983, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Ross O. Swimmer private papers inherited from his secretary, Carol Allison (hereafter Swimmer private papers).

[75]Mankiller/Wallis interview, 5 January 1992, p. 10.

stayed home.[76] While each woman likely experienced individual acts of sexism, it did not constitute systemic or institutionalized sexism. Further, the characterization of the election as one in which gender served as the biggest issue seems implausible given that Mankiller's biggest competition was another woman. Another factor which bears consideration is that in addition to Mankiller and Cowen, seven other Cherokee women ran for tribal office in1983, three of whom won election to the tribal council. Two of these women, Barbara Starr Scott and Wathene Young, ran campaigns that emphasized their gender as a positive attribute. They took out a political advertisement in which the following quote appeared beneath their pictures: "Historically Cherokee women have had a strong voice in the direction of our peoples' lives. Allow women this opportunity once again."[77] In spite of their use of gender identity politics, neither woman supported Wilma Mankiller in her bid for deputy chief. It should also be noted that in the1983 election, council members ran for office at large as opposed to running from a particular district or county. In light of this approach, which has since changed, the top fifteen vote getters became council members. And, in that election, Barbara Starr Scott received the second highest number of votes which offers a further challenge to the notion that gender bias acted as any meaningful barrier for the Cherokee women running for office.[78]

In fact, both Agnes Cowen and J. B. Dreadfulwater, as well as other Cherokees,

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[76]Ibid.

[77]Barbara Starr Scott and Wathene Young, Political advertisement with quote from Rachael Lawrence, 1983 Election, Swimmer private papers.

[78]"1983 Election," Ross Swimmer Collection (hereafter RSC), Cherokee National Archives (hereafter CNA), Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

criticized Mankiller for reasons unrelated to gender. They criticized her for only having been involved with the Cherokee Nation for a short time and for not having experience in Cherokee politics. Mankiller herself said that Cowen "was much better qualified to serve as Deputy Principal Chief" than she was.[79] In fact, Agnes Cowen, became the first woman elected to the tribal council in1975 and then ran for deputy chief in1979. By the time the 1983 election rolled around she had already been through two campaigns. And, if a few more votes had gone the other way, it would have been she and not Wilma Mankiller who became the first female deputy chief in1983. Cowen, who died on August 27, 1999, has been described by those who knew her as tough and no-nonsense.[80] In fact, it appears that she rubbed many people the wrong way. She never hesitated to tell someone when she disagreed with them. Her daughters remember her as a strong-willed feminist with a big heart who had little tolerance for excuses.[81] To those who found themselves at odds with Cowen, she could seem domineering and harsh. Mankiller described Cowen's style of interaction as "direct, straightforward, not emotional," whereas Wilma viewed herself as more "personal, intimate and emotional."[82] Here, in fact, Swimmer's support of Mankiller proved vital to her winning because he remained strongly opposed to having Cowen as his

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[79]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 1.

[80]Isabel Baker, Interview with the author, 14 July 2001.

[81] Sandra Ketcher, Interview with the author, 12 June 2001; Enid Strain, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001.

[82]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 1.

deputy chief, as the two had found themselves at odds in the past.[83]

One issue with which Mankiller had to contend and Cowen did not, was the fact that Mankiller had spent twenty years of her life living outside of Oklahoma. According to Mankiller, it seems that a number of people, particularly tribal executives and council members viewed her as something of an outsider and perhaps even a young radical because of her connection to Alcatraz and California Indians. When she first went to work for the tribe as the economic stimulus coordinator, Mankiller said people viewed her as an upstart. One tribal member even told her, "You know, you're pretty smart. You'll do ok here in Oklahoma as long as you stay out of politics."[84] The point here is not to dismiss sexism entirely as an issue, but rather to suggest that other factors figured into the opposition against her as well. Cowen and Mankiller experienced sex discrimination differently and to varying degrees. Perhaps the fact that Agnes Cowen had more experience in the tribe and came across as more "politically savvy" than Wilma also played a role in why people viewed them differently. Mankiller explained, "The conventional wisdom was that if a woman was going to win it was going to be Agnes because she had been on the council and directed the Bilingual Cultural Center, [she] had been there all her life, that sort of thing."[85]

Indeed, Mankiller's political inexperience, the way she dressed, the years she spent away from Oklahoma, her obvious support of feminism, and her membership in the

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[83]Ross O. Swimmer, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001; Sandra Ketcher, Interview with the author, 12 June 2001.

[84]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 14 November 1991, p. 20, Folder 5, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[85]Ibid., p. 11.

Democratic party all factored into the opposition against her. Because of the type of work Wilma had done prior to running for deputy chief, she often wore jeans and cowboy boots. While appropriate for working out in the rural Cherokee communities, she felt pressure to dress more professionally when she campaigned for office. Some people, including Ross Swimmer supporters, thought that she needed to dress up more if she were going to run for the second most powerful position in the tribe. One of Agnes Cowen's daughters recalled the pressure on Wilma and how ill at ease she seemed in the polyester business suits the campaign people encouraged her to wear.[86] In a letter to Swimmer at the beginning of the campaign, Wilma wrote that she would try to take more care with her appearance, adding "I will try to look like I have at least considered the question of whether certain colors go well together."[87] While female politicians often have to be more conscientious about their appearance then their male counterparts, the criticism of Wilma Mankiller's attire seems to have had little to do with gender but rather the professional dress required of political leaders in general.[88]

Appearance aside, Wilma ran a campaign that emphasized community development and economic renewal and she did so very successfully. She had developed a relationship with many rural Cherokees during her community development work. This group, as well as some older Cherokees and those who voted for her because of Swimmer's support

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[86]Enid Strain, Interview with the author, 21 June 200.1

[87]Wilma Mankiller to Ross Swimmer, circa summer 1983, p. 2, Swimmer private papers.

[88]For a discussion of the scrutiny female politicians face including how they dress see Cindy Simon Rosenthal, *When Women Lead: Integrative Leadership in State Legislatures* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

proved crucial in her getting elected. Despite the criticisms against her, Mankiller won the run-off election, becoming the first female deputy chief of the Cherokee nation. She was also the first to come from a large, poor, liberal family in the twentieth century, which marked a significant accomplishment for her.[89]

Once she began settling into the office of deputy chief, the difficulties Mankiller faced in the election did not entirely subside. She continued to experience a turbulent relationship with the tribal council, which she presided over as deputy chief. She related an instance from her first meeting in which a male council member kept interrupting her and saying she was in violation of various regulations that she had never even heard of. Before the next council meeting she had the microphones rewired so that she could control whose voice was heard.[90] This was a maneuver of a skilled politician and not simply a triumph over sexism. What is excluded from the telling of this story is that there were three women who were members of the tribal council, none of whom supported Wilma Mankiller.

The three female members of the tribal council elected in 1983 had not supported Mankiller in the election nor did they extend their support to her when she became deputy chief. Barbara Starr Scott, Wathene Young, and Patsy Morton instead allied themselves with Gary Chapman, who strongly opposed Wilma. Years later Wilma described her relationship with these three women as cordial, but said that at the time "no supportive

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[89]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001,p. 3.

[90]Wilma Mankiller, "The Changing Role of American Indian Women" 4 April 1989, Honors Week keynote address, video recording, Northern Arizona University.

relationship" developed between the female council members and their female deputy chief.[91] While Mankiller's interaction with the tribal council often remained strained, she did establish herself as a strong deputy chief over the next few years. Early on she voiced concern about her role, saying "I have mixed emotions about my new position." Wilma, it seems, feared that she would get bogged down in the bureaucracy of tribal affairs and not be able to focus on the initiatives that were most important to her.[92] This did prove a struggle, but she worked hard as deputy chief to continue community development projects.[93]

The community development that meant so much to Wilma and that helped her get elected also changed her life in another way. Not long after moving back to Oklahoma, Wilma met Charlie Soap, a full-blooded Cherokee who worked for the Cherokee Nation. They got to know each other while working together on the Bell project and then he became one of her strongest supporters in the1983 election. Charlie divorced his wife in 1983 and took over as director of Community Development when Wilma stepped down. He worked as the director until October of1985 when he and Wilma got married. According to Cherokee nepotism laws, no relative of an elected official of the tribe can work for the Cherokee Nation so Charlie had to resign from his job after he married

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[91]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 2. It should also be noted that despite numerous attempts, it was never possible to interview Barbara Starr Scott, Wathene Young or Patsy Morton.

[92]Wilma Mankiller to Daniel Bomberry, 12 August 1983, Folder 13, Box 8, WMC, WHC, OU.

[93]While eastern Oklahoma is conservative and a strong-hold for Republicans, mainstream party politics does not appear to directly affect the selection of tribal officials. Candidates run on specific issues and their affiliation with national political parties is typically of little consequence.

Wilma. He remained a vital presence though in the work on community development and strongly supported his wife's role in Cherokee politics.[94]

That same year Ross Swimmer began talking to Wilma about the possibility of his resigning as chief to assume the position of assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs. Swimmer maintained that he would not have taken the job unless he could be certain that Mankiller would stay and accept her constitutional duty to become principal chief upon his resignation.[95] When Swimmer did resign in December of 1985, just two months after Wilma and Charlie's marriage, she became principal chief and later described herself as unprepared for assuming her new role and for the "hardball politics" that went along with it.[96]

Since this now left a vacancy in the office of deputy chief, the council began searching for a replacement. Under these conditions, the council had to elect someone. Wilma believed that a coup was being planned against her by some members of the council. According to Mankiller, the plan consisted of filling the office with one of her harshest critics, Gary Chapman, who would then start impeachment proceedings against her and the council would remove her from office (for what reason is unclear). Sexism may have motivated some council members, but significantly the plan included a provision for female council member, Barbara Starr Scott, to become deputy chief upon Mankiller's removal from office while Chapman ascended to principal chief.

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[94]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 236-238.

[95]Ross O. Swimmer, Interview with the author, 21 June 2001.

[96]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 5 January 1992, p. 13, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

Wilma found out about the plan the night before the council election and asked first term council member John Ketcher to throw his hat into the ring for deputy chief.[97] Wilma thought she would be able to work well with Ketcher and knew his election offered her the best hope of maintaining control over a difficult situation since so many on the council openly expressed hostility to her and had since the beginning. Mankiller recalled, the future of her leadership "came down to that one critical moment.[98] As the selection process got underway for a new deputy chief from within the ranks of the tribal council, the December 14 council meeting took on greater significance. Initially, five of the fifteen council members submitted their names for consideration. After the fourth round of votes were cast, a deadlock remained between John Ketcher and Gary Chapman. At that point the council asked Mankiller to comment and she lent her full support to Ketcher. Gary Chapman then requested his name be withdrawn and made a motion that Ketcher be named deputy chief.[99] The coup attempt that may have been in the works did not occur and Wilma got the deputy chief she wanted.

As Mankiller prepared to run for the 1987 election, the political climate became particularly nasty. Looking back, she described it as "by far the worst election," explaining that even after her recent introduction to the underbelly of politics, she was still surprised by what she encountered in the 1987 election.[100] Mankiller learned a valuable

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[97]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001.

[98]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 5 January 1992, p.13 Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[99]Cherokee Tribal Council meeting minutes, 14 December 1985, p. 8, Folder 3, Box 4, WMC, WHC, OU.

[100]Ibid., 14.

lesson about the negative side of politics, commenting, "I am no longer the young social activist who couldn't find her way around Washington and was shocked that my own team would betray me."[101] Wilma faced three opponents in the 1987 election, Perry Wheeler, Dave Whitekiller, and Bill McGee. Whitekiller apparently did his best to make Mankiller's gender an issue in the election. Wilma recalled him saying to her "on numerous occasions that he didn't think women should be in leadership positions."[102] Whitekiller told at least one reporter that Mankiller's "being a woman was a drawback that caused other Indian tribes in America to lose respect for the Cherokee Nation."[103]

Whitekiller also criticized Mankiller for not going by her husband's last name. He even went so far as to file a complaint with the tribal election committee to try to force Wilma to use her husband's last name. His reason, at least according to the letter he wrote to the commission, was that he thought "Whitekiller" and "Mankiller" sounded too similar and would confuse voters on the ballots. He based his request on the gendered assumption that because of Wilma's marriage to Charlie Soap, she had automatically taken her husband's last name. In fact, Wilma had opted not to change her last name and had never gone by the last name Soap. Ironically, if anyone had something to gain by voter confusion of the two names, it was Dave Whitekiller because Wilma enjoyed far greater popularity than he did. Mankiller viewed the event as a gender based attack and in many ways it was; certainly, a male politician would not be vulnerable to such an assumption.

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[101]Ibid.

[102]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 5 January 1992, p. 15, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[103]Donna Hales, "First Woman Chief Begins Second Term," *Phoenix*, 20 July 1987.

However, the complaint stemmed mainly from ignorance-- albeit ignorance rooted in sexism. Whitekiller believed that Soap actually was Wilma's legal last name by virtue of her marriage to Charlie Soap and, on those grounds, he petitioned the council, not because he felt that she should have to change her legal name. He even suggested she go by "Wilma Pearl Mankiller Soap." The election committee, with three women and two men in attendance, unanimously voted to deny the request of Dave Whitekiller after a brief discussion of its frivolity and subsequently the issue was dropped.[104]

Though the controversy over her last name subsided, it left Mankiller with a sense of unease about gender-based attacks against her. In an interview shortly before the election, Mankiller said "the central issue is whether or not gender has anything to do with leadership."[105] Statements such as this led one writer to proclaim "Sexism was the only issue of the '87 campaign, not roads, schools, jobs, health care, sobriety programs, improving housing, or even Indian sovereignty."[106] On the one hand, Wilma's gender was central to some of the campaign attacks against her. People like Dave Whitekiller clearly made sexist remarks about female leadership in general and Mankiller's in particular. On the other, Mankiller was by no means the only prominent female in Cherokee politics. In fact, her biggest competition in the1987 election, Perry Wheeler, had as his deputy chief running mate, Barbara Starr Scott. In the1983 "coup attempt" it was also Scott who had

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[104]Cherokee Tribal Election Committee Meeting minutes, 23 April 1987, p. 1-2, Folder 2, Box 18, WMC, WHC, OU.

[105]Catherine C. Robbins, "Expanding Power for Indian Women," *New York Times*, 26 May 1987, p. C 1.

[106]Jo Higginbotham, "Cherokee Autumn's Warrior," p. 12, 11 April 1994, Folder 11, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

her eye on the office of deputy chief. In short, though a minority of tribal members did not want any women holding important leadership roles, there is no evidence to suggest that sexism guided the bulk of opposition to Mankiller.

Sexism, it seems, provided an easy way to attack Wilma and certainly got the most amount of attention. That Wilma appeared to experience a greater degree of sexism than other Cherokee women who held office is perhaps not surprising. With a few exceptions, it seems that most of the attacks against her came not because she was a woman but because of the particular woman that she was. Being a liberal feminist and a Democrat in conservative rural Oklahoma made her gender more threatening than if she were a conservative Republican who outwardly embraced mainstream images of women's traditional roles. The opposition against Wilma simply took on a conveniently gendered tone. Moreover, Wilma was more likely to view attacks against her as gender-based than perhaps were other more conservative women. In fact, Ross Swimmer repeatedly cautioned Wilma against running for office in 1987 because she did not have the support of the council.[107]

Regardless of the council's hostility, the issue of sexism, and Swimmer's warnings, Mankiller continued on in the1987 election. John Ketcher ran as her deputy chief and although both were forced into a run-off election, each prevailed in the end. In the July 18 run-off Wilma faced Perry Wheeler, who had served as Swimmer's deputy chief and then challenged Swimmer in the 1983 election. John Ketcher faced Barbara Starr Scott, whom

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[107]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 5 January 1992, p. 14, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

he beat 5,819 to 4,714 and Mankiller defeated Wheeler 5,914 to 4,670.[108] Saying "it was a sweet victory," Chief Mankiller added, "Finally, I felt the question of gender had been put to rest."[109] She quickly pointed out that because of her election to the most powerful office in the tribe "some people erroneously conclude that the role of native women has changed in *every* tribe." This, she went on to say "is not so."[110] However, after her election in1987, she promptly dismissed sexism as no longer being a problem. In the introduction to her autobiography, Michael Wallis wrote: "In the beginning there were many problems and obstacles. There were some Cherokee who didn't wish to be governed by a female." He concluded by placing that sentiment firmly in the past: "Now when disagreements occur, they are based on issues rather than gender."[111]

The contentions of Mankiller and her co-author raise a number of significant issues about the politics of identity. Identity politics is by definition exclusionary as one primary component of identity supercedes the others. While Wilma described herself as a feminist, her feminism seemed to take a backseat to her sense of Indianness, ultimately manifested in an adherence to a sort of tribal purity. Published two years before the end of her last term in office, her autobiography at times reads (perhaps not surprisingly) like a propaganda effort to show that while problems and sexism existed in the past, all had come to be right with the tribe under her leadership. In light of her election, Mankiller

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[108]Election Committee Meeting minutes, 21 July 1987, p. 1, Folder 2, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

[109]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 249.

[110]Ibid., p. 250.

[111]Ibid., p. xvii.

pronounced, "We are also returning the balance to the role of women in our tribe."[112] Furthermore, she came to characterize sexism as a decidedly "un-Indian" phenomenon. Just six months after her self-professed subjection to sexism at the hands of her own tribe during the election, Wilma told an audience at Harvard, "Contrary to what you've probably read in history books, not all tribes were controlled by men." She explained, "sexism was one of the many white influences on Cherokee culture."[113] She picked up on this theme in her autobiography as well, writing, "Europeans brought with them the view that men were the absolute heads of households, and women were to be subordinate to them." Certain that sexism "was not a Cherokee concept," Mankiller could then dismiss the gender biases she claimed to experience in the 1983 and 1987 elections as another detrimental aspect of European contact.[114]

Mankiller's autobiography also told her personal story within the context of Cherokee history. At times, the result is a static and ahistorical depiction of white/Indian interaction. In response to a BIA employee pointing out a few minor factual errors in her book, Mankiller reiterated that it was, in fact, an autobiography and added that she would "be very much surprised if anyone mistook it for a definitive book on Indian policy."[115] Still, a problem emerges in the commingling of her personal story and historical imagery.

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[112]Ibid., p. 246.

[113]Gary Perceful, "Ms. Mankiller 'Thrilled' by Ms Listing" *Tulsa World*, Section A 19, 17 December 1987.

[114]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 20.

[115]Wilma Mankiller to Carl Shaw, assistant to the assistant secretary, Indian Affairs, and director, Office of Public Affairs, 28 December 1993, Folder 13, Box 41, WMC, WHC, OU.

For instance, she claimed that intermarriage between Indian women and white men worked to the benefit of the men but to the detriment of the women.[116] Historical evidence fails to support such a sweeping generalization.[117] Experiences varied widely depending on tribe, time period, sex ratio, and other circumstances. Both male and female Cherokees have historically intermarried in greater numbers than many other tribes. Surely Cherokee women would not have done so if there were no benefits to such marriages. The larger significance of Wilma's autobiography lies in the revealing insight it offers into her blend of identity politics, both in terms of feminism and Indian identity.

The role of image and identity in politics signifies a great deal about both society and political leaders. Mankiller clearly considered(s) herself a feminist. In the1983 and 1987 campaigns she reacted to sexism by refusing to even entertain the notion that women should not run for office. She firmly remarked "Gender is not related to leadership, leadership is not related to gender."[118] She refused to acknowledge gender-based attacks. However, after being elected principal chief in1987, she quickly dismissed the problem of sexism, at least among the Cherokee. Did she abandon the tenets of feminism for political power? Or did the sexism she claimed to encounter really disappear upon her election?

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[116]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 25-26.

[117]See Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, 1997) and Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Both works argue that in early relations between white traders and Indians, some Indian women, in fact, benefitted a great deal from intermarriages. They enjoyed an elevated status because of their vital role as translator, cultural liaison, and helpmate. Eventually the status of Indian women who married whites declined for a number of reasons, such as the increase in the number of Anglo women who came to the West.

[118]Mankiller/Wallis Interview 5 January 1992, p. 10, Folder 6, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

One early male critic of Wilma came around, consenting "I had negative thoughts [about women leading the tribe] before. But I have had the opportunity to work with her [Mankiller]. I have been impressed with her leadership."[119] Some critics changed their minds about Mankiller's ability to govern as a woman as she gained popularity and brought national attention to the Cherokee tribe. Nevertheless, the competing role of feminism and Indianness in her political image should not be obscured. To put it baldly, in the battle between the Indian and the woman, the Indian won.

Granted, the identity of most people contains multiple components, which develop and change over time and sometimes one component may become more prominent than the others. In the case of Mankiller, however, it is not simply a matter of identity, but rather political expediency. Her dismissal of sexism among Cherokees provided her with a political tool. After the 1987 election, she chose to squelch whatever personal injury she may have experienced because of sexism in favor of emphasizing a return to harmonious gender relations within the tribe under her leadership.

The tension between feminism and Indianness, manifested in Mankiller's political rhetoric should not be examined in a vacuum. In fact, historians argue that perhaps the greatest limitation of second-wave feminism stemmed from the movement's failure to allow for and accommodate the differences that exist between women.[120] Issues of class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality led to a great deal of division within the movement. The

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[119]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 247.

[120]The following works explore the divisions within the feminist movement: Echols, *Daring to be Bad*; Evans, *Personal Politics*; Joseph and Lewis, *Common Differences*; Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism.*

fundamental premise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, which erupted while Mankiller lived in San Francisco, consisted of the belief that above all else women were united by their gender and that everything else remained secondary to this one commonality. Though Mankiller did not directly participate in the movement, she did credit it with having a significant impact on her. The point, then, is not that she experienced the tension within the feminist movement per se, but rather that the tension between feminism and Indianness in her own life should be understood within the larger context of challenges to feminism. To be clear, Mankiller herself did not articulate any sense of feeling torn between being a feminist and an Indian. However, to the extent that she utilized identity politics in her political career, this tension emerges in an examination of her rhetoric. She claimed that no sexism existed among Indians until contact and thus described the gender discrimination she encountered in the1983 and1987 elections as un-Indian. Once she won election in her own right, she and her co-author quickly placed the issue of sexism in the past. Here, it seems Mankiller acted as a skilled politician in her use of gendered imagery.

Clearly the assertion that Mankiller's political career and her election as chief in 1987 marked a return to Cherokee tradition is an oversimplification. The exact nature and extent of sexism in Cherokee society remains unclear. Though her allegations of sexism were inconsistent and at times unsubstantiated by the evidence, they can best be understood as political tools. Analysis of the elections in1983 and 1987 does not reveal widespread gender hostility toward Wilma Mankiller or any of the other candidates. Other Cherokee women, most notably Barbara Scott and Agnes Cowen, were politically active

before Mankiller ran for office. Men did not constitute her only competition and not all women supported her. If the1983 election revealed anything about opposition to women running for political office it was that those people were clearly a small minority. J. B. Dreadfulwater's elimination left Wilma and Agnes Cowen vying for deputy chief. His attempt to make the gender of his opponents a meaningful issue patently failed. In the so called coup attempt of 1985 and in the election of 1987, in which Mankiller's gender has been described as a major issue, there were women involved in the opposition to her.

The role of rumor and historical memory also complicates any attempt to identify the exact nature of sexism in the 1983 and 1987 campaigns. Mankiller's deputy chief, John Ketcher, recalled hearing that Mankiller had encountered sexism when running for office but he had no direct knowledge of it. Saying he had nothing but the utmost respect for the work of Mankiller, Ketcher described her as a remarkable woman who has overcome many obstacles in her life.[121] Similarly, Lynn Howard did not recall sexism being a particularly big issue for Chief Mankiller.[122] In a 1986 interview, however, an article in *Mother Jones* quoted Howard as saying "there was plenty of sexism" when Swimmer left office and Mankiller became chief. Howard added: "This area is very rural, very inbred, and full of a lot of good Baptists who think God doesn't want a woman in charge of anything."[123] Interestingly, shortly after Mankiller replaced Swimmer as chief, she conducted an informal poll of twenty people to gauge the reaction of Cherokees to

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[121]John Ketcher, Interview with the author, 27 July 2001.

[122]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October, 2001.

[123]"Woman Chief Blazing an Indian Trail," *Mother Jones*, September 1986, p. 8.

female leadership. Based on the poll results, Mankiller said the "support was overwhelming" and added "so the myth that people have worries about a woman is indeed a myth."[124] By and large, the sexism Wilma did encounter came only from a handful of people who were looking for any reason to discredit her politically. Both her own popularity among the tribe and the role of other Cherokee women in politics further supports such a conclusion. Yet the idea of overcoming sexism presented a national platform for Mankiller's story, and this is where Chief Mankiller, the politician, made use of the forum available to her.

By the time she ran for her final term of office in1991, she won by an astonishing 82.5 percent of the vote. Her margin of victory would be considered a landslide for any political race, but it was especially remarkable given the contentious nature of tribal politics. She once told an audience of college students that she did not yet believe that women had achieved equality in politics because they need a resume twice as long as a man's. Mankiller went on to add that only when mediocre women begin to get elected to high offices will equality truly be achieved.[125] It is in that spirit that Mankiller's accusations of sexism should be understood. As long as a woman's triumph over sexism is viewed as a necessary precursor to political participation and as long as there is an eager reception to stories that celebrate this triumph, then gender will be privileged over substance. Indeed, so long as this is the case, women in politics will remain an anomaly,

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[124]"Inaugural Address Charts Future Policy," *Cherokee Advocate*, v. x, n. 1, January 1986, p. 11A.

[125]Wilma Mankiller, "The Changing Role of American Indian Women Today," 4 April 1989, Honors Week Keynote Address video recording, Northern Arizona University.

an oddity, an out of the ordinary success to be celebrated, instead of women being remembered for where they stood on the issues. Given that, the work Wilma Mankiller did as chief of the Cherokee Nation after being elected in her own right in 1987 through the end of her last term in office in 1995 is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Chief Mankiller and Indian Identity

It's not just that she has led a new world interest in the Cherokee Nation and shared the story of the Cherokee Nation around the world. But she's made a difference with people- white, black, red, young and old, rich and poor.[1]

- United States Representative Mike Synar

With the1987 election behind her Mankiller finally felt that she had the support of her tribe and the mandate to govern the Cherokee Nation. While she had accomplished some gains for the tribe when she filled the last two years of Ross Swimmer's term as chief, it would not be until elected in her own right that she finally felt secure in her position and could wholeheartedly devote herself to running the Cherokee Nation. In the ten years that Mankiller served as chief she accomplished a great deal for her tribe and helped the Cherokee build forty-five million dollars worth of new facilities.[2] Membership soared, tribal revenues increased, new health care and educational facilities were built, and a tribal police force was established along with a host of other improvements. In order to understand the impact Mankiller had on the Cherokee Nation, it is essential to examine not only her accomplishments, but the way in which others viewed her, because part of what made her so successful and brought such attention to the Cherokees stemmed from her ability and willingness to use media interest in her to stimulate tribal development. She granted countless interviews and involved herself in national lobbying efforts to better conditions for the Cherokee and other Indians. Wilma also used her membership in

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[1]Mike Synar, Statement about Wilma Mankiller, RSC, CNA.

[2]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 3.

numerous national Indian organizations and her autobiography as a means to enhance and bring attention to the Cherokee Nation.

Mankiller's work with community development helped her get elected and continued to be one of the most important issues in her administration. A Cherokee Nation profile of Mankiller described her philosophy as "empowerment of people at the local level." She "strongly encourages the tribal membership to become more self-reliant in outlook," the profile explained.[3] From her early days of working with the Cherokee Nation, first as the economic stimulus coordinator and later as the director of community development, Mankiller maintained a strong desire to help those who needed it the most. For Mankiller, "creating community based change-getting health care, children's services, housing" to people took priority over ideology and politics.[4] In fact, her community development work transformed her mind set on the use of federal funding. According to Mankiller, she "went from being a purist (no federal funds, etc.) to a master of garnering federal support for everything from rural water lines to a youth shelter."[5]

The emphasis on community development among the Cherokee earned both Chief Mankiller and the tribe considerable attention. United States Senator David Boren, also an Oklahoma Democrat, praised Mankiller and said because of her efforts, the Cherokee Nation "has the most outstanding community development effort of any Tribe in our country." He hailed the Cherokee Nation as a "model for others to emulate." Senator

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[3] "Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Wilma P. Mankiller," Cherokee Nation Communications release, circa 1990-1991, Folder 2, Box 6, WMC, WHC, OU.

[4] Wilma Mankiller to Tom Bias, 13 April 1994, Folder 11, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[5] Ibid.

Boren cited the most significant outcome of the community development work as the increase in standard of living that many Cherokees enjoyed.[6] After becoming involved in community development work, Mankiller discovered a "national interest in self-help." She speculated that the interest in self-help for Native Americans stemmed from the challenge it offered to "the old stereotypes of American Indians as lazy and dependent" or because "it is extremely unusual for a community of people to build their own water system and housing."[7] As chief, Mankiller worked to continue development in Cherokee communities by getting the people involved at every level of the process.

The fact that Mankiller herself came from a large, poor, rural family afforded her an empathy for Cherokees living in poor conditions. Given the personal trauma she felt when her family moved to California because they could not make a living in eastern Oklahoma, it comes as no surprise that helping poor Cherokees become economically self-sufficient remained one of her most personally gratifying goals. Mankiller discussed her family's move to San Francisco saying, "I guess they [the government] thought we'd open a liquor store."[8] She did not want other Cherokee families to have to make the same decision that her's had. In many ways, Wilma embodied the role of a woman of the people. She identified with poor rural Cherokees because of the similarity to her own childhood and has spent a considerable amount of her life and energy seeking to improve

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[6]United States Senator David Boren to Wilma Mankiller, 6 October 1986, Folder 11, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[7]Wilma Mankiller to Jim Joseph, executive director of Council on Foundations, 28 January 1985, Folder 5, Box 7, WMC, WHC, OU.

[8]David Van Biema, "Activist Wilma Mankiller is Set to Become the First Female Chief of the Cherokee Nation," *To the Top*, 1985, p. 91.

the conditions of poor Indians. Mankiller did not want others to share in her family's experience of having to move away from their ancestral home to make a living so she encouraged Cherokee community development as an alternative.

Health care constituted another significant issue for Mankiller- one that bore a similarity to community development in that it was close to her heart because of her own experiences with health problems. Over the course of her life, Mankiller has endured a staggering number of health problems. After a head-on collision in1979, in which the driver of the other car was a friend who did not survive the accident, Mankiller went through a painful recovery only to find out the following year that she had myasthenia gravis, a debilitating neuromuscular disease.[9] Her condition worsened to the point where she struggled just to hold a hairbrush, had trouble swallowing, and spent time confined to a wheelchair. After undergoing a successful surgical procedure in which the doctors removed her thymus gland, Mankiller again recovered but suffered from the side-effects of her medication. She gained fifty pounds in a short amount of time and has since struggled to control her weight.[10] She has had two kidney transplants and developed breast cancer, which is now in remission.

Her health comprised a major campaign issue in both the1987 and1991 elections, when she constantly had to reassure both supporters and critics that her health would not jeopardize her performance as chief. She even had to hold a press conference from a

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[9]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. xxi-xxii.

[10]"Having a Good Mind: A Conversation with Wilma Mankiller" 1988, video recording, need more details

hospital bed in 1987 to convince her constituents that she had not died, despite rumors to the contrary.[11] According to the Cherokee Nation Communications Director, Lynn Howard, one small town newspaper obtained copies of her medical charts which contained a mis-diagnosis and used it to challenge further Mankiller's medical status.[12] When asked what the worst thing someone had done to her politically, she described this 1987 experience. While hospitalized shortly before the election, Wilma learned that an opponent of hers had launched a telephone campaign falsely informing voters that her doctors expected her to die very soon.[13] Given her health problems and the publicity they generated, it comes as no surprise that tribal health care drew considerable interest from Mankiller. Certainly no stranger to hospitals and fully aware of the need for competent healthcare providers in Indian country, Chief Mankiller made it a top priority to improve healthcare for Cherokees. One new Cherokee medical clinic located in Stilwell and built under Mankiller's leadership bears her name in recognition of her efforts. While her own health problems gave Wilma a greater empathy for others, they also provided ammunition against her in campaigns.

Mankiller's health also had implications for those outside of the Cherokee Nation. A transplant recipient who saw her as a role model wrote a particularly poignant letter to Mankiller seeking her advice about another transplant. The man had already undergone one heart transplant but discovered that he needed a second one in order to survive. This

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[11]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[12]Ibid.

[13] Ellen Knickmeyer, "Wilma Mankiller: Cherokee Chief has Knack for Building Tribe's Success," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 28 December 1987, p. 9.

father of four sought Wilma's advice because he had done something that made him ashamed and he felt that he did not deserve another chance at life.[14] While this man solicited Mankiller's advice because he felt she had made good use of her own transplant by helping others, some people with health problems responded differently. One angry and desperate woman wrote to Chief Mankiller asking for financial help for her medical problems. The woman wrote, "when you had your medical emergency no money was cut. There was plenty of everything that you needed." The woman concluded by writing "I realize that I am a nobody but I plead for your assistance. Please cut the red tape and let me enjoy my life and my girls."[15] This woman was not even Cherokee but somehow, in her distraught state, believed that Wilma was in a position to help her. On top of fielding letters such as this, Mankiller also lent her name to a variety of organizations relating to transplantation and other health related issues.

Aside from community development and healthcare, education constituted one of the most important issues to Chief Mankiller. Believing education essential to any sustained prosperity and self-sufficiency, Mankiller devoted considerable efforts to improving educational opportunities at every level of study for the Cherokees. She helped improve Head Start facilities and worked to strengthen the management of Sequoyah High School. Thus, Mankiller became involved in the most basic issues concerning the running of the tribe. Both her involvement and her sense of humor about it emerged in a memo

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[14]To Wilma Mankiller, 19 August 1992, Folder 1, Box 8, WMC, WHC, OU. Please note, the names of individuals who wrote to Wilma Mankiller have been omitted in order to protect their privacy, unless they represented a particular group or organization or wrote to her in some other official capacity.

[15]To Wilma Mankiller, 6 March 1994, Folder 15, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

she wrote in response to complaints about the cleanliness of the Sequoyah High School bathrooms. Wilma wrote: "I have lots of things to do in my daily schedule but I have never had an occasion to write a memorandum about toilets."[16]

On a more serious note, the chief also revived the Talking Leaves Job Corp, which provided training to Cherokee young people. Housed in an old section of dorms at Northeastern University in Tahlequah until its lease expired in1987, the Talking Leaves Job Corp came very close to being shut down. In May of1986 Mankiller testified before Congress in an effort to save Talking Leaves. She said that only two such facilities in the United States emphasized reaching the Indian population and indicated that it would hurt both the Cherokee and Oklahoma economy to lose the facility. [17] The following month she received a scathing letter from Roger Semerad, the assistant secretary of labor, in which he blasted the entire operation of Talking Leaves. He accused the "top leadership of the Cherokee Nation" of paying "little attention to its responsibility" of running the Job Corp. This particularly disturbed him, he said, because of the $248, 774 the Cherokee Nation received annually to operate the facility. Semerad vehemently disagreed with the criticism of the Department of Labor's evaluation criteria as "biased and inequitable." He concluded that "the logic employed is weak and tortuous, and further handicapped by the inaccuracies" in the analysis offered by the Cherokee Nation.[18]

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[16]Memo from Wilma Mankiller to Jerry Thompson, 10 January 1991, Folder 10, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

[17]Wilma Mankiller, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Employment Opportunities, 15 May 1986, Folder 18, Box 34, WMC, WHC, OU.

[18] Roger D. Semerad, assistant secretary of labor, to Wilma Mankiller, 27 June 1986, Folder 18, Box 34, WMC, WHC, OU.

Despite this withering critique and considerable opposition from the tribal council, Mankiller saved Talking Leaves from being closed. When the lease expired at Northeastern in November of 1987, Mankiller desperately tried to find another location. In the process, a number of people called the Cherokee Nation to oppose the continued operation of Talking Leaves. Some people who called or sent petitions argued that the Cherokee Nation "had no business operating a program for white youth or black youth or latin [sic] youth" because "they would burglarize the homes in Cherokee county."[19] Others argued that a new center would hurt the Tahlequah economy because less people would retire there and more inter-racial marriages would also occur.[20] She finally managed to convince the tribal council to close the Tsa-la-gi Lodge and Restaurant, which then afforded a temporary place to house the program. Mankiller described her struggle to get a new Talking Leaves Job Corp center built as "the biggest political fight I ever had."[21] She did, however, prevail in this effort and a new $9,000,000 center now houses the Talking Leaves Job Corp.[22] Cherokee communications director, Lynn Howard, described this as by far one of Mankiller's biggest accomplishments as chief.[23]

Another aspect of Mankiller's interest in education manifested itself in her devotion to bilingual education. She played a key role in making Cherokee language

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[19]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 27 January 1992, p. 6, Folder 7, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid, p. 7.

[23]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

classes available to both children and adults and increased the number of college and graduate scholarships available to Cherokees. Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Sandy Garret recognized Mankiller's work on education and wrote to the chief saying, "You are to be commended for your continued support of education of Oklahoma's Indian children."[24] Wilma's concern for education and young people in the Cherokee Nation took on other forms as well. Her administration established a youth shelter and sought to better the condition of Cherokee children in foster care. Mankiller praised Phyllis Wheeler, the executive director of Tahlequah Project Inc., for her efforts to provide safe activities for teenagers in the community. Mankiller wrote to Wheeler saying, "I am delighted that someone is making a serious effort to serve Tahlequah youth" and added, "be assured that I fully support your efforts."[25] In the same letter, Chief Mankiller expressed concerns about gang activity and the need for teenagers to have safe activities that kept them from being unduly influenced by college students from nearby Northeastern State University.

Community development and improving education and healthcare held a special place in Mankiller's administration but she also had to manage the business affairs of the tribe. Her activist background and her community development work prepared her for those related aspects of her administration but not for dealing with the business side of Cherokee affairs. During Mankiller's time in office the Cherokee Nation operated

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[24]Sandy Garret, Oklahoma state superintendent of public instruction to Wilma Mankiller, 3 February 1992, Folder 6, Box 4, WMC, WHC, OU.

[25] Wilma Mankiller to Phyllis Wheeler, executive director of Tahlequah Project Inc., 29 June 1991, Folder 2, Box 4, WMC, WHC, OU.

numerous facilities including schools, healthcare clinics, a nursery, hotel, restaurant, museum, and a manufacturing plant called Cherokee Nation Industries. Lynn Howard attributed some of Mankiller's success as chief to her willingness to listen to the advice of others and the way in which Mankiller surrounded herself with qualified and knowledgeable staffers.[26] On several occasions Mankiller described the role of chief as "something like running a big corporation and a little country at the same time."[27] She characterized the Cherokee Nation as "more of a republic than a reservation."[28] From her involvement in community development to the handling of personnel matters and the business management of the tribe, Wilma Mankiller undertook an enormous task in governing and expanding the Cherokee Nation.

One big accomplishment for the Cherokee Nation came in 1990 when Chief Mankiller negotiated a self-governance compact with the federal government. The 1975 Indian Self-Determination Act, which gave Native American tribes greater autonomy in administering a variety of government-funded programs, laid the foundation for agreements such as this one. According to the compact, the assistant secretary of the Interior agreed to "conduct the relations of the U.S. on a government to government basis" with the Cherokee Nation. The agreement stipulated that the secretary "pledges to the maximum extent to honor the laws of the Cherokee Nation and any decisions of the

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[26]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[27]Connie Koenenn, "Heart of a Nation," *Los Angeles Times*, need date, p. E 1.

[28]Ibid, E 3.

Cherokee Nation's court or tribunal."[29] This historic agreement indeed opened the door for the Cherokees to exercise more power over a host of programs, including healthcare and education, than they had in more than a hundred years. Mankiller summed up the significance of such an agreement saying that while she could not get very excited over the tribe using its power to issue Cherokee license plates, she could get excited when "the Cherokee Nation uses its authority to buy back some of our land base, to build and operate our own health systems or to sign a government to government agreement."[30]

Given the contentious nature of tribal politics, it hardly comes as a surprise that Mankiller could not please all people at all times. She drew criticism throughout the duration of her time in office. Often, however, the criticism was grounded in ignorance and ego rather than fact. On the eve of her bid for re-election in the 1991 election, Mankiller described Cherokee elections as "full of blood-letting" and said that "if one blinks during this period, the penalty is to get behind." Furthermore, "If one sleeps during this period, one is liable to lose the entire election."[31] A few months prior to the election, Ross Swimmer wrote to the chief to explain some comments attributed to him in a recent interview. He told her that she was "doing a great job," and added, "I think you might have even exceeded George Bush's popularity ranking- something I could never

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[29]"Self-Governance Compact Between the Cherokee Nation and United States," 2 July 1990, signed by assistant secretary of the Interior, Eddie Brown and principal chief Wilma Mankiller, Folder 16, Box 18, WMC, WHC, OU.

[30]"The Tobacco Wars: Message from the Chief," *Cherokee Advocate*, July/August 1992, v. xvi, n. 7/8, p. 6.

[31]Wilma Mankiller to Alan Parker, director of the National Indian Policy Center, 20 February 1991, Folder 4, Box 18, WMC, WHC, OU.

achieve."[32] Swimmer's predictions about Mankiller's popularity proved accurate. Despite her concern that her health would be a big issue in the election, she won re-election by a staggering 82.5 percent of the vote and went on to lead her tribe for another four years.[33] Still, Mankiller's concern demonstrates the nasty side of tribal politics.

Because the Cherokee name is familiar to people around the world and because people often recall vague stories of Indian ancestry in their family tree, the Cherokee Nation has had to confront problems with various groups using the Cherokee name without permission. Finally Mankiller became so fed up with fielding complaints about groups and individuals who claimed to represent the Cherokee Nation or who misused the Cherokee name that she circulated a list of unacknowledged groups claiming to be Cherokee to governors and other state and federal officials around the United States. For doing so, she received harsh criticism from a number of individuals as well as some of those groups. The Pan American Indian Association blasted Mankiller, saying that while some of their individual members may identify themselves as Cherokee, the organization itself had never done so. The concluding comments of Day Flower, the educational director of the organization, captured the overall tone of the letter: "You must realize that Great Spirit and the federal government throw maize to the whole flock not just one old hen and her biddies."[34] Another member of the Pan American Indian Association, Chief Walking Bear of the Amonsoquath Tribe, condemned Chief Mankiller's actions as well.

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[32]Ross Swimmer to Wilma Mankiller, 13 March 1991, Folder 1, Box 26, WMC, WHC, OU.

[33]Ibid.

[34] Day Flower, educational director of the Pan American Indian Association to Wilma Mankiller, 11 May 1993, Folder 9, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

He questioned what gave her the "power to refuse anyone the right to use the Cherokee name" and then described his tribe's Cherokee history. He argued that Mankiller's jurisdiction was "only good in Eastern Oklahoma and nowhere else." This emotionally charged letter accused her of "disgracing the Cherokee name," and went so far as to call her "an ugly person."[35] While uncommon, such attacks against Wilma Mankiller demonstrate the bitter and contentious nature of one aspect of the Indian identity issue and the "right" of individuals to identify with a given tribe, even if that tribe and/or the federal government fails to recognize them as belonging to the tribe.

Taking a less harsh tone, Luis Zapata of the D.C. Native Peoples Network also wrote to Chief Mankiller in regard to the misuse of the Cherokee name. He said many in his organization were "perplexed" by her actions because they viewed Mankiller as "one of the few [national] champions of *real Indians*" and therefore could not understand why she wrote the letter to state governors which seemed "to delegate sole discretionary power of deciding who is Native American and who is not to a non-Indian bureaucracy in Washington, D.C."[36] Essentially, he argued that a contradiction existed in Mankiller's recognition of people with legitimate but undocumented Cherokee descent and her circulating a list of unrecognized groups claiming to be Cherokee. This issue goes straight to the heart of Indian identity. Identity is by nature a personal issue and often evokes powerful emotions, yet the legal status of Native Americans creates tremendous

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[35]Chief Walking Bear of the Amonsoquath Tribe to Wilma Mankiller, 20 October 1993, Folder 9, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

[36]Luis Zapata to Wilma Mankiller, 25 May 1993, Folder 9, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

complexity for those without documentation.

A strong resentment emerged from those not able to document adequately their Indian heritage, as evidenced by some of the letters written to Wilma Mankiller. "Not all Cherokees were receptive to the roll system" admonished one angry person who said that the rolls "should not judge whether I am Native American or not." He said that he and others who lacked documentation simply wanted to be "acknowledged and respected."[37] Describing Mankiller's actions as "unfair," another critic asked her how she knew whether or not the people she accused of pretending to be Cherokee had any Cherokee blood in them or not. She concluded by saying "a lot of us just want to be accepted as Cherokee when we are, and not for the Government money."[38] Here the issue of federal recognition of Native American tribes ran headlong into individual issues of identity. People with stories of Cherokee ancestry in their families who had opted not to sign the Dawes Roll had no legal claim to Cherokee ancestry. Yet, tremendous resentment emerged when others told them they were not Cherokee. Condemning Mankiller's "blacklist"of people claiming to be Cherokee, one woman said: "I have always been proud of my Native American ancestry," but she felt "sad and angry" at reading about Mankiller's list. The woman asked Mankiller "who are you to say who is who?" She explained, "The Great Spirit or Maker of Breath is the one that put me here at this time in history with mixed heritage."[39]

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[37]Anthony Q. Vaughan, Mary Trail of Tears Long House, to Wilma Mankiller, 23 April 1993, Folder 8, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

[38]To Wilma Mankiller, 9 March 1993, Folder 8, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

[39]To Wilma Mankiller, 26 February 1993, Folder 8, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

While the issue seemed very clear-cut to those who wrote such letters, the process of federal recognition of Native American tribes and the implications of that recognition are anything but simple. And in fact, the phrases used to criticize Mankiller's "list" reveal the disjunction between the right of individuals to express their identity and the unique legal status of quite literally being a card-carrying Indian in the United States. No small amount of irony exists in seeing Mankiller, in her capacity as the chief of the Cherokee Nation, criticized for a recognition process necessitated by policy implemented by the federal government. Granted, the Cherokee Nation has jurisdiction over defining its own membership criteria but the ramifications of tribal membership/recognition were established by the federal government. The way in which the Cherokee Nation recognized its legitimate members no doubt came with great imperfection. Many people of Cherokee ancestry suffered and continue to suffer as a result of this policy. And yet, no easy alternative exists. Chief Mankiller could not stand idly by while people falsely claimed to represent the Cherokee Nation. If the Cherokee Nation suddenly began recognizing everyone as Cherokee who wanted to be Cherokee, thought they had been Cherokee in a past life, or in the more serious cases, were Cherokee but lacked documentation, it would have dire consequences for the enrolled members of the tribe and federal money allocated to the tribe.

Federal recognition of Native Americans indeed remains one of the most volatile concerns among Indian groups. Angered by the Georgia legislature's decision to recognize three groups as tribes, two of which identified themselves as Cherokee, Mankiller wrote a letter to Georgia Governor Zell Miller saying she "was shocked and

dismayed" over the decision. According to Mankiller, Jonathan Taylor, the Principal Chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, had also urged the governor not to sign the bill into law. Mankiller explained that they were concerned over states deciding to recognize or create Indian tribes "without specific recognition criteria." She reminded the governor that the United States government "has a complex set of criteria and a federal acknowledgment process each tribal organization must undergo to determine recognition eligibility." Mankiller laid out the complexity of recognition status and added that the groups recognized in Georgia would apply for federal recognition, costing both the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band significant time and energy to oppose their efforts.[40]

Mankiller recognized and had sympathy for those of Cherokee heritage who lacked proof. However, in legal terms Native Americans occupy a unique situation that brings legal and economic ramifications to claims of Indian ancestry. Mankiller did not begrudge those with undocumented Cherokee ancestry, but both the use of the Cherokee name by those groups not legally recognized by the federal government and those individuals not recognized by the Cherokee Nation brought negative consequences for the tribe. As chief, she had an obligation to uphold the integrity of the law. While the federal government, not Wilma Mankiller, set the criteria for federal recognition of tribes, each individual tribe set the criteria for individual membership within the tribe. Still, Mankiller had an obligation to the enrolled members of the Cherokee Nation to maintain the integrity of the process, even with all of its flaws. That fact, however, appears to have been lost on some.

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[40]Wilma Mankiller to Governor Zell Miller, 4 May 1993, Folder 9, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

Both the issue of establishing individual claims to Indian ancestry and attempts by groups to gain the status of federally recognized Indian tribes brought tremendous division and emotional responses on both sides. And here, Mankiller found herself caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

A further manifestation of the mine field involved in tribal identity emerged in the relationship of the Cherokee Nation to the Delaware tribe. The Delaware and the Cherokee Nation have inhabited the same land since their1867 agreement, which allowed the Delaware to relocate within the Cherokee Nation. According to the agreement each Delaware who participated received 160 acres and became members of the Cherokee Nation. The agreement stipulated that the children of those Delaware "shall in all respects be regarded as native Cherokees."[41] In 1985 the Cherokee Nation passed a resolution allowing the Delaware to take control of their tribal affairs and essentially function as a "tribe within a tribe." However, in 1992 the Delaware proposed a separation from the Cherokee Nation.[42] The significance of the debate that followed stems from the centrality of identity and the role of Mankiller in mitigating the contentious ordeal.

One of the clearest articulations of identity came from a Delaware woman who vehemently desired separation from the Cherokee Nation. In a letter to Mankiller regarding this proposed separation of the Delaware from the Cherokee Nation, the woman described the Cherokee Nation as being "as bad as the federal government" and accused

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[41]"Cherokee/Delaware Discussions and Chronology" prepared for meeting with Wilma Mankiller, 30 March 1994, Folder 12, Box 9, WMC, WHC, OU.

[42]Ibid.

them of denying the Delaware their identity. She described Mankiller as a symbol of oppression to the Delaware and called on her to support their quest for independence. The woman asked Mankiller how hard she would work if someone told her that her tribe was not Cherokee but instead were Seminoles or Navajos and ended the letter by writing, "What would you do if another tribe had jurisdiction over yours and considered your people to be their property? You would fight. And so will we."[43] Here again, the issue over the federally recognized status of a tribe versus tribal or individual identity emerges. The characterization of the Cherokee as oppressors of the Delaware seems both unfair and inaccurate. What the woman who wrote the letter failed to consider is that if the Cherokee severed their relationship with the Delaware, no guarantee existed that the federal government would in fact recognize the Delaware as an independent tribe.

Aside from the flack Mankiller received over Indian identity, she also encountered tremendous criticism from some Oklahoma tribes for negotiating a compact with the state in which the Cherokee Nation agreed to pay a 25 percent tax on all tobacco purchased from manufactures for the purpose of re-sale.[44] The agreement came in response to a United States Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Oklahoma Tax Commission vs. Citizen Band Pottawatomi Indian Tribe of Oklahoma* which said that Oklahoma could collect state taxes on cigarettes and other tobacco products sold by tribes or members of tribes to non-Indians.[45] As a result of this ruling, tribes basically had two options: they could agree

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[43]To Wilma Mankiller 22 May 1994, Folder 12, Box 9, WMC, WHC, OU.

[44]Tribal/State Tobacco Tax Compact Between The Cherokee Nation and the State of Oklahoma, 8 June 1992, p. 2.

[45]Ibid, p. 1.

to a compact like the Cherokee did, which provided for a flat tax paid up front on all tobacco purchased from the manufactures or they could collect the taxes themselves from tobacco products sold to non-tribal members. The second option was fraught with complications and for most tribes more trouble than it was worth. Legally, the compact recognized the right of tribes to sell tobacco products to its own members "free from state taxation;" however, in practice the agreement meant that tribes who signed the compact paid a state tax on the tobacco irrespective of who purchased it from the smoke shops.[46]

The Supreme Court ruling left tribes with very little room to maneuver on the taxation issue which makes the harsh criticism against Wilma Mankiller all the more surprising. Mankiller and leaders from the Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole Nations who also signed identical compacts with the state, used the compact for expediency and also as an expression of self-government. The wording of the compact made clear that the tribes had "sovereign powers of self-government" and that language ran throughout the agreement. Other tribes, most notably the Wyandotte tribe and the Wichita and Affiliated tribes, saw the compact quite differently and feared it would undermine tribal sovereignty. Leaford Bearskin, chief of the Wyandotte tribe, cautioned Mankiller that "the actions taken by the Cherokee will have a great impact on the entire Indian world."[47] When Mankiller failed to heed his warnings, he got particularly nasty. He accused her of pursuing her "own selfish interests" and added that by negotiating the compact she had

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[46]Ibid, p. 1.

[47]Leaford Bearskin, chief of the Wyandotte Tribe to Wilma Mankiller, 6 March 1990, Folder 18, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

"usurped the power and authority" of all the other tribes in Oklahoma. Chief Bearskin said that he would never again seek her council. He accused her of selling the other tribes of Oklahoma down the river and closed by saying, "I view your despicable actions with complete disgust and contempt."[48] One member of the Wyandotte tribe even drew a cartoon depicting Mankiller as both figuratively and literally being in bed with the Oklahoma Tax Commission. While her gender did not constitute the reason for Wyandotte criticism of her, it did prove a useful tool for their attempt to discredit her leadership. The cartoon showed Mankiller in a clinging nightgown sitting in bed with a man from the Oklahoma Tax Commission who was smoking a cigarette. When a member of the Wyandotte tribe walked in on them, the caption above the gendered caricature of Chief Mankiller said, "Oh! Well... UH... None of this is as bad as it looks!!!"[49]

Mankiller calmly but firmly responded to the attacks against her from Chief Bearskin. In regard to his argument that the compact with the state of Oklahoma undermined the authority and the sovereignty of the other tribes, Mankiller characterized it as "pure nonsense." She explained that the Cherokee Nation, as well as other tribes in numerous states, had entered into a variety of similar agreements, all of which were "exercises of tribal sovereignty." Mankiller dismissed his "scurrilous personal attacks," and said she disagreed that the tribes in Oklahoma should "conduct business through some kind of state-wide consensus." Instead, she argued that "the very essence of tribal self-

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[48] Leaford Bearskin to Wilma Mankiller, 21 May 1992, Folder 16, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

[49] Cartoon depicting Mankiller, Folder 16, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

determination and sovereignty is for each tribe to chart its own course."[50] Mankiller concluded by saying that she happily pled guilty to his charge that she had acted in the selfish interest of the Cherokee Nation and added that she would continue to do so. Here Mankiller made it clear that she had no interest in any sort of intertribal consensus governing and in fact, viewed it as the antithesis of sovereignty and true self-determination.

Despite Mankiller's defense of her actions, she still faced hostility. Gary McAdams, president of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, reinforced the criticism voiced by Chief Bearskin. He acknowledged the right of the Cherokee Nation to "determine its own destiny" but said that Mankiller "owed an explanation to all of Indian Country" for her support of the tobacco compact with the state of Oklahoma. McAdams accused her of "arbitrarily and erroneously" speaking for the other tribes in Oklahoma and argued "we cannot think of any more damaging action to tribal unity than your recent decision to assist in the drafting of this legislation."[51] George Wickliffe, a vocal Cherokee opponent of Mankiller, later accused her of being "willing to negotiate away our sovereignty" because of her support for the compact.[52]

The most revealing aspect of the criticism against Mankiller is the frivolity of it, and the fact that it appears to have come from varying degrees of ignorance and malice.

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[50]Wilma Mankiller to Leaford Bearskin, 28 May 1992, Folder 16, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

[51]Gary McAdams, president of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes to Wilma Mankiller, 2 June 1992, Folder 16, Box 17, WMC, WHC, OU.

[52]George Wickliffe, Letter to the editor, circa Spring 1993, unidentified newspaper, Folder 2, Box 5, WMC Collection, WHC, OU.

First, the Cherokee Nation had no choice but to address the tobacco tax on non-tribal members. Second, both Mankiller's participation in drafting the legislation and her act of signing the agreement reinforced the government-to-government basis on which Native American tribes exercising sovereignty wished to act. The incident also reveals a strange and confused dialogue regarding the connection between tribal unity and tribal sovereignty. Different leaders and tribes interpreted tribal sovereignty in contrasting terms.

While issues of unity, sovereignty, and identity often underscored the volatile nature of tribal politics, the increasing national and popular interest in all things Indian added a further element of complexity. Tribal membership increased drastically during the ten years Wilma Mankiller served as chief. Part of the reason stemmed from the overall increase in the number of Americans claiming Indian ancestry.[53] As Joan Nagel argues, "widespread ethnic renewal is the only way to account for the extraordinary eightfold increase in the Indian population in the twentieth century."[54] The Cherokee Nation witnessed a substantial growth in membership during Mankiller's time in office as a part of this trend. Between 1987 and 1991 membership increased 66 percent from 77,043 to 116,053 and continued to increase every year thereafter.[55] In fact, the prominence Wilma Mankiller brought to being Native American, especially to the Cherokee, also played a significant role in making Native Americans proud of their ancestry. As a man who

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[53]See C. Matthew Snipp, *American Indians: First of this Land* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation,, 1989).

[54]Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, p. 11.

[55]"Membership Soars During Last Four Years" *Cherokee Phoenix*, 22 February 1991, p. 1.

described himself as a conservative Republican put it, "I have never been ashamed of my Native American heritage, but I never took pride in it." He then proclaimed that Mankiller had "changed that forever!"[56] The story Wilma told in her autobiography affected people in many ways and very often made people feel better about themselves because they could relate to her story. The struggle she went through trying to adapt to life in San Francisco as a child, her deepening sense of Indianness that came though her exposure to Alcatraz and the Pit River struggle, her homecoming to Oklahoma and subsequent involvement with the Cherokee Nation resonated with many of her readers. One Cherokee woman described herself as feeling like "an ex-patriot and a member of an endangered species" until reading Mankiller's book.[57]

For some, proof of their Cherokee ancestry seemed a last ditch effort at validating their identity. The "extreme importance" of "heritage pride" coupled with the desire to "become officially a member of the Cherokee tribe" led one woman to lash out at Mankiller when writing for the third time about her efforts.[58] Interestingly, when the writer failed to receive the information she wanted, she criticized Mankiller, saying, "Upon first hearing that a woman was Chief, I felt great pride in my gender " but added "Methinks this job is perhaps more suited to the male gender."[59] The desire to trace and legitimize Cherokee heritage inspired many to write very personal letters to Mankiller

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[56]To Wilma Mankiller, 22 March 1994, Folder 11, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[57] To Wilma Mankiller, 29 November 1993, Folder 6, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[58] To Wilma Mankiller, 6 January 1991, Folder 7, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

[59]To Wilma Mankiller, 4 February 1991, Folder 7, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

explaining its importance to them. "You have truly been an inspiration at this time in my life" said a fan of Mankiller's who described her "only goal" as to find her "Cherokee roots" and claim her heritage.[60]

Establishing Indian ancestry held deep significance to the identity of many who wrote to Wilma Mankiller, but for others personal profit seemed the main goal. In fact, historian James Clifton argues that, "every time the value of being Indian increases, the number of persons of marginal or ambiguous ancestry who claim to be Indian increases."[61] While the value of Indianness meant different things to different people, to a small minority seeking to establish their Indian heritage it came as a monetary incentive. One person wrote to Mankiller succinctly saying, "I would like to find out if I have enough Indian in me to draw any money."[62] Another asked Mankiller for claim forms to fill out in expectation of receiving money. "Please send me information on what qualifies me to receive payment because of my heritage."[63] Most who wrote to Mankiller in an attempt to trace their ancestry did not do so for money, but those who did serve as a reminder of the complexity of Indianness and the connection between identity, image, and gain.

Aside from letters she received from people wishing to establish their Cherokee heritage, Mankiller received numerous letters from both Indians and non-Indians who felt compelled simply to share their stories with her. Such letters should be understood, to

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[60]To Wilma Mankiller, 30 December 1993, Folder 14, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

[61]Clifton, *Being and Becoming Indian*, p. 17.

[62]To Wilma Mankiller, 20 February 1991, Folder 7, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

[63]To Wilma Mankiller, 26 January 1989, Folder 6, Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

some extent, as a part of a wider social tend which venerated all things Indian beginning in the 1980s. Still, Mankiller exuded a quality that encouraged a familiarity from people. The sentiments expressed by one fan mirrored that of many others: "After reading her autobiography I know her well and almost feel she is a friend who lives just up the road."[64] Her communications staff grew during her tenure in office as they struggled to keep up with all the fan mail and requests for interviews she received.[65] Letters from a wide array of people made their way to Mankiller's staff as media coverage fed an ever greater interest in her. She received requests for everything from buffalo skulls and tobacco to her favorite squash recipes and even requests for her to preform "Indian weddings" and give people Indian names. These inquires came from Indians and non-Indians, men and women, and from all over the world.

An examination of some of the letters written to Mankiller reveals both the fascination people have with Indians and the use of Indian imagery to satisfy something otherwise lacking in their lives. One such letter from a woman asking Mankiller to give her an Indian name explained, "I feel as though my life would be altered significantly with some meaning attached to it." The letter concluded with a plea to please help her "sad spirit."[66] On one hand, some of the letters sent to Mankiller can simply be dismissed as the handiwork of lonely people looking for attention. On the other, even the strangest letters provide insight into the larger tendency of new age spiritualists and self-help gurus seeking

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[64]Unidentified letter to Wilma Mankiller, Folder 8, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[65]Lynn Howard, former communications director for the Cherokee Nation, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[66]To Wilma Mankiller, 26 November 1992, Folder 1, Box 8, WMC, WHC, OU.

to find peace from romanticized notions of Indianness. The fact that Mankiller felt the brunt of some of this attention is not surprising given the simultaneous visibility of the Cherokee Nation and Mankiller's name. A man wrote to Mankiller asking her to put him in touch with "any young Cherokee women" who would start a friendship with him that would hopefully lead to marriage. Saying that he had always thought of himself as Indian, he turned to an idealized version of Indians to bring meaning to his life.[67] Clearly two things were at work in this letter. One, the man simply wanted a date. But two, and more important, he wanted a particular type of date. Specifically, he preferred someone who knew about "the old ways, traditions and customs" and could teach them to him.[68] Drawing on a romanticized notion of Indianness, he believed that a Cherokee woman could put him in touch with tradition and meaning otherwise missing from his life.

Fixation on Indianness exacerbated stereotyping of Native Americans, and because of her visibility Mankiller, like LaDonna Harris, often confronted those stereotypes. Wilma criticized the image she believed many people had of Native Americans. In an interview she said, "We need to get Oklahoma to not just see us as a people that dances and makes nice baskets."[69] She indeed saw herself as combating a variety of stereotypes. In fact, when she left office in 1995 and taught as a visiting scholar at Dartmouth, she described her duties as at least in part to "interact with as many people as possible to

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[67]To Wilma Mankiller, 14 September 1991, Folder 3, Box 6, WMC, WHC, OU.

[68]Ibid.

[69]"Lawmakers Blasted by Cherokee Chief: Mankiller Cites Image Woes," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 February 1992, p. 16.

dispel stereotypes about Native people."[70] One newspaper described her as "helping erase the Western movie stereotype of the drunken Indian on a horse, chasing wagon trains across the prairie and pillaging white settlements."[71] Still, the use of stereotypes took on varied forms. Just as some in the media regaled their readers in the1960s with physical descriptions of LaDonna Harris, Mankiller received similar treatment by at least one journalist more than twenty years later. A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* painted a vivid, albeit stereotypical, picture of Wilma for his readers. He described her as having "the features that identify her people" and said "Her high cheekbones frame large soft eyes that look into a man as much as at him." In a single sentence he captured the stereotype of Native Americans as having high cheekbones *and* possessing an intuitive spirituality. Each depicts a static and often highly romanticized and unrealistic image of Indians. The journalist even described her hands: "clasped in front of her, her thick fingers appear as though they would be at ease shucking corn or clutching a pen to authorize an act of office."[72] It seems highly unlikely that a white male politician would receive similar treatment and yet the writer no doubt viewed his description as flattering.

Ignorance about Native Americans manifested itself in more ways than one. Saying he had been a fan of Wilma for some time, a man wrote to ask her if it was true that Indians were the best kind of people because they did not want to own land. He did

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[70]Wilma Mankiller to Michael Brown, president and CEO of Foxwoods Resort and Casino, 9 January 1996, Folder 1, Box 12, WMC, WHC, OU.

[71]"Woman Breaks Indian Stereotypes in Career," Unidentified Newspaper clipping, circa 1985, Folder Mankiller, Wilma P., Box 7, RSC, CNA.

[72]John Hughes, "Cherokee Nation Looks Up to Chief Mankiller," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 May 1986, p. 19.

not intend to be insulting in the letter but wrote to her because he had heard conflicting information about Native Americans and wanted a more accurate understanding of them.[73] Some people's lack of understanding of Native Americans manifested itself in a misguided desire to help them. After praying about what she could do "to help make the Native American again a strong and proud person," this woman explained her concerns to Wilma and said that she "struggled within" to "read, live, and see the alcohol deteriorating a once brave, strong, wise, and noble people."[74] Mankiller responded brusquely to the letter saying, "It is not true that Native people have been almost destroyed by alcohol" and concluded that she could not think of anything the woman could do.[75]

The perpetuation of stereotypes by organizations meant to help Indians offered a further irritant to Chief Mankiller. The Native American Children's Fund incurred the wrath of the chief after circulating fliers that grossly distorted the situation of Native Americans. Drawing on stereotypes of an alcoholic father and poverty stricken family living in a broken down automobile with nothing to eat but an old biscuit or sweet potato, a newsletter circulated by this organization sought to raise money to help Indian children. Mankiller chastised the man responsible. Calling this newsletter "one of the worst examples of stereotyping" of Native Americans she had ever read, she added that the newsletter evoked "powerful images of pathetic, helpless people." Mankiller informed him that she planned to ask for an investigation into his organization and warned him that

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[73]To Wilma Mankiller, 5 October 1992, Folder 5, Box 6, WMC, OU.

[74]To Wilma Mankiller, 22 February 1993, Folder 8, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[75]From Wilma Mankiller, 3 March 1993, Folder 8, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

he would not get away with exploiting children for the purpose of fund-raising.[76]

The desire to help Native Americans took on a number of different forms among those who wrote letters to Wilma Mankiller. Interestingly, often little or no difference existed between letters from Indians and non-Indians, as both struggled for meaning and a sense of belonging. A letter from a man with some Cherokee ancestry wrote, "My heart is all Cherokee" and said he felt "the need to help - make a difference - protect - educate... my spirit cries out for this."[77] Another person, who identified himself as a "half-breed" described the difficulties he had experienced living in the "outside world." He offered to give the Cherokee Nation all of his possessions if he could live there, writing, "I ask nothing in return; not even living quarters or food, just to come home!"[78] This man from Tennessee clearly hoped that the Cherokee could restore something missing from his life. Letters such as these, as misguided as some were, illustrate that Chief Mankiller's own struggles provided a symbol of hope to those who read about her.

Along with the misconceptions about Native Americans and the Cherokee tribe in particular, Wilma Mankiller also received numerous "white guilt" letters. These letters provide useful insight into the general public's perception of Native Americans in the last decades of the twentieth century. Further, such perceptions illustrate why a ready-made audience existed for the story of triumph over tragedy that characterized Mankiller's own life. As Lynn Howard explained, Mankiller's time in office "came in the middle of a

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[76]Wilma Mankiller to W. T. Jeffers, World Changers, Inc., 20 September 1994, Folder 17, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

[77]To Wilma Mankiller, 20 May 1995, Folder 4, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[78]To Wilma Mankiller, 18 August 1991, emphasis original, Folder 3, Box 6, WMC, WHC, OU.

growing awareness of Indianness" and indeed coincided "with the height of the Indian wannabe period. "[79] This upsurge in fascination with Native Americans translated into an even greater interest in Wilma Mankiller.

A number of people wrote to the chief to express their remorse for the treatment of Native Americans. Her autobiography prompted one person to write that prior to reading Mankiller's autobiography, she "had little first-hand knowledge about the terrible injustices committed by my people against your wonderful race."[80] After watching a television show about the atrocities whites committed against Native Americans, a former naval officer wrote to Mankiller saying, "I must tell you of the shame I feel because of what my ancestors did to yours."[81] Similarly, another letter to Mankiller also addressed the issue of guilt. This person wrote "It's difficult to say why I feel the need to write other than to express the feeling of anger, outrage, and guilt at the terrible things done by my people to yours."[82] Still another person, describing herself as an "American of European ancestry," voiced her shame over the "the systemic [sic] genocide of Native Peoples in the United States," but added that Mankiller's autobiography gave her hope.[83] Similar letters came to Mankiller from all over the United States and from all over the world. A woman from Germany expressed her "rage and sorrow" after reading about

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[79]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[80]To Wilma Mankiller, 3 January 1994, Folder 13, Box 41, WMC, WHC, OU.

[81]To Wilma Mankiller, 12 May 1995, Folder 4, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[82]To Wilma Mankiller, 6 October 1994, Folder 1, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[83]To Wilma Mankiller, 29 March 1994, Folder 13, Box 41, WMC, WHC, OU.

Mankiller's life as well as the treatment of other Native Americans. She said she had always been interested in Indian culture and that she wanted to express her "solidarity" with Mankiller.[84] This type of letter often came across Mankiller's desk as a part of the desire of some to right past wrongs. Both her national visibility and her autobiography contributed to the large amount of mail she received.

In fact, many people expressed profound awe at the story Mankiller told in her autobiography. The most common response came from those describing how Wilma had inspired them to do things they had not been able to in the past. She appealed not only to Cherokees and other Native Americans but to women and people with health problems. A person with a physical handicap thanked Mankiller after hearing her speak and said, "Your lecture gave me the courage to return to the University of Michigan and get my Master's."[85] Several letters to Mankiller simply thanked her for sharing her story and for giving them hope that they too could overcome difficult obstacles in their lives.[86] One writer who had been going through a stressful period in her life said how much better she felt after reading about Mankiller's difficult experiences. "I needed to hear how brave you've been and how far you've come," she said and added "I find strength in you."[87] Another person described Mankiller as "a woman to be reckoned with" and called her a role model for Indian leaders. She applauded Mankiller for standing up "without pretense,

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[84]To Wilma Mankiller, 26 April 1995, Folder 13, Box 41, WMC, WHC, OU.

[85]To Wilma Mankiller, 21 February 1993, Folder 8, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[86]To Wilma Mankiller, 13 July 1995; To Wilma Mankiller, 19 June 1995, Folder 5, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[87]To Wilma Mankiller, 13 March 1993, Folder 1 Box 16, WMC, WHC, OU.

without glamor and selfish ambition" in her work for all Native Americans.[88] Mankiller's story clearly resonated with people on a number of levels.

As many of the issues and letters examined here demonstrate, Wilma Mankiller had become a national figure. As chief of the Cherokee Nation she made tremendous contributions to the betterment of the tribe in healthcare, education, membership, revenue, and certainly in visibility. After announcing that she would not seek re-election in1995, Mankiller described her experience with the Cherokee Nation saying, "I've been here seventeen years. I've grown up and become a grandmother. I've met with three presidents, lobbied Congress for everything from job corps to head start and been given more awards and honors than any one person deserves." Mankiller closed by explaining, "The thing I have appreciated most is when a group of male Cherokee elders still tells me they respect me and asks me to sit and talk with them."[89] Many Cherokees expressed disappointment with Mankiller's decision not to seek re-election. After describing Mankiller as a "fabulous leader and friend," Ross Swimmer said "I am very disappointed, but I feel like she is just changing her role of leadership."[90]

Believing it necessary to serve on national committees and engage in national politics, Mankiller played a vital role in shaping the Cherokee tribe of Oklahoma and in shaping federal Indian policy. Her visibility at the national level brought forth a world-wide interest in the Cherokee Nation and in her personally. Lynn Howard commented that

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[88]To Wilma Mankiller, 11 April 1994, Folder 11, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[89]"Mankiller Says She Won't Seek Third Term," *Cherokee Advocate*, v. xviii, n. 5, May 1994, p. 1.

[90]Ibid., p. 6

while she did not see Mankiller as seeking out media attention, she certainly learned how to utilize the forum it provided her. Howard maintained that contrary to what some believed, nothing special went into the press releases put together by the Cherokee Nation Communications Department about Mankiller.[91] The fascination many had for Wilma took on a life of its own and lent itself to a ready-made audience eager for any news surrounding her role as chief. That fascination with Wilma Mankiller led many to praise her efforts as a national figure. Indeed, just a year before she left office, Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Jack Mildren wrote to Mankiller praising her work and said that her "commitment to leadership of the Cherokee Nation and its great traditions continues to bring national and international attention to your state and its heritage." Mildren said that he "sincerely appreciated" her and the work she had done "for all Oklahomans."[92]

As chief, Mankiller no doubt made sizable contributions to her tribe. What is most striking, however, remains the fact that so many people identified with her and saw her as a source of inspiration. Those who wrote to Wilma Mankiller felt as if they knew her regardless of whether or not they had ever met her or seen her in a public appearance. While her work often had state and national implications, she acted first and foremost in the interest of the tribe that elected her chief. She made it clear through a variety of actions, including the tax compact she made with the State of Oklahoma, that her first loyalty and devotion went to the Cherokee Nation. Even as she pursued the self-interest

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[91]Lynn Howard, Interview with the author, 17 October 2001.

[92] Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Jack Mildren to Wilma Mankiller, 2 June 1994, Folder 11, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

of the tribe which elected her to lead them, she also became increasingly aware of the need to be involved nationally to best serve the Cherokee. Because of that national visibility, Mankiller took on a significance which extended far beyond the borders of the Cherokee Nation. In fact, both she and LaDonna Harris have in common their visibility at the national political level. While neither woman ever held an elected position outside of tribal office, both became recognized as national leaders by members of Congress and presidents, for their influence and power in fighting for the rights of Native Americans. The way in which each affected, and were affected by, federal Indian policy is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Beyond the Politics of Indianness

> *In our time the linear European arrow of progress has bumped head on into Einstein's curved universe, and it is time to revisit these ancient circular ideas which see diversity and difference, not as competing rights or wrongs, but which see these differences as unique contributions to the whole. According to this ancient way of being, a leader does not ask, "what can I control?" but "what am I responsible for? Not "what do I get" but "what can I contribute?"* [1]
>
> -LaDonna Harris

In addition to their larger humanitarian efforts, LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller have made substantial contributions to bettering the condition of both Native Americans and women. A comparison of these two influential women provides insight into their identities and their methods for affecting change. In fact, Harris and Mankiller have a great deal in common. While Harris is older than Mankiller and has been active in national and Indian politics longer, they both share several commonalities in expressions of identity, their methods of activism, and in the issues they address. Both were born into large poor families in rural Oklahoma (Harris in far western Oklahoma and Mankiller in far eastern Oklahoma). Harris and Mankiller are liberal Democrats and have actively supported a wide array of Democratic initiatives and Democratic presidents. LaDonna Harris has discussed Indian affairs with every president since Lyndon B. Johnson and Wilma Mankiller served on the Clinton/Gore transition team and consulted with the Clinton Administration on both health care and the environment.

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[1]LaDonna Harris, "Contributions of Tribal People To the Contemporary World, Speech, date unknown, Series 1, Nox 29, LHC, NAES.

Both women have one white parent but identify strongly with their Indian heritage. LaDonna Harris' father was Irish and Wilma Mankiller's mother was Dutch-Irish. Despite their white heritage, both women overwhelming identify with their Native American ancestry. They grew up in homes that stressed their respective Indian cultures and drew strength from their tribal heritage. In fact, the autobiographies written by Harris and Mankiller took a similar approach in that each told her personal story within the context of the larger history and traditions of her tribe.[2] Mankiller, whose autobiography came out first, explained the centrality of her heritage: "My own story has meaning only as long as it is a part of the overall story of my people. For above all else I am a Cherokee woman."[3] Similarly, LaDonna Harris' autobiography began with the story of her ancestors. After setting up the context of her tribal history, Harris explained: "And that's where I come from. Those are my folks. That's my heritage. That's what influences everything I do and how I do it."[4]

The cultural identity expressed by Harris and Mankiller played a defining role in their work. The use of that identity permeated all that they did. Each drew strength from her understanding of Indian culture. In fact, each time one did something exceptional or seemingly unconventional by the standards of dominant society, she explained it as a natural outgrowth of her heritage and tribal customs. Harris and Mankiller placed everything they undertook, from their participation in politics to their support of women's

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[2]*LaDonna Harris*; Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*.

[3]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 14.

[4]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 11.

rights and emphasis on equality for all people, in the context of their tribal customs. Given the use of Indianness in their images and activism, it is crucial to explore how cultural beliefs shaped each woman and, at times, how each shaped her beliefs to legitimize otherwise unconventional behavior. While the way in which they entered into the political arena differed, the type of work done by Harris and Mankiller proved quite similar and is explored throughout this chapter. The main focus here is to examine how LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller participated in national politics and how their work and experiences relate to federal Indian policy and other national issues. The work of Harris and Mankiller must be examined within the larger framework of federal Indian policy.

The latter half of the twentieth century gave rise to two of the most significant changes in federal Indian policy in the history of the relationship between the United States government and Native American tribes. Both the termination policy carried out by Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1940s and 1950s and the shift to a policy of self-determination in the 1970s during the presidency of Richard M. Nixon, characterized not only a sharp policy shift, but indeed played a defining role in the lives and activism of both LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller. Termination policy sought to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream by doing away with services provided to them by the federal government. Both the role of about 25,000 Native Americans in the Second World War and the push toward conformity that defined the decade of the 1950s contributed to the implementation of this policy.[5] Here again, the

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[5]See Jere Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999).

federal government treated all Native Americans alike and failed to take into account their varied cultures and needs. Both Alison Bernstein and Donald Fixico argue that termination ultimately proved highly detrimental to Native Americans.[6] While some supported the policy as a way to achieve autonomy, "for the most part Termination frightened Native Americans."[7]

Harris, who grew up during the Great Depression and Collier's Indian New Deal, was in her twenties before the enactment of termination policy began.[8] She had already become active in civil rights issues and, along with her husband, became engaged in mainstream politics with his1956 election to the Oklahoma State Senate. LaDonna took a dim view of termination and characterized it as one of the worst things that had ever happened to Native Americans. Harris saw termination policy as an attempt by the federal government to erase native cultures and traditions, which is why she also described assimilation as meaning "to no longer exist."[9] In school, the message she received was blunt: "If you give up your Indianness and become educated like us-be like us-then you will be accepted in our society."[10] Harris rejected the notion that it had to be an all or nothing approach- either the complete abandonment of Indian culture to join the mainstream or the retention of that culture to the exclusion of "fitting into" dominant

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[6]Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II*; Fixico, *Termination and Relocation.*

[7]Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, p. 196.

[8]For a discussion of Collier's Indian New Deal see Kenneth R Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform: 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).

[9]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[10]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 20.

society.

In fact, most of Harris's work can best be understood as an effort to counter the effects of termination policy and to convince Native Americans that they can retain their traditional beliefs and values while simultaneously participating in the mainstream society and economy. She has also sought to help Native American tribes regain federal recognition who were terminated, such as the Menominee. In a letter lending AIO's support to the Ramapuogh Mountain Indian tribe's restoration efforts, Harris said she hoped "justice will prevail," and that termination would cease. This would, Harris said, finally end "one of the ugliest and most hurtful chapters in the history of Federal/Indian relations."[11]

Mankiller, who is fifteen years younger than Harris, felt the direct impact of termination in her early life. She too depicted termination as a very dark period in federal Indian policy. Her condemnation of it comes, in part, from her personal experience as she herself grew up as a product of this policy. It had, after all, been the federal Indian relocation program which grew out of termination policy that had uprooted her family from their home in eastern Oklahoma and moved them to the big city of San Francisco. Mankiller described termination and the relocation program as "another direct assault on Native American rights and tribal identities."[12] Here, Mankiller and Harris certainly agreed as to the detrimental aspects of termination policy; each viewing it as an attempt at

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[11]LaDonna Harris to Ronald Van Dunk, Ramapuogh Mountain Indian Tribe, 12 December 1984, Series 1, Box 19, LHC, WHC, OU.

[12]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 63.

cultural genocide. While some policy makers in the1950s believed termination provided the best way to aid Native Americans in participating in the mainstream, it came at a heavy price. Many in Mankiller's generation suffered from a loss of cultural knowledge but would later challenge termination policy and reassert pride as a part of the red power movement.

This emphasis on termination policy and its erosion of native cultures and traditions is most apparent in the sharp critique which emerged in the1960s. At the heart of this critique lay the desire of Native Americans to reassert tribal sovereignty and to celebrate cultural pride. This push for self-determination and greater sovereignty emerged in conjunction with a number of other social changes. The struggle of minority groups for civil rights, the Community Action Programs of Lyndon B. Johnson, the increased public awareness of government mismanagement of Indian affairs, Richard Nixon's support of greater autonomy for Native Americans, and the articulate leadership of young Indian radicals as well as more mainstream figures such as LaDonna Harris, all played a role in ushering in the era of self-determination. Thus, a variety of factors converged to create a climate conducive to the shift in federal Indian policy which emerged.[13] The life work of

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[13] See George Castile, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998). He argues that Nixon essentially supported Indian self-determination as a public relations tool to boost his image among minority groups. According to Castile, "doing something that one minority group wanted done and which could be easily done made political sense– to show heart!" p. 77-78. Works which place greater emphasis on Native American activism in explaining the shift in policy to self-determination include Alvin M Josephy, *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970); Stephen Cornell, *Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996). For an excellent overview of activism and self-determination see Troy R. Johnson, "The Roots of Contemporary Native American Activism," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, (1996) p. 127-154.

LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller, the images they projected at a given time, and the manifestations of Indianness in their politics all demonstrate the larger shift in policy that transpired.

While termination policy began to ebb in the late 1960s, Congress waited until 1988 to formally repealed House Concurrent Resolution 108, otherwise known as termination. Senator Daniel K. Inouye, chairman of the Select Committee on Indian Affairs, stated that alterations to the trust relationship between Native American tribes and the federal government "must never again be considered without the consent of the tribes involved."[14] He called termination "both morally and legally indefensible," which ironically bore a striking similarity to Richard Nixon's condemnation of it eighteen years earlier when he characterized termination as "morally and legally unacceptable."[15] It was no doubt gratifying to leaders such as Harris to see the formal repeal of termination policy. However, the fact that President Nixon and Senator Inouye uttered basically the same criticism of termination two decades apart as a rallying cry for change did not bode well for much actual progress taking place. It is small wonder that LaDonna Harris voiced frustration at having to re-educate policy makers at every level with each new election.

Harris had come to national attention with the termination period still underway. The founding of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity in1965 in the midst of President Johnson's Community Action Programs marked both the beginnings of a greater emphasis

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[14]United States Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, "1953 Termination Resolution Finally Repealed," Press Release, 21 April 1988, Series 1, Box 22, LHC, NAES.

[15]President Richard Nixon's message to Congress on Indian affairs, 8 July 1970 in Josephy, *Red Power*, p. 228.

on self-determination and a carry-over of termination type language in which OIO articulated its goal as being to help Indians participate more fully in the social, economic, and political mainstream of Oklahoma. Herein lies the fundamental transformation of federal Indian policy and the activism that went along with it. Johnson's Community Action programs, which he intended as a "hand up, not a hand out," brought significant ramifications for Native Americans and indeed for those who acted as advocates for them.[16]

As Harris and Mankiller found themselves affected in one way or another by the shift in federal Indian policy, one of the most significant elements that emerges in a study of the two women lies in the work both did in the area of community development, which provided a vital link in the transformation of the larger policy toward Indians. The work of Harris and OIO predated that of Mankiller and certainly provided a useful model for others to follow. LaDonna Harris got involved in community development through the Johnson administration's Great Society and Community Action initiatives. Harris became convinced that if Native Americans were ever to break out of the cycle of poverty, that they must gain autonomy over the programs and agencies designed to help them. Her criticism of the Bureau of Indian Affairs helps explain why she first saw community development as essential. She described the BIA as a "controlling institution that keeps people from doing what they could do." Moreover, non-reservation Native Americans got even less assistance from the BIA than did others. Harris also criticized what she termed

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[16]See Daniel M. Cobb, "A War for Self-Determination: Culture Poverty, and the Politics of Indian Community Action, 1960-1975," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Oklahoma.

the "BIA old Catch-22 runaround," which she outlined as follows: " I don't have enough information to make a decision, and I won't tell you what information I need." She called this attitude of the BIA "exasperating but also humiliating."[17] Given the slow and ineffective movement of the BIA on any number of issues, Harris felt that this lent even greater urgency to the need for a reassertion of tribal sovereignty. If Native Americans and their tribal leaders could exercise greater control over their own programs and within their own communities, they would gain optimal possibilities for economic and cultural self-sufficiency. Harris's work with community development is what brought her to the national political spotlight. In fact, the first time she testified before Congress she addressed the impact of the Office of Economic Opportunity, which funded OIO and other such efforts in Oklahoma.[18]

Nearly two decades after LaDonna Harris founded OIO and became involved in community development, Wilma Mankiller's work with community development also served as a catalyst for her own involvement in politics with the Cherokee Nation. While OIO had worked on a number of projects with the Cherokee Nation, there appears to be no direct link between the organization founded by Harris and the community development project in the Bell community that brought Mankiller to the attention of

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[17]LaDonna Harris to Congressman Peter deFrazio, 30 March 1988, Series.1, Box 23, LHC, NAES.

[18]Testimony of LaDonna Harris before the US Senate Education and Labor Committee, 13 July 1967, *Congressional Record*, Folder 8, Box 286, FHC, CACRSC, OU.

Chief Ross Swimmer in the early 1980s.[19] Regardless, the work Mankiller did in Bell and other communities secured her election to deputy chief in1983 and chief in1987. She appealed to Swimmer because he wanted someone who would spend time in the Cherokee communities, and she also developed a strong support base from those rural Cherokees she had helped.

In short, community development provided a venue in which both Harris and Mankiller could stand out and affect change at a very rudimentary level. They continued to emphasize the centrality of community development to economic stability for Native Americans. The main difference between Harris and Mankiller regarding community development lay in the role each played. Harris, as president first of OIO then AIO, put together literally thousands of proposals and held workshops for tribes across the United States to provide leaders with the skills they needed and with information on how to access federal money for community development projects. Mankiller, on the other hand, worked in a more hands-on fashion, first as the director of the Community Development for the Cherokee Nation and then as deputy chief and principal chief. Still, both women viewed self-help as essential to any long term success in improving the lives of Native Americans. Clearly economic self-sufficiency remains a necessary ingredient in ensuring any meaningful degree of tribal sovereignty.

Their insistence on greater self-governance for Native American tribes reinforced

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[19]For a discussion of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity community development efforts in the Cherokee Nation see Daniel M. Cobb, "'US Indians Understand the Basics': Oklahoma Indians and the Politics of Community Action, 1964-1970," *Western Historical Quarterly*, v. 33, n. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 41-66; "A War for Self-Determination: Culture Poverty, and the Politics of Indian Community Action, 1960-1975," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Oklahoma; Ross Swimmer, Interview with author, 21 June 2001.

the emphasis each placed on community development. The shift of federal Indian policy to self-determination made possible a resurgence in tribal self-governance. Harris played a prominent role at the national level in promoting tribal self-governance. One of the biggest obstacles facing tribes in this quest has been a lack of information and understanding of federal Indian law. Once the federal government agreed that Native American tribes should have greater control over tribal affairs and programs, the next step did not automatically become clear. Here, LaDonna Harris proved a vital asset to numerous tribes. She wrote countless letters to government officials on behalf of tribes and worked closely with tribal leaders in the pursuit of economic independence and self-governance. Reuben Snake Jr., tribal chairman of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, wrote to Harris saying, "Our tribe owes much of our long range planning and development efforts to your wisdom and to AIO for its continued, invaluable help in many areas."[20] Harris also testified as an expert of behalf of tribes on a variety of issues. The tribal chairman of the Ute Mountain Tribal Council, Ernest House Sr., expressed his "sincere appreciation" for LaDonna's testimony in support of his tribe's water rights settlement legislation and for her "past and continued support."[21]

AIO spearheaded self-governance workshops and sent letters to tribal leaders across the United States inviting them to attend. In some cases AIO provided funding for tribal representatives to attend such workshops. The workshops were run by experts who

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[20]Reuben A. Snake Jr., tribal chairman, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska to LaDonna Harris, 15 November 1984, Series 1, Box 39, LHC, NAES.

[21] Ernest House, Sr., tribal chairman, Ute Mountain Tribal Council, to LaDonna Harris, 6 October 1987, Series 1, Box 22, LHC, NAES.

understood the highly complex and ever-changing body of federal Indian law as well as by grant writers and government officials from Indian agencies. While self-governance became a key goal for many tribes, by no means did all tribal leaders view it in the same way or as being beneficial to the tribes. Harris remained a staunch proponent of self-governance but at the same time, she and AIO also helped bring to light some of the problems that emerged from the shift toward greater self-governance and sovereignty. After conducting a two year long project with three tribes, Harris revealed their "most frightening conclusion," which dealt with the heavy economic burden of tribes taking over the administration of various federal programs. She described possible bankruptcy for tribes "in the name of self-determination."[22] Harris played a role in not only facilitating self-governance, but also followed through by identifying problems resulting from the actual implementation of self-determination policy.

In a Red Paper, AIO addressed the language used by Ronald Reagan in his1980 Presidential campaign regarding self-determination. In "New Federalism: The Role of the Indian Community," AIO utilized several quotes from President Reagan about his support for more local control and for Indian sovereignty. In so doing, Harris and her staff members conveyed to their readers the issues at stake. Although President Reagan stated that he supported self-determination, AIO pointed out the inconsistencies in his rhetoric and his actions, as he also advocated a cut in the funding of Indian programs.[23]

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[22]LaDonna Harris to AIO mailing list, 17 December 1979, Series 3, Box 6, LHC, NAES.

[23]"New Federalism: The Role of the Indian Community," Red Paper, Americans for Indian Opportunity, 1981, Series 3, Box 11, LHC, NAES.

AIO provided a vital service to many Native American tribes and organizations by holding information symposiums and workshops related to self-determination and governance. In an effort to help tribal leaders cultivate skills useful to governing their communities and in working with the federal government, AIO often sent material to leaders and organizations across the United States about their workshops. Here again, LaDonna Harris and Americans for Indian Opportunity found a vital role to play. Harris' position and reputation enabled her both to see firsthand where Indian leadership lacked skills and information and to work with policy makers in the Washington power structure.

One of the most successful symposiums put together by LaDonna Harris grew out of the Governance Project. The "To Govern and to be Governed: American Indian Tribal Governments at the Crossroads" symposium took place in Washington, D.C. and included leaders from seven different tribes, scholars, and various representatives from all levels of government. Acting as a broker between federal and state governments and Native American leaders, AIO helped create a comprehensive dialogue on tribal governance. After the symposium, AIO published a fifty-eight page booklet about the issues discussed and the possible solutions to problems in tribal governance.[24]

Wilma Mankiller played a different role in the process of reasserting self-governance. As chief of the Cherokee Nation, her first obligation went to her constituents. She assumed a vital role in the reassertion of self-governance for the Cherokee. Mankiller not only entered into the self-governance compact with the state of

[24]"To Govern and to be Governed: American Indian Tribal Governments at the Crossroads" Americans for Indian Opportunity Publication, 1983, Series 3, Box 11, LHC, NAES.

Oklahoma, she also negotiated agreements with the state of Oklahoma, such as the cigarette tax compact, on a government-to-government basis as an expression of self-determination.[25] The criticism Mankiller encountered from some of the other tribal leaders in Oklahoma over the Cherokee Nation entering into contracts with the state reveals the contentious and contradictory nature of the self-governance issue. Not all tribes viewed the meaning of self-governance the same. In short, while Harris and Mankiller played different roles in the return to self-governance, both supported the policy despite the problems they encountered with it. Similarly, both viewed self-governance as critical to the survival of Native Americans in the twenty-first century. Shortly before Mankiller left office in 1995, she testified before the United States House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, directly addressing the need for greater self-governance and self-determination among Native Americans. Mankiller explained:

> The key elements of any plan to improve the lives of those in Indian country are threefold: advance self-determination through tribal self-government; continue to empower adults with real economic opportunities and job training; and ensure that children are given every chance to succeed through proper schooling and preventative health care.[26]

Harris and Mankiller spent considerable efforts lobbying Congress. While Harris initially drew on her husband's role and connections to make her voice heard, Mankiller capitalized on the media interest in her election and the size and notoriety of the Cherokee

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[25]"Self Governance Compact Between the Cherokee Nation and United States," 1 October 1990, WMC, Folder 16, Box 18.

[26]Wilma Mankiller, Testimony before the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, 27 March 1995, Folder 18, Box 13, WMC, WHC, OU.

to use as leverage with both state and national policy makers. Each woman has made remarkable efforts in lobbying Congress and, at times, each has had members of Congress solicit their opinions on issues relating to Native Americans.

Senator Inouye from the Select Committee on Indian Affairs asked LaDonna Harris for her input on a piece of legislation he introduced called the Indian Development Finance Act, or S. 721. He wanted her to review the bill and offer her expert opinion on the ramifications of it if passed. The senator also asked Harris to pass along information to tribes or individuals who might be interested.[27] Here Harris' reputation for acting as a liaison between the Indian community and policy makers in Washington, D.C. is clearly demonstrated. In fact, Harris described AIO's role as bringing people and information together.[28] Harris also actively opposed the H.R. 4162, which would have amended the Alaska Claims Settlement Act.[29] In her efforts to protect the rights of Indian people from being encroached upon by lawmakers, Harris took up a number of such issues. She wrote to Senator Jeff Bingaman to voice her objection to a recommendation under consideration by the Department of Justice which would potentially privilege state law over tribal laws in the operation of tribal bingo facilities. She explained the importance of bingo to numerous tribal economies and concluded by stating that "it is not the job of the Department of Justice to make Indian policy and law." Instead, she added "that is the job of the President,

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[27]United States Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, to LaDonna Harris, 26 March 1987, Series 1, Box 37, LHC, NAES.

[28]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 11 March 2002.

[29]United States Senator John D. Rockefeller IV to LaDonna Harris, 31 October 1986, Series 1, Box 37, LHC, NAES.

the Bureau and the Congress in careful consultation with the tribes."[30] Such correspondence between Harris and lawmakers illustrates the breadth of Indian policy issues addressed by AIO. In fact, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Interior, Kevin Grover described AIO as being "at the forefront of every major national native initiative" and said that AIO had also "provided better cross cultural understanding."[31]

Similarly, Wilma Mankiller engaged in numerous letter writing campaigns to policy makers and testified before Congress. She wrote to Senator Don Nickels and others asking for their support for the National Park Services proposed funding of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.[32] She worked closely with United States Senator David Boren on the issue of jurisdiction over the Arkansas River Bed, something the Cherokee Nation had been battling for several years prior to her coming into office. Mankiller thanked Boren for his work on behalf of the tribe saying, "Your continual support of our effort to equitably resolve this issue is important to the Cherokee Nation."[33] Mankiller exchanged countless letters with Senator Boren and others in both houses of Congress regarding the environment and other issues facing Native Americans.

In addition to the relationships between Harris and Mankiller and policy makers

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[30] LaDonna Harris to United States Senator Jeff Bingaman, 2 May 1985, Series 1, Box 37, LHC, NAES..

[31] Americans for Indian Opportunity Press Release, "Americans for Indian Opportunity Celebrates 30th Anniversary," 2000.

[32] Wilma Mankiller to United States Senator Don Nickles, 23 April 1993, Folder 6, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[33] Wilma Mankiller to United States Senator David Boren, 1 November 1993, Folder 2, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

on Capital Hill, each had considerable dealings with United States presidents. Harris has worked with both Democratic and Republican presidents on issues facing Native Americans and has remarked that each time a new president gets elected the education process starts all over again.[34] She has received letters thanking her for her service on behalf of Native Americans from a number of administrations including Spiro Agnew, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.[35] Harris also enlisted the help of former First Lady Rosalyn Carter in her quest to see through the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Bill, which sought to keep Indian children in Indian homes.[36] In her interaction with such powerful people LaDonna Harris credits her experience as a congressional wife for helping her feel more at ease. According to one interviewer, "Being married to a United States Senator helped Harris see government as 'just another group of people trying to do a job.'"[37]

Mankiller interacted with top level policy makers as well. She met with President Reagan to discuss his administration's approach to addressing problems facing Native Americans but found little support from Reagan or the subsequent George Bush administration. She described President Reagan as "not good on Indian issues," and

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[34]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[35]Spiro Agnew to LaDonna Harris, 2 September 1970, Series1 Box 13; Gerald R. Ford to LaDonna Harris, 23 October 1974, Series 1, Box 20; Jimmy Carter to LaDonna Harris, 21 February 1978, Series 1, Box 20, LHC, NAES.

[36]LaDonna Harris to Rosalyn Carter, 9 November 1978, Series 1, Box 20, LHC, NAES.

[37]Jeanne Grimes, "Comanches Plan for a New Century," *Lawton Constitution*, 16 January 1999, p. 11.

added "he did not have the tiniest interest" in them.[38] When Bill Clinton ran for president in1992, Mankiller actively supported him despite the fact that she once told former Oklahoma Governor David Walters, "It is my policy to not endorse any candidate for public office." She further added "We at the Cherokee Nation cannot become involved in partisan politics to that extent."[39] Mankiller's support for the Clinton/Gore ticket earned her criticism from at least one of her constituents. In a letter to the editor of a local paper, George Wickliffe, a frequent critic of Mankiller, questioned her endorsement of Bill Clinton in the1992 presidential election and accused her of believing herself superior to other Cherokees and telling them how to vote.[40] Despite the criticisms of Wickliffe, Mankiller did indeed issue a strong show of support for Bill Clinton and even participated in his1992 Economic Conference in Little Rock. She offered her assistance to Clinton and expressed pleasure at hearing of his Cherokee ancestry. She wrote to Clinton saying, "It makes me so proud that someone with Cherokee ancestry is now President of the United States."[41] Clinton responded to her letter, thanking her for the enthusiasm she had shown at his economic conference and added a handwritten message to Mankiller saying, "you were great."[42]

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[38]"At Work with Chief Wilma Mankiller: The Name's the Most and Least of Her" *New York Times*, 4 November 1993, p. C 10.

[39]Wilma Mankiller to David L. Walters, 3 September 1986, Folder 5, Box 4, WMC, WHC, OU.

[40]George Wickliffe, Letter to the editor, circa Spring 1993, unidentified newspaper, Folder 2, Box 5, WMC, WHC, OU.

[41] Wilma Mankiller to President-Elect Bill Clinton, 24 September 1992, Folder 14, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

[42]President-Elect Bill Clinton to Wilma Mankiller, 17 December 1992, Folder 14, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

Given the prominence shared by Harris and Mankiller, it is hardly a surprise that they have worked together from time to time on issues of mutual interest. They actually met while Mankiller still lived in San Francisco, but their interaction on behalf of Native Americans did not really emerge until Mankiller became involved with the Cherokee Nation.[43] They proved useful allies in their joint support of issues affecting Native Americans and they also gave each other advice from time to time.

In 1991 Harris wrote Mankiller to tell her about funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for programs dealing with community health and prevention. Harris described the initiative as "designed to promote partnerships between public health education and practices."[44] Another project that brought Harris and Mankiller together came in 1994 when Harris asked the Cherokee Nation to act as a consortium member in a proposal to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Mankiller agreed to support the proposal which would provide better internet access to tribes.[45] Harris also solicited Mankiller's support for an AIO repatriation program which would "provide the opportunity for academics to develop a large body of data of specific Native American groups" and enable the information to be conveyed to the general public as well as the individual cultures.[46] Mankiller responded that she believed this could be "a mutually beneficial collaboration between Native Americans and the academic and museum

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[43]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[44]LaDonna Harris to Wilma Mankiller, 27 January 1991, Folder 1, Box 7,.WMC, WHC, OU.

[45]LaDonna Harris to Wilma Mankiller, 9 May 1994, Folder 11, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[46]LaDonna Harris to Wilma Mankiller, 2 June 1992, Folder 1, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

communities."[47] Mankiller also became one of the early board members of the AIO Ambassador's program, which Harris initiated in1993 as a way to mentor young Native Americans in preparation to serve their communities. Harris and Mankiller endorsed Jerry F. Muskrat for nomination to the tenth circuit court of appeals in1992. The prominence of both women emerges in the wording of the letter of support for Muskrat. Harris began the letter of support by saying "on behalf of Wilma Mankiller, myself and others in the American Indian community..."[48] Indeed, both Harris and Mankiller had made national reputations for themselves and they carried a lot of weight in some political circles.

Aside from their other concerns, both Harris and Mankiller exerted considerable efforts on environmental issues. In the early 1980s AIO began a two year study called "To Assess Environmental Health Impacts of Development on Indian Communities and the Roles of Government Agencies Charged with the Responsibilities for Various Aspects of Environmental Protection and Individual Safety." Harris explained that AIO had found that "tribal governments are making daily decisions with far-reaching effects with very little information regarding the impacts of those decisions on the environment and health of the people." She said that AIO wanted to "increase the awareness of Indian decision makers of the environmental health impacts" related to development. In order to accomplish this, AIO, with funding from six federal agencies, sponsored a series of

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[47]Wilma Mankiller to LaDonna Harris, 5 June 1992, Folder 1, Box 8, WMC, WHC, OU.

[48] LaDonna Harris to Jesse Jackson, president of the Rainbow Coalition, 4 December 1992, Folder 1, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

regional seminars to educate leaders on environmental problems and possible solutions.[49] One of the seminars took place in San Diego and had approximately forty-one tribes in attendance.[50]

AIO continued its work on environmental issues and responded to a request from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to comment on a proposal regarding the administration of environmental programs on Indian lands. LaDonna Harris did so by reminding William Ruckelshaus of the EPA that "Indian tribes are not subject to state jurisdiction unless specifically authorized by Congress." She admonished that "any attempt by the EPA to place Indian tribes under state jurisdiction would be strenuously opposed" and would detract from the larger goal of protecting the environment. Harris cautioned that the problem should "not try to be solved in haste with a 'broad-brush stroke.'"[51] AIO as a facilitator of education and environmental protection drew praise from many, including Wilma Mankiller. While still serving as deputy chief, Mankiller wrote to Harris to offer her advice on AIO's annual report. Mankiller said "I find your past work in tribal resources, environmental matters, and tribal governance both important and needed." She went on to say she thought AIO "can and should be the final word on Indian related economic development and information within its areas of expertise."[52] Mankiller later

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[49]LaDonna Harris to Perry Raglin, California Rural Indian Health Board, 5 February 1981, Series 1, Box 8, LHC, NAES.

[50]Ibid.

[51]LaDonna Harris to William D. Ruckelshaus, administrator, Environmental Protection Agency, 2 February 1984, emphasis original, Series 1, Box 37, LHC, NAES.

[52]Wilma Mankiller to LaDonna Harris, 29 December 1986, Series 1, Box 19, LHC, NAES

encouraged AIO to become "even more involved in environmental actions."[53]

That AIO and LaDonna Harris spent considerable effort to protect the environment is not surprising. Going back at least to the early 1970s, LaDonna had voiced strong concern over the future of the environment. Believing that Native Americans have something to teach other Americans when it comes to the environment, Harris explained that "American Indians' whole social and religious relationship to the earth and to the reproduction of the earth is totally ecology."[54] Mankiller echoed a similar sentiment nearly twenty years later when she participated in the International People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.

At that conference Mankiller described the way in which whites and Native Americans have historically differed in their views of the environment.[55] She explained that "to indigenous people, the environment and land are all connected" and that they "understand clearly that everything in nature has its place and works to sustain" their lives.[56] According to Mankiller, this put Native Americans into immediate conflict with European settlers, and she said that the conflict continued between indigenous concepts of

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[53]Wilma Mankiller to LaDonna Harris, 29 December 1986, Series 1, Box 19, LHC, NAES.

[54]"Indian-ness: Beyond the Melting Pot," 28 March 1971, Interview with LaDonna Harris by Edwin Newman, on WNBC-TV "Speaking Freely," Series 2, Box 35, LHC, NAES.

[55]Mankiller is not alone in her contention that Native Americans and whites have historically held conflicting perceptions of land and the environment. See Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999); Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Resources* (Niwot: University of Colorado Press, 1998); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983). For an alternate view, see Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

[56]Wilma Mankiller, draft of presentation transcript, The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 24-27 October 1991, p. 2, Folder 9, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

the interconnectedness of nature and humanity and the mainstream desire for progress. She said she could not understand why eighty percent of people said they believed something should be done about the environment yet politicians remained unwilling to support meaningful reform.[57] Mankiller concluded her presentation by saying she no longer believed that people could wait for someone, a national leader or a prophet, to save the day. She said "there's only us," and added that they must take charge to "preserve an environment that will be good for our children and our children's children."[58] Shortly after attending the conference, Mankiller testified before Congress at a joint hearing with the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment and the Committee on Energy and Commerce.[59] And the following year Mankiller served on the Clinton/Gore National Environmental Committee. She urged other tribal leaders to support them in the1992 presidential election and stated that the Clinton/Gore environmental policies were their "ancestor's teachings."[60]

Mankiller also devoted a good deal of attention to the Cherokee Nation policies regarding the environment. Along with the tribal council, she supported the efforts of Native Americans for a Clean Environment when they tried to stop a food irradiation

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[57]Ibid, p. 8-9.

[58]Ibid, p. 9.

[59]United States Representative George Miller to Wilma Mankiller, 12 November 1991, Folder 12, Box 6, WMC, WHC, OU.

[60]"Tribal Leaders Encourage Voter Participation, Endorse Clinton" *Cherokee Advocate*, v. xvi, n. 11, November 1992, p. 8.

facility from being built in Oklahoma.[61] When the Cherokee Nation drew criticism for operating a "dump site," the executive director of Tribal Operations, Tommy Thompson, explained that the landfill, run by the tribe since Ross Swimmer established it in1978, functioned as simply a "repository for domestic, household waste" and not toxic waste of any kind. He maintained that the Cherokee Nation had the "strongest environmental record of any tribe in the State of Oklahoma due to the leadership of the Council and the Chief."[62] Mankiller did not hesitate to criticize environmental organizations, however, if she felt they were not doing enough. In1993 when the tribal council passed a resolution for the Cherokee Nation to become a member of the National Tribal Environmental Council, Mankiller vetoed it. Citing internal problems within the organization as explanation for her decision, Chief Mankiller said that it had not yet become clear the extent to which the National Tribal Environmental Council would "prevent environmental destruction of Indian lands."[63] Until the issues could be resolved, Mankiller made it clear she did not want to join.

The concern of Harris and Mankiller over the environment paralleled their advocacy of Indian health issues. In a letter to Senator James A. McClure, Harris blasted a proposed recommendation of the Committee of Appropriations to reduce significantly the funding of urban Indian health care programs. Harris said, "Indian people do not stop

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[61]Wilma Mankiller to Whom It May Concern, 10 May 1989, Folder 21, Box 44, WMC, WHC, OU.

[62]Tommy Thompson, Executive Director of Tribal Operations for the Cherokee Nation to Mike Haney, New Comer Band, Seminole Nation, 1 October 1991, Folder 23, Box8, WMC, WHC, OU.

[63]Wilma Mankiller to John Ketcher and members of the tribal council, 19 May 1993, Folder 2, Box 45, WMC, WHC, OU.

being Indian simply because they live in the city." She implored Senator McClure not to assume that those living in cities were "better off financially, educationally, or physically than their reservation counterparts." She added, "nor is there less of a responsibility on the part of the government to assist them." Harris concluded her plea by describing the proposal to cut funding as "irresponsible" and said it would result in "even deeper human misery."[64] The concerns voiced by Harris revealed the difficulties often faced by non-reservation Indians living in urban areas, an issue which Harris had fought to bring to the attention of policy makers since the1960s. Part of Harris' frustration came from the fact that she kept having to tell policy makers the same thing over and over again. Regardless of the verbal support given to improving conditions for Indian people, the actions of lawmakers often contradicted their rhetoric. Wilma Mankiller had her own concerns about health care for Native Americans. As chief she opened new healthcare clinics for the Cherokee and shared her experience with Indian health care services with policy makers at the national level. Senator McCain requested that Mankiller testify before the Committee on Indian Affairs in an oversight hearing on Indian Health Service implementation of the self governance demonstration project. Once again, Mankiller's experience with community development and healthcare as chief of the Cherokee Nation provided her expert credentials to testify before Congress.[65]

United States Senators John McCain and Daniel Inouye, from the Senate Select

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[64]LaDonna Harris to United States Senator James A. McClure, 15 December 1982, Series 1, Box 37, LHC, NAES.

[65]United States Senators John McCain and Daniel Inouye to Wilma Mankiller, 21 January 1993, Folder 6, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

Committee on Indian Affairs, asked Mankiller to serve as a member of the National Commission on American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Housing. They praised her past work and commended Mankiller on the "intelligence and judgement"she brought to "every task" she undertook. McCain and Inouye expressed confidence that her contribution to the commission would ensure its success.[66]

The exposure of both Harris and Mankiller to discrimination provided them with empathy for others suffering in the same way. They strongly advocated on behalf of African Americans and all minorities who were subjected to prejudice. Harris, of course, had helped facilitate the integration of Lawton and has been a life-long supporter of civil rights. One African American friend of Fred and LaDonna Harris from Lawton recalled staying with them in their home in Washington, D.C. on numerous occasions. John Henry Nelson, also a pioneering member of the Lawton integration effort, said that some of his other African American friends could not believe that the Fred and LaDonna had invited him to stay with them in their home in the 1960s.[67] From her desegregation work in Lawton to the nature of her individual friendships, Harris has unequivocally condemned racial discrimination. She dismissed the melting pot theory as a myth because "if you are of a dark-skinned people, you do not melt into the society." Harris added that she believed Americans Indians "could help the blacks and Chicanos and others in

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[66]United States Senators John McCain and Daniel Inouye to Wilma Mankiller, 21 January 1993, Folder 6, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[67]John Henry Nelson, Interview with the author, 20 September 2001.

understanding that being different is something beautiful."[68] Because the civil rights movement created a climate conducive to Native American efforts to challenge their treatment by the federal government, it also led to the unfortunate tendency by some to see Native Americans as simply minorities. Harris pointed this out saying: "We are not just another minority. We are political governmental entities."[69] She added that the Supreme Court "continues to uphold the fact that we are sovereign governments and that we have to be dealt with."[70]

In her support of civil rights, Harris not only recognized the commonalities among all groups who suffered discrimination, but used the language of civil rights to point out the unique status of Native Americans. In effect, she connected the struggle of Native Americans for self-determination with the larger fight against all forms of oppression. In 1987 at the "Constitutional, Roots, Rights, and Responsibilities International Smithsonian Symposium," LaDonna gave a paper entitled "Constitutional and Tribal Governance" in which she articulated the need to preserve Native American heritage.[71] She explained that her life's work had been "to work with Indian tribes in attaining their political, social, educational, and economic aspirations" and to articulate the contributions of Native

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[68]"Indian-ness: Beyond the Melting Pot," 28 March 1971, Interview with LaDonna Harris by Edwin Newman, on WNBC-TV "Speaking Freely," Series 2, Box 35, LHC, NAES.

[69]Barbara Gamarekian, "A Long, Long Way From Oklahoma" *The New York Times*, 25 September 1984, p. A 22.

[70]Ibid

[71]LaDonna Harris, "Constitutional and Tribal Governance," *The United States Constitution: Roots, Rights, and Responsibilities*, ed. A. E. Dick Howard (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992), p. 115-127.

Americans to "United States and global society as a whole."[72] LaDonna insisted that much of her work emerged from a "lifelong and deepening understanding of Native American traditions."[73] She explained that all of what she did was a manifestation of her culture's ancient traditions, which taught her that "internationally as well as domestically, the voice of the smallest, weakest, and most vulnerable must be heard, that *all* people may live."[74] Implicit in the concept of cultural restoration lies the recognition of the importance of Native American heritage to an understanding of the present. By situating both her work and the contributions of Native American culture as a whole within a larger global framework, LaDonna articulated the significance of cultural preservation as a necessary component of civil rights. In short, cultural restoration offered a vital link to the future and offered Indians a way to participate in the mainstream while maintaining and celebrating their heritage.[75]

LaDonna's ability to relate the suffering of others to her own experience with discrimination and intolerance is reflected in the varied causes both she and AIO have embraced. While most of AIO's focus centered on Native Americans, the organization also reflects the wider concerns of its founder in that it has supported women's organizations, anti-war efforts, and the rights of indigenous people around the world. For

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[72]Ibid., p. 115-116.

[73]Ibid., p. 126.

[74]Ibid.

[75]This can also be seen in her autobiography. She makes it clear in *LaDonna Harris: A Comanche Life*r that her Comanche culture has shaped the way in which she views the world around her.

example, AIO passed a resolution condemning Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The resolution not only called on the United States to "provide the maximum in humanitarian assistance" to the victims in Lebanon but also stated that "no justification exists for the bombing and shelling of areas in which civilians live" regardless of the presence of Palestinian guerrillas.[76] Americans for Indian Opportunity also joined Citizens Against Nuclear War (CAN). In a letter to the Executive Director of CAN, LaDonna Harris commended the organization for its ability "to include the concerns of people of color and women's groups in the nuclear arms debate."[77]

Harris' personal concern over the issue of nuclear arms led to her involvement in other organizations, such as Global Tomorrow Coalition and Women for Meaningful Summits. She visited the Soviet Union as a part of her work toward a reduction of nuclear armaments and creation of a better dialogue and understanding between Soviet and United States people. In a speech in which she recounted her trip, she opened by saying that upon embarking on her journey to the Soviet Union she had taken with her "all of the knowledge and prejudice that a Comanche girl from Cotton County, Oklahoma would have."[78] True to her style, Harris drew from her own experience to express commonality with the Soviet people. She made an insightful comparison between the bureaucracy which governed so many aspects of Soviet people's lives and the bureaucracy

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[76]Americans for Indian Opportunity Resolution, 1982, Series 1, Box 25, LHC, NAES.

[77]Letter from LaDonna Harris to Karen Milhauser, 8 February 1987, Series 1, Box 27, LHC, NAES.

[78]LaDonna Harris, Speech, circa mid 1980s, Series 2, Box 13, LHC, NAES.

under which Native Americans live. She concluded by saying that her trip to the Soviet Union had humbled her.[79] Her compassion for others and her ability to find some way to connect her experiences with theirs is what has made her so effective as a humanitarian.

Yet another indication of commitment by AIO and LaDonna Harris to a broad range of humanitarian and civil rights concerns can be seen in a statement issued by AIO about the plight of indigenous people in Guatemala. It expressed concern over the involvement of the United States and asked that the United States government not resume military aid to the government of Guatemala. Citing both physical and cultural genocide against the Indian population in Guatemala, AIO condemned their treatment and pointed out that Guatemalan Indians, who comprised sixty percent of the population, received no representation.[80] The position of AIO on the situation in Guatemala as well as their stance on Israel's invasion of Lebanon goes to the heart of LaDonna Harris' political philosophy of helping all those in need and all those who faced discrimination.

Wilma Mankiller also has a strong record in her support of civil rights which, in part, stemmed from her own negative experiences with racism. In fact, Mankiller recalled that the Black Panther Party was the first activist group that she could really identify with because of their self-help approach and because they addressed problems which resonated with her own experiences. She said she had "never before seen any minority stand up to

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[79]LaDonna Harris, Speech, circa mid 1980s, Series 2, Box 13, LHC, NAES.

[80]"Statement on Guatemala by Americans for Indian Opportunity" circa early 1980s, Series 1, Box 24, LHC, NAES.

police, judges, and other white people."[81] Mankiller's commitment to fighting against racism only deepened over time as her national stature afforded her greater opportunities for involvement. She served on the board of the South Africa Free Elections Fund, which provided financial support for voter education projects. According to one newspaper article, after her re-election in 1991, Mankiller "emerged as one of the most effective global leaders for human liberation and justice."[82] Earlier that same year, Mankiller had also taken part in a civil rights march to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. One woman wrote Mankiller a letter criticizing her for participating in the march with people like Patricia Ireland, Ted Kennedy, and Barney Frank: "unfortunately, I'm afraid you have let all native Oklahomans down by walking hand in hand with this motley crew."[83] Wilma Mankiller responded by telling the woman that "being liberal or conservative has nothing to do with being concerned about the growing racial intolerance in this country." Mankiller added that she indeed wanted "a world in which Dr. King's dream of equality for all people is finally realized."[84]

Mankiller received recognition for her civil rights efforts in 1992 when the Commission on Racial Justice presented her with an award. In response to the award, Mankiller said she believed Native Americans and African Americans had a great deal in

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[81]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. 154.

[82]"Mankiller Presented Award for Efforts of Civil Rights" *Cherokee Advocate*, v. xvi, n. 11, November 1992, p.2.

[83]To Wilma Mankiller, 1 January 1992, Folder 1, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

[84]From Wilma Mankiller, 3 February 1992, Folder 1, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

common because of the discrimination inflicted upon them. She pointed out that at different points in history each group had been "the subject of debates as to whether we were human or whether we had souls." Mankiller said "we know about struggle and loss" but added "we will continue on" until "racial hatred will no longer be tolerated anywhere in the world."[85] Mankiller's support for equality for all people brought her accolades from Indians and non-Indians alike and helps explain why she has been called a humanitarian leader rather than simply a Native American leader. Like LaDonna Harris, Mankiller's work and her rhetoric had larger implications for society.

LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller clearly brought different experiences and backgrounds to their work in politics and activism but the way in which each harnessed those experiences into a larger advocacy for all people engenders a striking commonality. Their concepts of Indianness permeated their accomplishments. While they achieved numerous victories, each viewed those accomplishments within a wider framework of her traditional culture. The emphasis on the group, as opposed to the individual, and the belief in the interconnectedness of all things infused their perceptions of their work. Both Harris and Mankiller exhibited a sense of individual modesty as well. Harris said she does not have all the answers and that "any real Indian will say that an individual doesn't know the answers."[86] Mankiller also deflected praise of her accomplishments. Despite being hailed by many as a role model for women and Native Americans, she modestly remarked,

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[85]Wilma Mankiller, Written statement to Commission on Racial Justice in acceptance of an award, 16 October 1992, Folder 10, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

[86]*LaDonna Harris*, p. 125.

"If I am a role model, I am certainly a flawed role model."[87] Still, she acknowledged that she received admiring letters from all sorts of people including females as well as males.[88]

Harris and Mankiller actually have been important role models for many people in the United States because of their devotion to improving the conditions and rights of people. In fact, Mankiller's definition of a role model as someone who "spends much of their life trying to help others," applies to both her and LaDonna Harris.[89] The work of Harris and Mankiller in the areas of community development, the environment, civil rights, and larger humanitarian efforts gained them national recognition. They also achieved recognition for their work on behalf on women. Both were named women of the year by different women's magazines including *Ladies Home Journal* and *Ms. Magazine*, and both have given numerous talks on the subject of women's rights. Here again, they took the traditions from their native cultures and applied them to their support for women's rights. In fact, the intersection of Indianness and feminism can best be seen through an evaluation of how each woman has approached the issue of feminism and women's rights.

One intriguing commonality that emerges in a comparison of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller lies in their belief that no gender inequality existed among Native Americans prior to contact. As Mankiller explained based on her discussions with other indigenous women: "Almost all of them believe at some point in their tribal history there

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[87]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 3.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

was balance between men and women."[90] Certainly, she and Harris both believed that Indian women played a vital role in most tribal cultures and that the decline in status they experienced stemmed from the influence of Anglo European notions of gender roles. Harris and Mankiller were hardly alone in this belief. The significance of their belief lies not in its validity but rather in that it legitimized their own roles in politics. This belief enabled both women to view their activism as a traditional expression of women's tribal power rather than a challenge to traditionalism. Both women firmly situated their life experiences and work within the context of their tribal heritage and traditions. Given that, the belief that their roles in national politics came from tradition played a central and defining role in the identity and image of each woman. LaDonna Harris described her work as in keeping with Comanche values. Similarly, Wilma Mankiller successfully characterized opposition to her as decidedly out of step with tradition.

The way in which each woman used her understanding of tribal heritage to justify her role in the national political arena, dealing with everything from Indian rights to women's issues and humanitarian causes, provides insight into the changing role of women of color in politics. This, as well as the larger role of the feminist movement and the place of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller as women in it, is explored in the following chapter.

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[90]Ibid.

Chapter Six: The Intersection of Feminism and Indianness

According to one Native prophecy this is the 'time of the women,' a time when women's leadership skills are needed. Women, by and large, bring to leadership a greater sense of collaboration, an ability to view social, political and personal concerns in a uniquely interconnected, female way.[1]

-Wilma Mankiller

Though quite remarkable in their own right as Native American leaders, LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller operated within a particular political and social climate as women. The public persona of each was necessarily and inextricably tied to gendered imagery. They each began their political involvement with great emphasis on their gender; Harris because she acted in an unofficial capacity as a congressional wife and extension of her husband's political persona, and Mankiller because of the mystique surrounding her status as a female chief. In other words, Harris and Mankiller were not national leaders who happened to be women. They became national figures in large part *because* of their gender. That understanding is paramount in situating them within the historical and political context to which they belong.

Harris's entry into the political arena came through, and because of, her gender. As the wife of a politician, she played a particular type of role, one that she expanded and ultimately challenged through her own direct involvement in politics as an advocate for Native Americans. Still, her first involvement in politics hinged on her being a wife. She used a very traditional role to afford her own entry into the world of politics and activism;

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[1]Wilma Mankiller to "Dear Friends," 1 September 1993, Folder 6, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

however, she would not have known and interacted with people such as Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Stewart Udall if she were not the wife of a United States senator. She drew on the private, social side of being a senator's wife to enter into political discourse with policy makers. It is important to note that Harris did not sit down one day and decide to play up a particular image to get what she wanted. The process came about in a far slower and less deliberate fashion. She realized in the early 1960s that she wanted to make people cognizant of the problems facing Native Americans. She also knew what people expected of her and what roles were available to her at that particular time. She and Fred Harris made a striking political duo and the manifestations of that public relationship afforded her a means for getting her voice heard. That said, LaDonna Harris possessed a remarkable sense of self-awareness in constructing an image to accomplish her goals. As she pointed out, she "knew that being a senator's wife had some power behind it" and used that power accordingly.[2]

Wilma Mankiller also made use of gendered imagery in her political career with the Cherokee Nation. Pinpointing the exact nature of Mankiller's popularity and rise to national prominence poses certain difficulties, but she certainly made successful use of media interest in her identity as a female chief. A woman named Mankiller becoming chief of the second largest and most well-known tribe in the country during a period of renewed interest in Indian culture contained all the ingredients of a good human interest story. "I'm sure my name had something to do with the media interest," Mankiller

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[2]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p.25.

acknowledged.[3] The real heart of her story, however, lies in how she utilized this interest to create a forum in which she could express her views on Native American rights, women's rights, and other issues. The use of gendered imagery by Mankiller is perhaps two-fold. First, Mankiller made her gender an issue by virtue of the sheer number of times she said "gender is not an issue" while simultaneously expressing surprise at gender-based opposition to her. Second, she used Cherokee history to legitimize her leadership within the tribe, when her election actually represented a departure from tradition.

In fact, the argument that Mankiller's election represented an extension of traditional roles of women in her tribe is really no different than the arguments made by nineteenth-century white female reformers to legitimize their involvement in the public realm. They, too, characterized their entrance into the public world of social reform as an extension of tradition. Advocating for temperance, child labor, and prostitution lent a legitimacy to female activism. Indeed, they could justify their involvement in reform as a logical extension of the traditional role of women as moral guardians of the family.[4] In both the case of Mankiller and those nineteenth-century female reformers, traditional concepts of femininity were molded to legitimize a new behavior.

While considerable scholarship exists on female reform in the nineteenth-century, only recently has scholarship on Native American gender roles begun to emerge. A major

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[3]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 3.

[4]See, Nancy Burns, et al. *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Lori Ginsberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Classin the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).

goal of this scholarship has been to debunk myths surrounding the role of Native American women throughout history. The gist of this attempt to instill agency in Indian women and transcend the image of them as either "squaws" or "Indian princesses" has resulted in useful literature. One author argued that in order for the Cherokees to acculturate, "it was necessary to undermine the role of women in Cherokee society." She explained "this bias against women was something the white man brought to Cherokee culture."[5] Similarly, there have been a number of works which stress the power of women within their tribes and the esteemed role they played throughout history. Interestingly, many of these works argue that power should not necessarily be equated with participation in politics but rather should be evaluated as a part of the larger esteem a given society, or tribe, afforded to its women. Issues such as marriage rights, religion, and community involvement, should also be considered.[6]

Strikingly, this is an argument long made by women's historians and one which actually demonstrates more commonality than difference among Indian women and their European counterparts who settled in North America. In most cultures women have, in one way or another, found ways to express power in unofficial but legitimate terms. This should hardly serve to downplay the existence of sex-based oppression and discrimination. It should, however, be noted that more similarities exist, in this respect, between Native American women and their white counterparts in terms of private or familial based

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[5]Maureen O'Dea Caragliano, "Beyond Princess and Squaw: Wilma Mankiller and the Cherokee Gynocentric System," Masters Thesis, San Jose State University, 1997, p. 76.

[6]See Perdue, *Cherokee Women*; Geen, *Women in American Indian Society*; Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth*; Bataille and Sands, *American Indian Women*.

expressions of power than is often recognized. As Clara Sue Kidwell points out, "the power of women in matrilineal societies included that of selecting men for positions of leadership."[7] While that is not true in the case of the European women who came to North America, it is the case that just as white men dominated public life, Indian men "played the public roles in Native American societies."[8]

Mankiller stated on numerous occasions that no sexism existed among the Cherokee prior to contact. As a political move, she defended her own role in tribal government by explaining it as an extension of the powerful role women have historically played in the Cherokee tribe, and some scholars have lent their support to her contention. Susan Williams and Joy Harjo describe Mankiller's election as the first time a Cherokee woman had held such a position of power since the influence of Christianity, and said that this was "due to the insecurity of men."[9] They also characterize Mankiller as following "in the path of other Beloved Women" in the Cherokee tribe.[10] Yet, the very essence of the Cherokee having "Beloved Women" connotes that women achieving an equitable level of power and influence to that of men was exceptional in nature. Cherokee men did not have status of "Beloved Men" because their presence in the public arena of politics and decision making was unremarkable in the very ordinariness of it. Wilma Mankiller being elected

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[7]Clara Sue Kidwell, "Native American Women" *Readers Companion to United States Women's History*, ed Wilma Mankiller, et al., (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998) p. 407.

[8] Ibid.

[9]Susan M. Williams and Joy Harjo, "American Indian Feminism" *Readers Companion to United States Women's History*, ed. Wilma Mankiller, et al., p. 199.

[10]Ibid.

chief did pose a challenge to traditional Cherokee gender roles regardless of the autonomy and even public power some Cherokee women exercised in the past. Lacking in both Mankiller's portrayal of her role and that of Williams and Harjo is the recognition that Mankiller's accomplishment clearly exceeded traditional female representations of power within the Cherokee Nation. This is, in part, an indication of Mankiller's astute political maneuvering; by characterizing her leadership as a restoration of tradition instead of an aberration, she put her critics on the defensive and portrayed the Cherokee tribe as far more progressive on women's rights than mainstream white society.

However, the tendency to characterize Mankiller's tenure as chief as a return to tradition speaks to a larger problem in the area of Native American women's history, which is the fallacy promulgated by romanticized depictions of a distant past prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America in which all Indian women exercised a great deal of power. This is not to dismiss the fact that some groups of Native American women did exercise a greater degree of autonomy than white women, but rather to suggest there existed more similarities between the two groups, in terms of the acceptable arena for expressions of power, than has been indicated by most scholars. Certainly it could be argued, for example, that Abigail Adams, the wife of President John Adams and mother of President John Quincy Adams, occupied something akin to "Beloved Woman" status. But just as it would be erroneous to take the status and respect afforded to Abigail and apply that to an analysis of the roles of other women in the eighteenth century, so too is it inaccurate to take the experience of a small minority of Beloved Women and argue that all Cherokee women achieved a status of power completely equal to that of men. The larger

problem with scholarship which over emphasizes the power of Native American women prior to the influence of white culture is that it plays into the predictable good-guys vs bad-guys dichotomy and ignores the dynamic nature of human interaction. It further obscures the issue of identity politics as well. The larger point here is not to dwell on pre-contact manifestations of female power, but instead to explore how that particular belief shaped the image, as well as identity, of both Harris and Mankiller.

LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller share two fundamental beliefs about female leadership which underpins their styles of interaction and participation in politics. First, both believe that historically Indian women played a vital role within the tribes and that sexism came from white culture. Harris described Indian men and women as "equal until Euro-American society and religion came in."[11] Second, each woman contends that women and men engage in leadership differently. In fact, Harris and Mankiller both argued that women are more collaborative and that they bring a different type of sensitivity to leadership.[12] According to Mankiller, women are more likely to build teams and are "more inclusive and are able to see things in a more interconnected way," whereas "men tend to make unilateral decisions and charge ahead."[13] The significance of both beliefs is that at the heart of their activism and self-image lies a gendered perception of politics. Being female and believing traditional Native American cultures esteem women lends a legitimacy and confidence not automatically found among many females in politics.

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[11]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 20 November 2000, p. 42.

[12]See for example, "LaDonna Harris: Indian Powerhouse," *Playboy*, v. 19, n. 2, 2 February 1972, p. 178.

[13]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001.

In fact, most women in politics have had to overcome gender in order to succeed; Harris and Mankiller actually *used* their gender to succeed.

Wilma Mankiller has been instrumental in encouraging greater political participation among Indian and non-Indian women as well. As she said in1993, "Continued change will not occur without women leaders organizing, networking, debating, and singing our way into the next millennium, hand in hand with our young sisters."[14] Describing Mankiller as a "role model for all Americans," United States Representative Susan Molinari invited her to speak at the Women as Leaders seminar in Washington, D.C.[15] Representative Molinari expressed confidence that Mankiller's "inspirational words" would "impart wisdom and hope" to those participating in the seminar.[16] Wilma also demonstrated her support of women when she voiced objection to the confirmation of Judge Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court after University of Oklahoma Law Professor Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment. She wrote to United States Senator David Boren and criticized the lack of female leadership in government. She questioned the ramifications of Thomas' confirmation saying, "If a Yale educated law professor will not be believed when she complains about sexual harassment, what woman or girl can be encouraged to come forward with complaints about sexual harassment?" Adding that she felt strongly about the issue, she reiterated her concern that

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[14]Letter from Wilma Mankiller to "Dear Friends," 1 September 1993, Folder 6, Box 1, WMC, WHC, OU.

[15]Letter from United States Representative Susan Molinari to Wilma Mankiller, 5 March 1993, Folder 19, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

[16]Ibid.

Thomas' confirmation would discourage females across the country from exposing sexual exploitation and harassment.[17]

Mankiller criticized not only the treatment of Anita Hill but also lamented the fact that more women did not get appointed as judges. She asked Senator Boren to support Jane Wiseman for a federal judgeship in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The chief wrote, "I don't understand how we can continue to have gender inequity in judgeships when we have so may women qualified to serve in these positions."[18] She added that she had been able to solve a similar problem in the Cherokee Nation "pretty quickly by appointing two women judges in the tribal courts."[19] Senator Boren responded that Wiseman would be among those he considered for the opening and Wiseman also wrote to Mankiller thanking her for her help and advice.[20]

LaDonna Harris too has actively supported women in politics throughout her career. In fact, ten years before Mankiller became the first woman elected principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, LaDonna Harris wrote a letter of congratulations to another female leader of an Indian tribe. In a letter to Anne Sandoval, chairwoman of the Sycuan Band of Mission Indians, Harris wrote, " I'm glad to see a woman chairing an Indian

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[17]Wilma Mankiller to United States Senator David Boren, 15 October 1991, Folder 3, Box 6, WMC, WHC, OU.

[18] Wilma Mankiller to United States Senator David Boren, 1 November 1993, Folder 2, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

[19]Ibid.

[20]United States Senator David Boren to Wilma Mankiller, 12 November 1993; Letter from Jane P. Wiseman, district judge, to Wilma Mankiller 26 August 1993, Folder 2, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

tribe" and added "it does my heart good."[21] When Mankiller did get elected chief of the Cherokee Nation, Harris says she was pleased but not surprised to see a woman chosen, given that a number of other women had already served as leaders of their tribes.[22]

Harris' support of women has continued for over thirty years. Described by one associate as a "Fearless Noble Comanche Maiden," Harris contributed significantly to the promotion of women's issues.[23] She did this both in her support of women and in her ability and willingness to expand assumptions about women in leadership positions. Moreover, her work with the Women's Political Caucus, her support of the Equal Rights Amendment, and involvement with the feminist movement further illustrates this commitment.[24]

That Harris and Mankiller developed a profound sense of themselves as Indian women, and at times, used it to band together is clear in any examination of their interaction with each other and other Native American women. When Mankiller ran for chief in 1987, for example, a prominent Native American activist, Ada Deer, sent a letter to Harris and other members of the Women of Indian Nations Political Action Committee (WINPAC) Board about the election. This organization encouraged the participation of Native Americans in all levels of politics without being affiliated with any political entity or

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[21]LaDonna Harris to Anne Sandoval, chairwoman of the Sycuan Band of Mission Indians, 28 January 1977, Series 1, Box 20, LHC, NAES.

[22]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

[23]Roger A. Jourdain, chairman of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, to LaDonna Harris, I December 1981, Series 1, Box 23, LHC, NAES.

[24]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001.

group. In regards to the pending election, Deer explained that Mankiller was "facing three male opponents" and urged the board members to make a personal donation to her campaign.[25] When Mankiller won the election LaDonna Harris sent her a telegram congratulating her. Harris and another friend, Ella Mae Horse, wrote: "Your sisters across the country are so extremely proud of you" and "Please know we are thinking of you and stand ready to help assure you a successful and productive term." The letter closed with an extension of their "most heartfelt congratulations" and "best wishes."[26] As evidenced here, gender was a central component of the political identity and image of these women and also served as a basis for unity and mutual support. Such support proved a tremendous asset among the network of Native American women involved in politics.

Ada Deer is important for her accomplishments on behalf of Native Americans but an examination of her is particularly useful here in forging a better understanding of the network formed by contemporary Native American women in politics. Her relationship to both LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller provides insight into the centrality of the gender-based support network forged by these women. Like Harris and Mankiller, Deer urged women to play a larger role in politics saying, "It is a man's world unless women vote." She encouraged women to support political candidates who "are striving to

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[25]Letter from Ada Deer to LaDonna Harris, 22 May 1987, Series 1, Box 19, LHC, NAES.

[26]Telegram from LaDonna Harris and Ella Mae Horse to Wilma Mankiller, 13 August 1987, Folder 11, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

eliminate oppressions of all kinds."[27]

LaDonna Harris has acted as a mentor to Ada Deer throughout her career and the two joked that every time LaDonna got named to some board or other, she would soon open the door for Ada to follow. In fact, both Fred and LaDonna Harris provided Deer with assistance. She stayed with them in their home in Washington, D.C. on a number of occasions, and they also aided her in her efforts to re-gain federally recognized status for her tribe, the Menominee, which had been terminated during the 1950s.[28] Deer wrote a letter to LaDonna Harris thanking her for all the help both she and Fred provided to the Menominee efforts at restoration. "Your encouragement, consultation, and advice really bolstered my work," she wrote, adding "I always marvel at your vision and foresight." Deer concluded the letter by calling LaDonna Harris an inspiration for all Indian people and said, "you've won my perpetual Woman-Of-The-Year Award!"[29]

After securing restoration of reservation status for her tribe by the mid1970s, Deer has since continued as a vital activist for the rights of Native Americans and later became the head of Native American Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She ran, but did not win, as the Democratic candidate for secretary of state of Wisconsin in1978 and1982. In1993 she became the first female Native American assistant secretary of the

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[27]"Keynote Speaker Urges Political Involvement Among Women," unidentified newspaper article, Series 2, Box 23, LHC, NAES.

[28]LaDonna Harris, Interview with the author, 25 September 2001; Ada Deer, Interview with the author, 27 September 2001. For a discussion of the Menominee tribe's effort to re-gain the status of federal recognition see, Nicholas C. Peroff, *Menominee Drums: Tribal Termination and Restoration, 1954-1974* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

[29]Letter from Ada Deer to LaDonna Harris, 26 July 1974, Series 1, Box 6, LHC, NAES.

Interior for Indian Affairs.[30] When Ada Deer ran for secretary of state of Wisconsin, Fred and LaDonna Harris supported her. They wrote letters of support and engaged in fund raising efforts on her behalf, writing "we have known and admired her for many years" and "we respect her abilities as a leader." They described Deer as an American Indian woman who "has accomplished many firsts in her career."[31] On the back of a pamphlet promoting her candidacy, a passage from *Ms. Magazine* described Deer as representing the "re-emergence of the Indian woman, who historically has filled positions of equal responsibility in a tribal society which operates on qualifications."[32] To be sure, gendered language and assumptions about supposed traditional expression of female power in native societies regularly informed positive depictions of Native American women in politics like Deer and Mankiller.

Ada Deer met Mankiller in the early1980s and on occasion the two worked on projects of mutual interest and sought advice from one another. Mankiller testified in support of Ada Deer's confirmation as the assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs in July of 1993. She described Deer as a "courageous and tireless advocate of Native people" and as "always in tune to the needs of people."[33] Mankiller said that in her

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[30]See Clara Sue Kidwell, "Ada Deer," *The New Warriors, Native American Leaders Since 1900*, ed. R. David Edmunds (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) p. 239-60.

[31]Campaign support letter from Fred Harris and LaDonna Harris, circa 1978, Series 2, Box 35, LHC, NAES.

[32]"Ada E. Deer: Democrat for Secretary of State" election pamphlet, Series 2, Box 35, LHC, NAES.

[33]"Testimony of Principal Chief Wilma P. Mankiller, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, in support of Ada E. Deer for confirmation as assistant secretary of Interior for Indian Affairs, Senate committee on Indian Affairs" 15 July 1993, p. 2, Folder 13, Box 19, WMC, WHC, OU.

opinion Deer's biggest contribution was the leadership she exhibited in the restoration efforts of her tribe and she called Deer a "superior choice" for the position.[34] After receiving confirmation for her new job, Deer continued to receive support from Mankiller.

The following year Mankiller gave Deer advice on formulating priorities for1994. After making some general observations and recommendations, Mankiller warned Deer of Oklahoma-based opposition to her because of her efforts the previous year to consolidate the BIA offices in Oklahoma. Mankiller told her that United States Senator David Boren of Oklahoma was "so angry he has threatened taking you personally to federal court" and added that the other United States senator from Oklahoma, Don Nickles, was "pretty pissed off" as well.[35] Mankiller advised Ada Deer to "always question the agenda and recommendations" of the BIA and to keep in mind that even as she "worked for the common good" as she always had, there were people who wanted to see Deer "fall and trip" in order to facilitate her removal from Indian Affairs.[36] Deer clearly saw Mankiller as a sound advisor, as she expressed a few months later. Deer praised Wilma for her efforts at the1994 White House Listening Conference, in which numerous Indian leaders met with policy makers and members of the Clinton Administration, saying "I trust your judgement and am in awe of your intelligence and common sense." She added, "You have already achieved so much in your life and I am counting on you to help me achieve our goals for

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[34]Ibid, p. 3.

[35]Letter from Wilma Mankiller to Ada Deer, 22 February 1994, Folder 15, Box 13, WMC, WHC, OU.

[36]Ibid

Indian country."[37]

When LaDonna Harris received the Lucy Covington Award for her lifetime contributions to bettering the condition of Native Americans, both Wilma Mankiller and Ada Deer, along with feminist leader Gloria Steinem, participated in the awards ceremony honoring Harris. Here again ,the significance of the support network emerges. These women identified heavily with the significance of gender and thus gender comprised a central bond that forged this support network. Harris wrote to Mankiller thanking her for her presentation at the ceremony and said "I know we will always be supportive of each other."[38] Harris and Mankiller indeed have a mutually high opinion of each other. In one article, Harris described Mankiller as someone other Indian leaders view "with great admiration, maybe sometimes with envy that she can do what she does."[39] Similarly, Mankiller describes herself as "an enormous admirer of LaDonna Harris," whom she described as a "highly creative woman." Wilma credited LaDonna with having had "a tremendous impact on Native American women."[40]

The support network made up of women like LaDonna Harris, Wilma Mankiller, Ada Deer, and others remains central to understanding the identity they brought to their leadership and to the goals they accomplished. In 1993 Clara Nomee, madam chairman of the Crow Tribal Council, wrote to Mankiller discussing the role of Indian women leaders

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[37]Letter from Ada Deer to Wilma Mankiller, 27 June 1994, Folder 15, Box 3, WMC, WHC, OU.

[38]LaDonna Harris to Wilma Mankiller, 10 October 1994, Folder 17, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

[39]Elizabeth Levitan Spaid, "Challenges of a Cherokee Chief: First Woman to Head Tribe Battles Poverty, Ill Health, and Lack of Jobs and Confidence" *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 June 1992, p. 14.

[40]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001.

and their responsibilities to their respective tribal governments. She said that they "must stand and support each other in the area of tribal sovereignty."[41] There were also numerous support organizations which emerged for Native American women. For instance, Women of All Red Nations (WARN) stresses the value of women within Indian tribal traditions. Winona LaDuke, one of the founders of WARN, described the organization as growing out of a recognition that more women needed to be involved in the American Indian Movement. She added that WARN also sought to "bring back the traditional role of women in the Indian nations and in the leadership and guidance of AIM."[42] This push toward reasserting "traditional roles"of Native American women appears both in organizations such as WARN and in the recent scholarship which purports to move beyond stereotypes of Indian women. Still, for women such as Harris and Mankiller, their participation in mainstream national politics cannot be divorced from the gendered imagery they helped create. Nor can it be divorced from the feminist movement, given that feminism not only helped shape their awareness of gender inequality but also significantly altered the possibilities for women in politics.

While white middle and upper class college educated women dominated the feminist movement and often defined "women's issues" too narrowly to appeal to women of color and poor women, the movement did have implications for women at large.[43] It

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[41]Letter from Clara Nomee, madam chairman, Crow Tribal Council, to Wilma Mankiller, 4 August 1993, Folder 1, Box 10, WMC, WHC, OU.

[42]"Resources in Red Nations: A Conversation with Winona LaDuke, *RAIN,* Feb-March, 1980, p. 6

[43]See Evans, *Personal Politics*; Echols, *Daring to be Bad;* Joseph and Lewis, *Common Differences*.

raised the issue of sex based discrimination to national attention and fostered a dialogue which directly shaped perceptions of femininity and options available to women. The feminist movement gave women like Harris and Mankiller a framework within which they could challenge assumptions about the appropriate place of women in society. In fact, the feminist movement created a host of new possibilities for women. By the mid 1990s women still made less money than men and remained under-represented in every branch of the government. But it is also true that increasing numbers of women go to college, pursue advanced degrees, run companies, and do a number of other things that, prior to the feminist movement, were considered unusual.

The friendship between Wilma Mankiller and Gloria Steinem, whose name is virtually synonymous with the feminist movement, provides further insight into Mankiller's use of feminism in her political image. She and Steinem developed a friendship after meeting through their work with the Ms. Foundation. Mankiller credited Steinem for encouraging her to write her autobiography. In the acknowledgments, Mankiller extended her "love and appreciation" to Steinem for her support.[44] When asked how her friendship with Steinem had affected her feminist beliefs, Mankiller said that it "has deepened and reinforced" her understanding of feminism.[45] Their relationship has brought even more publicity to Mankiller. What better irony for feminists and critics of feminism alike to see Steinem, the best known spokesperson of the movement, linked to a woman named Mankiller? The name brought substantial interest and, in fact, even the *Wall Street*

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[44]Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, p. x.

[45]Wilma Mankiller, Written response to questions posed by author, 18 October 2001, p. 1.

Journal quipped about her name. Saying that their favorite name on the list of those in attendance at Bill Clinton's economic summit meeting was Chief Mankiller, they added their hope that she represented only the Cherokee Nation and not "a feminist economic priority."[46] Mankiller also utilized humor about her name, often telling people that she earned it. Mankiller's image, because of her name, her prominence, and her support for women's issues cannot be separated from her use of gender. Despite her claims that gender had nothing to do with leadership, it had everything to do with her national image as a leader.

Similarly, gender opened the door for LaDonna Harris' rise to national leadership. By the time that her organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity, celebrated its 25 year anniversary, LaDonna had been divorced for 15 years and it had been even longer since she was a congressional wife. No doubt she projected a different image in1995 than she did as the young wife of a rising politician. Yet it was, after all, that gendered image that first brought her national recognition. She continued to be one of the most well-respected advocates of Native American rights in the country and grew far less likely to have to cater to social expectations to get what she wanted. Indeed, gender role expectations, while still in existence at the end of the twentieth century, were far less rigid than they were in the late1950s and early1960s when LaDonna got her first taste of expectations for political wives.

While Harris represents a first in the expanding the role of congressional wives and Mankiller became the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation, each functioned within a

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[46]Connie Koenenn, "Heart of a Nation," *Los Angeles Times*, p. E 3.

larger political climate which they shared with a number of other contemporary women in politics. Two such women, Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug, provide useful comparisons to Harris and Mankiller because of the way in which each used her image as a feminist and a woman to take on "female issues."

Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to the United States House of Representatives in1968. Like Harris and Mankiller, Chisholm believed women brought special attributes to political leadership. In fact, she argued that women make better politicians because "they are not as likely as men to engage in deals, manipulations, and sharp tactics."[47] For this very reason, she argued, more women should be in politics. Chisholm also ran for president in1972, the same year Fred Harris ran for the first time. Chisholm's rhetoric proves helpful here primarily because of her use of feminism and gendered imagery during her career. She drew a connection between racism and sexism, saying, "the cheerful old darky on the plantation and the happy little homemaker" constitute equally destructive stereotypes steeped in oppression.[48] She urged women to see that involvement in the existing political struggle offered them the best way to instigate change and challenge oppression. Here is where her activism most resembled that of Harris and Mankiller. She too recognized the need to work within the system in order to change it.

Another notable politician who challenged assumptions about female leadership was Bella Abzug, a Jewish United States Representative from New York who did not

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[47]Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), p. 167.

[48]Ibid, 163.

begin her political career until age fifty. Acknowledging that people described her as a "tough and noisy woman," a "prizefighter," and a "man-hater," Abzug consciously constructed an image that made her stand out and be heard.[49] Abzug became notorious in Congress for her aggressive in-your-face style. She too lamented the need for more women to involve themselves in politics and, like many feminists in the early1970s, believed that women had a number of concerns in common. Abzug dedicated the last few decades of her life to condemning war, fighting for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, and working for other "female" causes such as equal pay and adequate child care for working mothers. In addition to Abzug's outspoken personality, she also exhibited a loud persona in the manner in which she dressed. She wore colorful clothing and large hats that made her impossible to ignore. Physically, Abzug was not a woman most would describe as pretty, and this too provided a challenge to traditional assumptions and beliefs about women. While scrutiny of unattractive male politicians seldom arises, the same does not hold true for women. Bella Abzug challenged many very basic ideals of womanhood by being loud, aggressive, and unattractive.

Roger Jourdain, the chairman of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, drew an interesting comparison between LaDonna Harris and Bella Abzug. After assuring Harris that there was no "physical comparison" between them, he said that "the same forceful manner in which you state 'our' case is quite like Bella's"[50] Among her other numerous

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[49]Bella Abzug, *Bella! Ms. Abzug Goes to Washington*, ed., Mel Ziegler (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 6.

[50]Letter from Roger A. Jourdain, Chairman of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, to LaDonna Harris, 1 December 1981, Series 1, Box 23, LHC, NAES.

accomplishments, Abzug also introduced and helped pass House Resolution 9924, which created a National Women's Conference in 1976. Abzug described the conferences as the first "federally supported opportunity" for women "to assess their current status, identify the barriers that prevent women from participating fully and equally in all aspects of national life" and to "develop recommendations for means whereby such impediments can be removed."[51] That such a conference was not embraced by all women is hardly surprising. Certainly this proved the case with one AIO female staff member who scratched a note to Harris at the bottom of Abzug's letter about the conference. She wrote: "This offends me someway. Maybe it is spending 5 M [million] for what will probably be a mutual masturbation." As if anticipating Harris' reaction she added, "I know, don't knock it."[52]

The letter from Abzug and the response of the AIO staffer demonstrate one of the clearest issues which emerged in the feminist movement: women are by no means united in their perceptions of the problems that face them or the solutions to them. Still, it is due to the persistence of women like Shirley Chisholm, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Ada Deer, LaDonna Harris, and Wilma Mankiller that the role of women in politics has evolved so substantially and the participation of women in mainstream politics continues to grow. Today, a congressional wife taking an activist role would hardly seem surprising. Indeed, while women have yet to achieve full equality, what seemed radical in the1960s is today

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[51]Letter from United States Representative Bella Abzug to "Dear Friend," 13 December 1975, Series 1, Box 32, LHC, NAES.

[52]Ibid

mainstream in terms of the opportunities available to women and the new notions about appropriate gender roles. As opportunities for women continue to increase, stories about women in politics triumphing over sexism and accomplishing female firsts will become increasingly quaint, just as women in the military and in other venues previously dominated by men is increasingly unexceptional.[53]

Until that time, however, women like LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller continue to serve as role models for others to follow. Mankiller said she felt "uncomfortable with being cast as a role model" because people get upset if you fail to fulfill the image they have of you.[54] She said, "I can't do my work or live my life being conscious of the fact that some people view me as a role model" or she added, "I would begin to suffer from paralysis."[55] Despite her lack of comfort with being considered an exemplary person, Mankiller received numerous awards and other recognitions precisely for this reason. LaDonna Harris has also served as a role model for many women, including Ada Deer. For the wives of politicians, LaDonna Harris set an example of informed activism and made it clear that wives had more to offer than folding bandages for the Red Cross and heading up social functions.

The intersection of feminism and Indianness that shaped both the identity and image of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller made possible their respective challenges

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[53]For a discussion of how the presence of women in even the most prestigious military academy in the United States is becoming less remarkable with each new class of cadets see Lance Janda, *Stronger of Custom: West Point and the Admission of Women* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002), p. 198-200.

[54]Mankiller/Wallis Interview, 27 January 1992, p. 9, Folder 7, Box 43, WMC, WHC, OU.

[55]Ibid.

to accepted social and political norms. Steeped in the understanding of their cultural traditions, each found a way to situate her accomplishments, her desires, and her life's work within the context of being Indian. By promoting the belief that native tradition esteemed women, Harris and Mankiller simultaneously challenged dominant society and uplifted the status of Native Americans through their activism while creating a new place for women in politics. LaDonna Harris not only redefined the role of political wives, she helped erase stereotypes of both women and Native Americans. By characterizing her larger humanitarian efforts as an outgrowth of her tribal values, Harris helped make Native American beliefs and customs relevant to contemporary society. An AIO biographical description of Harris characterized her identity succinctly: she is one "who ultimately only seeks to be known as a Comanche woman."[56] Wilma Mankiller drew on elements of feminist ideals and Cherokee tradition to create a new modern concept of the Beloved Woman who is both politicized yet traditional. Taken together, Harris and Mankiller are the two most important Native American women in the second half of the twentieth century, both for their accomplishments and for their use of gendered imagery to justify and affect change.

[56]LaDonna Harris biographical profile, p. 1, Folder 1, Box 2, WMC, WHC, OU.

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