

*Bożena KOCHMAN-HAŁADYJ*

## **THE RESERVATION ERA AND THE ALLOTMENT ACT ERA – TWO TRAGIC PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICANS**

### **The reservation era (1867–1887)**

Once the American native peoples had been subjugated and forced to stay on government-assigned reservations, federal officials could continue the policy of separating them, but first of all were able to apply the detribalization processes. The tactic they adopted was nothing new. From the colonial period Anglo-Americans had used reservations to remove Native Americans from the land that whites desired. In the 1850s, rapid transcontinental expansion had absorbed the territories of the western tribes. The demands of white settlers that Native Americans be removed led federal agents to begin the reduction of tribal territories and to assign the Indians to reservations, primarily in California, the Pacific Northwest, and in the Rocky Mountains. Federal agents maintained the policy of making reservation assignments during the Civil War (Gibson 1980:426). Initiated as a way of establishing a boundary between the two peoples so that accountability for the actions of each against the other could be determined the reservations, in the mid nineteenth century, often took on the character of ‘a concentration camp’ or ‘a national ghetto’, onto which the Indians could be herded as the lands they previously occupied came increasingly under the control of the immigrant white man (Washburn 1975:209).

For many tribes the reservation era lasted from roughly 1867 to 1887. It was a painful experience to put up with. In these twenty years, the federal government anticipated magically *to transform the tribes from free, roving hunters and raiders to settled, peaceful, law-abiding wards made self-sufficient by the adoption of agriculture and stock raising* (Gibson 1980:426). It reflected opinion maintained by majority of white people. And the American public in the late nineteenth century agreed almost completely in its view that Native

American nations ought to be stripped of their lands and colonized on restricted reservations where detribalization could be applied. Concentrating them on such places would permit their forced Americanization to proceed in an efficient manner. According to the public opinion, Native American transformation was essential because *Indianness was an evil and comprised a threat to cherished national values* (Gibson 1980:427). Confined there and guarded by federal troops, they would no longer be a threat to regional peace and orderly development; their evacuated territories thereby would be opened to exploitation by stock growers, farmers, lumbermen, miners, railroad builders, town developers, and land speculators.

All those viewpoints generated a set of policy objectives for federal officials assigned to manage the reservations and their tribes. In many respects it was a *replay of Jeffersonian doctrine that Indians were capable of civilization and ultimate assimilation* (Gibson 1980:428). And, as in the early days of national development, in spite of talk that reduction of tribal territory was for the benefit of Indians, in reality as in earlier times, it actually served to benefit American settlers.

Accordingly, the late nineteenth-century reservation system was supposed to americanize Indians in a way that agrees with a formula which consisted of 5 steps:

1. Self-sufficiency, and to accomplish it the Indian was to be converted from hunting to farming or stock raising
2. Isolation i.e. separation of the Indian from the wicked, unscrupulous whites
3. Education, principally of the manual labor variety
4. Christianity, without which, that generation of Americans considered true civilization impossible
5. A system of law, to protect the individual property rights of the Indian as he evolved from communal ownership (Gibson 1980:428).

Reservations were in existence *under the authority of acts of Congress or treaties between organized groups of Indian people and the President of the United States, with ratification by the Senate* (Brandon 1961:387). They were established in payment for immense land cessions and other tribal acts of cooperation. The United States was absolutely inclined to promise that the reservations would permanently belong to Native Americans and would be protected by the federal government from interference by neighboring white residents, including state and county governments. As often as not, especially *when the comparatively small reservation area left a hunting people without range enough for livelihood, the commissioners also promised help in the form of goods, tools, subsistence, or annuities* (Brandon 1961:387).

Most Native Americans naturally opposed conditions of living they were forced to. Having been overwhelmed by the non-Indian culture, or defeated

militarily, they were confined to reservations and made to adapt to a lifestyle very different from that to which they were accustomed. According to Washburn (1975), the system provided there represented a total reversal of roles for white and Indian. Political authority was taken away from the native leaders and assumed by the representatives of the American government. *Dependence upon a subsistence system controlled by the Indian was replaced by dependence upon one controlled by the white man* (Washburn 1975:214). Freedom to continue intertribal warfare, tribal ceremonies, and traditional law was increasingly denied or restricted by the new authority. The removal of hunting from the list of approved activities of the Indian male was enough of a blow. When decisions about subsistence activities, law and order, and education began to be made by Indian agents rather than by Indian leaders themselves, the loss of hope was complete. All this generated extreme forms of behavior change, a kind of widely used resort among reservation tribes. At times the changes were ‘transformative’ in character – that is, they sought to change the objective conditions under which the Indians were forced to live. Now and then they were ‘redemptive’ – that is, they intended to change the individual Indian to enable him better to accommodate himself to the conditions within which he was required to live. The phenomenon known as the Ghost Dance religion is a transformative response to the pressure induced by the reservation life. Peyotism and the form of the Sun Dance religion that developed on reservations late in the nineteenth century are examples of redemptive movements (Washburn 1975:217).

Despite all the efforts made by the American government neither political nor spiritual strategy served to convert the Native Americans into white men. United States reservation policy foundered because as Washburn (1975) points out it sought not merely to prevent the Native American from troubling the white man by keeping him disarmed, isolated, and separate, but because it sought also to perform a grandiose social experiment whose outcome would be a red white man and a Christian heathen. It could not bring desirable results, at least in so short a time and under such unfavorable conditions. Quoting after Washburn (1975) the American government was not the first or only organization to stub its toe on the hard rock of cultural resistance. Cultural heritage never has been, and is not in his opinion a force to be overcome by simple military force, congressional legislation, or educational edicts.

As Gibson (1980) concludes, the nineteenth century had been a particularly destructive period for Native Americans. Nevertheless, they had to endure one additional ordeal – allotment in severalty – before the century closed. Although it was inconceivable that anything could exceed the trauma of the Native Americans reservation experience, partitioning the reservations and assigning the Native Americans homesteads did just that.

## The Allotment Act era (1887–1930s)

In 1887, after much arduous politicking, the so-called General Allotment Act was enacted to formally change basic federal Indian policy from one of segregation to one of assimilation or as it was often phrased, the civilizing of the Indians. As Spicer (1980) points out, this massive forced assimilation to white economic ways through redistribution of land became one major objective held by the American government and the public at that time. A secondary, related goal was elimination of Indian communities and political organizations. Realizing these goals tribes were to surrender their reservations, fragments of which were to be parceled out to individual Indians as small, family-sized farms – from 10 to 640 acres each. It was supposed that *individual responsibility for the land and for a family's welfare on it would promptly result in each Indian becoming a hard-working, economically motivated person like the thousands of white settlers who spread across the land* (Spicer 1980:183). Simultaneously, *the immense reservation acreage left over was to be declared 'surplus' and, after a token payment to the tribes involved, opened to white ownership* (Brandon 1961:388). Therefore, the plan would at one stroke provide a solution to the problem of how to bring about the maximum utilization of the land.

The policy of assimilation of Native Americans into the white world through individual parcels, like the policy of reservations, has origins starting at the colonial times. Amalgamation or assimilation with the white man was frequently advocated by whites and was normally available to individual Indians who wanted to take up the white man's way of life. However, the early examples portrayed *voluntary choices during a period when Indian nations negotiated with, but were not subordinate to, the white colonial government* (Washburn 1975:234).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century virtually all white Americans agreed on the importance of assimilation as the proper goal for Indians in the American union. According to many who considered themselves as Indians' friends, the reservations were just an indirect road to civilizing the Indians. The next step was to be creating in them the feeling of individual property to which they would have the same right as every white man (Nowicka & Rusinowa (1988:244)). Thus, more than 100 reservations were parceled out, primarily on the plains, the Pacific coast, and in the Lakes states. Quoting after Brandon (1961), of the approximately 150 million acres owned by the Indians in 1880, most of it guaranteed by treaties made less than thirty or forty years before, over 90 million acres – an area more than twice the size of Oklahoma – were abstracted from the Indians' pocket. The process lost steam after some of the big plains reservations, the principal targets, were carved up and sold, but it went along in a desultory way for many years.

In its apparent objective of civilizing Indians, the Allotment Act was totally unsuccessful. If Native Americans were as Brandon (1961) mentions children

just learning to walk, as *fin-de-siecle* unction expressed it, the Allotment Act helped this along by cutting their legs off at the knees. Allottees did not change immediately into hardy small farmers. It would not have been much different if they had, in many cases, since even, as he continues, imported Russian peasants went gaunt trying to work small claims on the northern plains. Instead, using one means or another, allottees frequently lost their ragtag and bobtail patches of ground to white ownership, or leased the land for messes of pottage to larger operators. Some were thus completely dispossessed, and *congregated in junkyard squatter communities here and there, or piled in by wagonloads to 'visit' with relations who still had the wherewithal for a square meal of tough beef and fried bread* (Brandon 1961:390). A great number of families collapsed into a state of permanent poverty. The hardest example whose economic wreckage is evident yet is the Sioux centering in South Dakota.

The law stated that the government hold parceled out land in trust for a period not intended to exceed 25 years before making the allottee the outright owner by granting him a patent in fee simple. (The fee simple titles had the effect of putting the land on tax rolls and also made the land subject to alienation.) As the pattern of allottee ruination came clear, the government applied (in the 1920s) a policy of automatically renewing the trust periods. Much Native American land today is still held under government trusteeship in this fashion; other reservation lands, often in desert or otherwise unproductive areas, have never been broken into individual parcels. But the drastic reduction of reservations already accomplished had by the 1920s made Native American poverty chronic, and above all no room had been left for an expanding Indian population. When this totally unexpected event began to come pass, overwhelming the reservations still further, poverty became widespread and acute.

A thorough survey sponsored by the government and conducted in the late 1920s stated in its opening sentence, *an overwhelming majority of the Indians are poor, even extremely poor, and they are not adjusted to the economic and social system of the dominant white civilization* (Brandon 1961:390). The same study also found Native American health and education noticeably poor. Perhaps most significantly, it found that the battered native Americans of the United States were very definitely a living race. Obviously, as many politicians point out, the impatient and repressive policies of the Allotment Act era had been in tragic error.

## Conclusion

The Indian episode is nowadays regarded as one of the so called 'awkward things' in American history (White 1979:247). From a time perspective it is now clear that U.S. Congressional legislative law was never meant for the protection

of Native American rights. Whenever white pressure for more Indian land or restrictions on treaties grew strong enough, Congress merely passed a new Act or Indian treaty which negated those earlier treaty rights. One of the more bloody infringements of Native American rights was when the tribes were forced onto reservations. This was in complete violation of treaties previously made with the various Indian Nations. These treaties guaranteed the Native American tribes ownership of vast portions of their original and ancestral homelands. In the end the tribes had no choice, either fight and die or accept U.S. Governmental dictates and survive.

As for individual allotment of land this again happened in complete disregard of the wishes of the Native American tribes all over the country. The wishes of the tribes were simply that their reservation lands be left intact for the sole use of the Tribe or Tribes residing there. However, the policy, believed by its supporters to be in the best interest of the Native American, can now be seen to have had opposite results. Ignorance of Native American culture, fatuous self-righteousness, and land hunger combined to push the Native American reeling into the twentieth century without any economic supports or cultural values that had formerly given their life meaning.

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