

A Legacy from the Thirties

by Darrel Smith

The debate about Indian sovereignty is part of a continuing debate about the proper balance between individual freedom and the power of government. The vast majority of early American cultures exhibited high levels of individual freedom before Europeans intervened in their cultures. A similar desire for individual liberty was a primary reason for the American revolution and the birth of the United States. Our Founders used written constitutions, the separation of powers, federalism and a free economy to restrain the natural tendency of governments to encroach on individual liberty.

In this century, the success of centrally planned war projects during World War I, the establishment of communism in the Soviet Union, the excesses of the twenties and the devastation of the Great Depression worked together to shatter the confidence of many Americans in our system of limited government. In 1934, this environment created modern federal Indian policy. The head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs at the time was a man named John Collier. He would later write a book of memoirs, *From Every Zenith*, praising communism in China. Contrary to both Native American traditions and Constitutional principles of limited government, Collier convinced Congress to set up strong centralized tribal governments in control of reservation laws, courts and communal economies.

Collier envisioned hundreds of reservations scattered around our country serving as models and demonstrating the glories of socialism to the rest of us. Collier and his reformers dreamed of making reservations “a model of community that all Americans might in some ways follow. . . . he wanted Indians to offer an alternative way of living for individualistic-oriented white America” (*Sovereign Nations or Reservations*; Anderson; 1995; p. 139). In 1939, Collier gave a speech extolling what his reforms had accomplished with these words, “No, the task is not finished. It is only begun. But one part of the task is finished, and it marks and makes an epoch. The repressions which crushed the Indian spirit have been lifted away. From out of the dark prison house the living Indian has burst into the light, into the living sunlight and the future. All his age-tempered powers and his age-trying discipline are still there. He knows the future is his; and that the century of dishonor, for him is ended.” (*American’s Behind the Buckskin Curtain*; Scofield; p.21).

Along with similar political experiments around the world, reservations certainly have been excellent models, but instead of the glories, they have clearly demonstrated the social and economic destruction of socialism. Corruption, poverty, Drug/Alcohol abuse, and suicide are just some of the more obvious problems on Indian reservations. Most of the other socialistic experiments around the world have collapsed. The reservation system survives in this country only because of the support of the Federal Government and the annual transfusions of billions of tax dollars that it provides.

Fortunately, many solutions for reservation residents are both readily available and relatively simple. We can easily provide American citizens living on reservations with the same protections for individual liberty that the rest of us treasure. This would apply the Golden Rule to our relationships with Indians. For example, why shouldn’t reservation citizens be protected by the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection of the laws and the protections of the Bill of Rights just like the rest of our country?