The Red Progressives: Native Americans and the Shift from Assimilation to Pluralism

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One great irony of American history has been the exclusion of the earliest Americans from the traditional American dream. As the nation entered the 20th Century, Native Americans remained arguably the country's most oppressed ethnic group. At the same time, the progressive movement swept up the nation. Recent immigrants, African-Americans, Native Americans, and other marginalized minorities sought to improve their social standing and earn complete citizenship with the broad progressive movement. In order for Native Americans to have a political impact, however, they first had to settle internal disputes and create the image of a unified front. Pan-native organizations sprung up during the period, most notably the Red Progressives. Native American activists were split between those who favored assimilation and those that favored dual-identity. The assimilation proposal called for Native Americans to attempt to blend in with the predominantly white culture that surrounded them. On the other hand, those in favor of dual-identity proposed that Native Americans retained their cultural heritage and sought legal and political assimilation. However, once the Red Progressive movement began to fracture politically, the front had to re-unify itself through other means. The pan-native organizations created during the early 20th Century ultimately created an independent spirit amongst the Native American community, and they shifted Native American goals from assimilation to dual-identity.

Assimilation of Native Americans into the "traditional" American society was the primary objective of native and white leaders in the final decades of the 19th Century. Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt, a white officer with the 19th Infantry Regiment, recalled a conversation between his commanding officer and tribal leaders of the Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Apache nations. At the meeting, Pratt's commander expressed "that the Government was anxious to have the Indians adopt our ways of living and unite with us to use and develop the land of our great and good country," and the "leading chiefs of the several tribes accepted these sentiments, claiming it was their desire to become like the whites."[1] Firmly

[1] Richard Henry Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904*, ed. Robert M. Utley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 16.

committed to assimilation, Pratt believed that education was the best method to bring Native Americans into the societal norm. He tested his theory at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. Here he brought "sixty-five representatives of the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche and Arapahoe tribes, who, having been selected as among the worst specimens of the wild, cruel Indians of the far west, have, through the influence of judicious discipline and Christian kindness, become industrious...and, in some instances, unmistakable Christian converts."[2] Encouraged by his "successes" at Marion, Pratt opened another school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and wrote to General William B. Hazen, military advisor to President James A. Garfield, outlining his plan "to create an educational department for the Indian service…and to provide [the department head] with all the means necessary for the work."[3] Additionally, Pratt convinced Native American leaders that education at Carlisle was in their best interest for assimilation. After a meeting between Pratt and the Lakota chief, Spotted Tail, the leader chose to send five of his twelve children to Carlisle with Pratt.[4]

Assimilation through education remained the approved solution for dealing with Native Americans during the early years of the progressive era. Francis E. Leupp, the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1904-1909, increased emphasis on schools such as Pratt's in Carlisle and sought to make the boarding school experience "transformative."[5] However, tension existed between Leupp and Pratt over President Theodore Roosevelt's concurrent policies which confined many Native Americans on reservations. Pratt attacked Leupp's organization for "completely bribing the Indians to remain segregated tribally and racially under Bureau control."[6] Following the disagreement between the two men, Pratt was forced to resign from his position. Pratt's removal deeply angered tribal leaders, such as Carlos Montezuma from the Yavapai-Apache tribe, who believed that Pratt's removal signaled the end of Native American integration. Montezuma wrote Roosevelt that "there is not a wigwam throught [sic] the country can smoke a pipe of peace with you for such an act of injustice to our veteran leader."[7] Roosevelt's failure to reinstate Pratt led Native American leaders to seek a route for assimilation outside of the Roosevelt administration.

Native American leaders quickly realized that their lobbying efforts would have to present a broad front, as opposed to individual tribes, if they were to gain political traction. Consequently, a pan-native movement would

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[2] Ibid., 181.
[3] Ibid., 246.
[4] Ibid., 224.
[5] Hayes Peter Mauro, *The Art of Americanization at the Carlisle Indian School* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 13.
[6] Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom*, 271.
[7] Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans & Whites in the Progressive Era* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 68.

be a necessary pre-requisite for the advancement of Native Americans during the progressive era. The greatest challenge to the formation of a pan-native movement was the geographical separation of the United States' multiple tribes. The Carlisle school, however, provided one central location where multiple tribes were located in a central location. Not surprisingly, it was the well-connected graduates of Carlisle who would return to their tribes and preach the importance of pan-nativism.[8]

Native American leaders did not believe that the political atmosphere was immediately ready for a larger pan-native movement.[9] In 1912, however, the Society of American Indians (later known as the "Red Progressives") met for the first time with the hope that "the entire race may be given the freedom which will enable it to develop normally as an American people in America."[10] Of the eighteen members present, eleven had roots to eastern boarding schools (eight from Carlisle) and all major geographic regions were represented.[11] These members, deeply influenced by Pratt, continued to push for assimilation as the ultimate goal of Native Americans. Education remained the cornerstone of assimilation plans for the Red Progressives. In 1914, Henry Knocksofftwo, a Sioux educated at Carlisle, re-emphasized "that it is better for [Native Americans] to be taken away from the reservation, at least for a time, to attend the government schools provided."[12] Montezuma furthered Knocksofftwo's argument and wrote to members of the Red Progressives that "the highest purpose of *all* Indian schools ought to be only to prepare the young Indian to enter the *public* and *other* schools of the country."[13]

The next step for the Red Progressives was to secure legislation or other government assurance for the further assimilation of Native Americans into American society. At the fourth annual conference of the Society of American Indians, held during October 1914 at the University of Wisconsin, the Red Progressives called in their platform to "petition…the President and Congress of the United States and to the Bureau of Indian affairs with regard to the need of a careful revision and codification of Indian law and the definition of Indian status."[14] The Red Progressives elected one of their own

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[8] Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971), 15.
[9] Ibid., 31.
[10] "Report of the Executive Council on the Proceedings of the First-Annual Conference of the Society of American Indians" (*Society of American Indians:* Washington, D.C., 1912), 5.
[11] Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity*, 36-7.
[12] Henry Knocksofftwo, "Educated Indians are Successful," *The Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 2 (1914), 77.
[13] Carlos Montezuma, "The Reservation Fatal to the Development of Good Citizenship," *The Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 2 (1914), 72.
[14] "Platform of Fourth Annual Conference, Society of American Indians," *The Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 2 (1914), 231.

into federal office in order to propose legislation friendly to their cause. Charles Carter, a member of the Chickasaw tribe from Oklahoma, proposed the Carter Code Bill, which would legally define the citizenship status of Native Americans.[15] The bill was defeated, however, not by conservative whites in Congress, but by radicals from within the Red Progressives. Members such as Montezuma were not satisfied with any measure short of immediate citizenship for Native Americans.[16] The Red Progressives had still not created a united front that could enact effective change.

The rift between moderates and radicals among the Red Progressives continued to grow as the nation entered World War I. The advent of World War I diverted the nation's attention away from domestic reform issues and towards military preparedness and the nation's role in the world. This period gave the pan-native movement the opportunity to re-calibrate. At home, the Red Progressives sought to make gains while the public could appreciate Native American sacrifice. Abroad, Native Americans in the military made strides towards assimilation that the Red Progressives could not achieve at home. However, the new generation of Native Americans serving abroad was disillusioned by the complete assimilation that the Red Progressives advocated.

On the homefront during World War I, traditional Red Progressive leaders continued their push for reform. In the radical newsletter, *Wassaja* (Apache for "signaling" and Montezuma's native name), Montezuma wrote to his audience that "the best time to get your money from a patient is when he is very sick. If you present your bill after he gets well, he will tell you 'to go to the place where it does not snow.'"[17] He claimed that Native Americans stood their best chance of achieving political success while the American public was directly aware of the sacrifices being made by Native American service members. If Native American activists waited until after the war, the United States government would not express its full gratitude because the war was already won. Montezuma's audience included Native Americans across the nation and created pan-native identity as one group of people oppressed by the government rather than multiple individual tribes.[18] Those who had not gone off to fight were beginning to become disillusioned about full assimilation as they saw their loved one go fight for a nation which did not provide full citizenship to Native Americans.

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[15] Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race, & Reform* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 110.
[16] Ibid., 111.
[17] Carlos Montezuma, "While the Iron is Hot, Strike," *Wassaja*, May 1918.
[18] Kiara M. Vigil, *Indigenous Intellectuals: Sovereignty, Citizenship, and the American Imagination, 1880-1930* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122-3.

Approximately twenty-five percent of all Native American adult males served in the war.[19] These service members did not serve in completely segregated units like their African-American counterparts. However, they generally served in units with many other Native Americans.[20] The government chose to not segregate Native American units "because of the desire to have them rub elbows with fellow citizens and become better acquainted."[21] The more important consequence though was not the whites that Native Americans met, but the other Native Americans they met. Outside of those who attending government boarding schools, World War I was the first opportunity many Native Americans had to meet individuals outside of their tribe.[22] When the new generation of Native Americans returned from the war, they met at clubs such as the American Legion in order to bond over their similar service and similar heritage.[23] A new form of pan-nativism began to expand. When thousands of Native Americans returned from the war they were proud of their service as both an American and a Native American.

Following the war, and President Woodrow Wilson's departure from office, Native American leaders continued to push their political agenda for complete citizenship. However, the post-war effort emphasized a legal assimilation into white America but not a similar cultural assimilation. Native Americans were largely inspired by Wilson's idea of self-determination. Consequently, Native Americans across the nation became less motivated by the American melting-pot and aimed to be part of American pluralism.[24] The Red Progressives (still heavily influenced by Pratt) lost support amongst their Native American counterparts. Even the radical Montezuma had a change of heart. In 1923, the outspoken supporter of assimilation chose to return to his tribe's reservation in Arizona. He died on January 31, 1923 in a traditional hut as a Native American, not an assimilated member of American society.[25] Montezuma's obituary did not state that he had spent his life for the assimilation of Native Americans. Instead, it recognized that he was "an advocate of the freedom of American Indians."[26] Additionally, the obituary emphasized in particular that he "was a full blooded Mojave Apache Indian of the McDowell band."[27]

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[19] Thomas A. Britten, *American Indians in World War I: At Home and at War* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 84.
[20] Ibid., 74.
[21] "Indians in War Are Proving Title as Real American," *Pueblo Chieftain*, July 4, 1918, 4.
[22] Britten, *American Indians in World War I*, 84.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity*, 179.
[25] Ibid., 197.
[26] "Dr. Montezuma, Indian Physician, Dies in Arizona," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 3, 1923, 15.
[27] Ibid.

Despite changing cultural attitudes amongst Native Americans, they still sought legal assimilation in the form of citizenship. According to John Collier, the executive secretary of the newly founded American Indian Defense Association, citizenship would grant Native Americans "the elementary rights guaranteed to other Americans by the Constitution" such as the "right to speak freely, to practice one's own religion, to form associations, to communicate with one's friends and to move freely about the country."[28] After extensive lobbying by pan-native groups such as the American Indian Defense Association, Native Americans finally received the citizenship they desired. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 stated "that all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States be, and they are hereby, declared to be citizens of the United States."[29] Native American lobbyists, however, sought assurance from the government that they could still maintain their traditions and life on reservations. Therefore, the law included a provision "that the granting of such citizenship shall not in any manner impair or otherwise affect the right of any Indian to tribal or other property."[30] Native Americans gained the legal recognition they sought; however, in their final push for citizenship they also recognized that they desired a degree of autonomy and did not want complete assimilation like their predecessors in the first two decades of the 20th Century.

As the United States entered the 20th Century, Native American leadership embraced the idea of the American melting-pot and sought full assimilation of Native Americans into society. In order to gain political support, however, these leaders recognized the importance of a pan-native movement to create broad lobbying support. Increased pan-native connections combined with pride in their service in World War I, however, made Native Americans recognize the importance of their heritage and question the principles of full assimilation. As a result, Native Americans rejected the idea of the American melting pot and embraced pluralism in American society. By 1924, Native Americans had largely dropped their ambitions to assimilate into white society. Rather than assimilate, they sought a new dual-identity. They were culturally Native American but legally American.

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[28] Gary C. Stein, "The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924," *New Mexico Historical Review* 47, no. 3 (July 1972), 262.
[29] "H.R. 6355," 68th Cong., 1st sess., 1924. *Congressional Record*. 1924. Washington, DC.
[30] Ibid.