An Ungrateful Nation

by George McColm

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ARTICLE FROM AMERICAN HISTORY

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As a United States naval officer in World War II, I had been in charge of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's agricultural planning for the post-war occupation of Japan. In the fall of 1946, I was hired by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and sent to Window Rock, Arizona--capital of the Navajo Nation--to direct the soil conservation program on the Navajo reservation, where living conditions were well below the national poverty level. I reported to Reservation Superintendent James Stewart and soon became his confidential advisor on a number of problems that he encountered. It shocked me to learn that no members of the Navajo Nation were being asked to participate in any of the decisions being made "for their good" by the BIA officials at Window Rock or in Washington, D.C.

In the late spring of 1947, when the BIA sent Elizabeth Chief to Window Rock to conduct a study and prepare a report on the welfare needs of the Navajo people, Stewart saw an opportunity "to convince Washington that we really have a lot of starving Indians out here." He told me to work closely with Elizabeth, a wonderful person who put her heart and soul into gathering detailed information for the report. Unfortunately, it soon became apparent to her that all of her training had failed to prepare her emotionally for what she experienced on the reservation. Although it was an undertaking far beyond the requirements of official duty, Elizabeth and I dedicated ourselves to the task of writing the "Navajo Welfare Report of 1947"; we wanted the government to know what was really happening to these people.

Certainly, other means of getting the message back to the nation's capital had so far proved fruitless. When Secretary of the Interior Julius Krug toured the reservation in

the fall of 1946--the first high ranking government official to do so since the land was allocated to the Navajos in 1868--Superintendent Stewart and tribal leaders impressed upon him the necessity of immediate funds to stave off widespread starvation on the reservation. They also pleaded for job-creation projects, such as the building of schools, hospitals, and housing, to provide much needed income to the Indians. By May 1947, however, the $50,000 in relief money allotted annually to the Navajo Welfare Agency had been spent, and no additional funds were forthcoming. It seemed that Secretary Krug had not reported to President Harry Truman on what he had seen the previous fall. Elizabeth and I hoped that our report would serve as a reminder.

Between the signing of the 1868 treaty and the turn of the century, members of the tribe had been very happy to be left alone by the BIA, choosing to overlook repeated treaty violations. To subsist during those years, they cultivated small plots of land and made good use of native plants and herds of wild game; in addition, they earned income through sheep raising and the sale of wool, rugs, and jewelry. But by 1920, the population of both the Navajo people and their sheep herds had increased dramatically, making it apparent that the reservation's resources could not support the growing numbers.

In response to the situation, the BIA increased government welfare, health, and medical services for Navajos during the 1920s, and in the '30s, the agency participated in New Deal projects on the reservation that generated a significant amount of income for its residents. Access to this income temporarily prevented a crisis on the reservation in 1933, when a BIA initiative threatened the food supply of many Navajos by cutting them off from a traditional source of meat. For at least fifty years, Navajos with large flocks of sheep had been sharing with the poorest members of the tribe. But now, in order to halt soil erosion on the watershed of Lake Meade--a result of overgrazing of the reservation land--the number of Navajo-owned sheep was sharply cut from 1.5 million to 350,000. No longer would there be a surplus with which to feed the less fortunate residents of the reservation. This Stock Reduction Program destroyed the Navajos' way of life, making them more dependent on the federal government.

During World War II, more than 3,600 Navajos served in the U.S. military; approximately 10,000 Navajos left the reservation to work in war plants, and another 2,000 were employed by the railroads. The most obvious source of money flowing into the reservation during the war years was the allotments for families of military personnel. As I recall, our studies indicated that each Navajo serviceman was sending home nearly $2,000 per year, far more than the average World War II soldier. The final discharge of servicemen in 1947, however, brought an end to this source of income. At the same time, the various New Deal economic and social programs that had been established years before were being discontinued, with no new work opportunities taking their places. And, a prolonged drought, coupled with a ruling in both New Mexico and Arizona that Navajos were not eligible for social security benefits, made reservation life almost unendurable for Navajo families.

Elizabeth Chief had been trained to examine medical records in order to assess welfare needs, and she soon noticed a disturbing trend. We had been told that many children had died on the reservation in the spring of 1947. Subsequent examination of death

certificates confirmed that there had been an increasing number of deaths due to inanition, or starvation. The majority of the victims were among the elderly or very young; most of the children had died at the Indian Bureau hospitals.

When our report was finished, Jim Stewart read it carefully and agreed to my suggestion that we make copies for the entire staff. We were certain that every Division Chief in Window Rock would send a copy to his boss in the Washington office. Their doing so, we felt, would make a greater impression than a single report. Elizabeth then returned to Washington, very much concerned, I am sure, about how the report would be received and what would be done to help the Navajos.

When the Gallup, New Mexico, *Independent* somehow obtained a copy of our report in August 1947, it published a wire service story about the starving Navajos that almost immediately attracted more than two hundred reporters to the reservation. I took the noted radio personality Will Rogers, Jr., himself part Native-American, on a two-day, picture-taking tour of the area, while two *Chicago Tribune* reporters made a trip across the reservation with George Bowra, editor of the Aztec, New Mexico, *Independent Review*. The scribes told George that they had toured South America, Mexico, India, and China, and nowhere had they witnessed people trying to live in such squalor. The *Denver Post* subsequently published 89 articles and 4 editorials about the starving Navajos, while other prominent papers, including *The Los Angeles Examiner* and the *Arizona Republic*, featured the Navajos' story in juxtaposition to President Truman's plan to aid post-war Europe.

Politicians began to condemn the Indian Bureau for neglecting the Navajos, and the Bureau of the Budget for reducing the amount of money Congress had appropriated for Native Americans. Wisconsin Representative William H. Stevenson pointed out that "50 percent of Navajo children die before they reach the age of five years . . . ," adding that "After 80 years of BIA management, ninety percent of the Navajo Nation cannot speak or understand English; and schools are available for only 25% of the Navajo children."

North Dakota Senator William Langer assailed the president and his colleagues in *The Congressional Record*. "The Indian veteran returns home," he stated, "to find deplorable conditions among his people. Because of the lack of resources, there is no opportunity to establish his home. He cannot get a GI loan for his home, because the United States holds title to his land, and therefore the bank will not give him a loan. He cannot go into the sheep or cattle business, because he cannot get a permit from the government to run more livestock on an already depleted range. There is no farm land or capital available to him . . . ."

"So, Mr. President," Langer asked scornfully, "can we say that a group of American citizens in which the tuberculosis rate is five times that of the entire United States, is getting a square deal? Are Indian mothers, who went down into the shadow of death to bear the very sons who have gone out and made this marvelous record I have cited, getting a square deal when infant mortality among the Indians is five times greater than the rest of the country? Are the people who have been dispossessed of nearly 90,000,000 acres of land within the last 50 years getting a square deal? Do senators know that Indian tribes in many states are now expressly prohibited by an act of

Congress from purchasing additional land? Even with their own money, they cannot buy it; it is prohibited."

In October 1947, large quantities of relief supplies started to arrive on the reservation, initially from many private donors and later from various government agencies. The War Assets Administration furnished the Navajos with 40,000 pounds of rice, several hundred dozen cases of canned food, and 17.5 tons of flour, sugar, spices, and other commodities. Two carloads of fresh fruit were brought in by the "Friendship Train," a charity drive organized by the Mormons, while twenty tons of clothing was shipped to Gallup and distributed to Navajos by volunteers and the Navajo Service.

On December 17, as Congress debated the authorization of more relief funding for the Navajos, Arizona Representative Richard Harless castigated the U.S. government: "It is my purpose to tell why these people are starving to death. We put them on the most worthless land that could be found in the United States. At that time there were some 8,000 of them. We captured them and gave them a treaty at the point of a gun, to educate their children and furnish one teacher for every thirty students. We agreed to furnish housing for them. We agreed to provide for their welfare. We have never fulfilled that treaty. We stand here today and talk about relief for foreign nations when we have a national disgrace in our own country."

The 1947 debate in Congress over Navajo welfare left many congressmen with a guilt complex, as indicated by Republican John Jennings, Jr., of Tennessee, who said: "[A]s to whether we should extend belated relief to these people, the spirit of Christmas and the dictates of our common humanity demand that we right the wrongs that this country inflicted upon these Indians. We should do it while they are alive and while the opportunity is ours." He added, "I want to say that I feel like my Christmas turkey would choke me if I voted against this proposition."

It was gratifying and indeed surprising to find such compassionate congressional support for Navajo relief, and that this compassion was, within a few years, extended to the establishment of the Navajo Long Range Program and the Navajo Irrigation Project. Many of the congressmen who came forward and participated in the debates had never taken part in congressional discussions of Indian affairs. In an article published in *Nation* magazine, author Carey McWilliams tried to explain the politicians' sudden interest in Indian welfare and noted that the Navajos' plight had become a topic of world discussion. The government of the Soviet Union, America's Cold War nemesis, expressed great sympathy for the Navajos as "an oppressed minority in the United States." When an article from the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* was placed in *The Congressional Record*, starvation deaths on the reservation could no longer be ignored by the Truman administration, or by any member of Congress, despite efforts to dismiss the piece as "Russian propaganda."

An article with the worrisome headline "NAVAJOS WILL USE VIOLENCE TO GET FOOD" appeared in the November 29, 1947 issue of the *Albuquerque Tribune*. This warning, spoken by a Bishop James Moss Stoney of Southwest Texas, was widely publicized, but the rebellion he predicted did not occur. Navajos were loyal Americans, and they could see that concerned citizens, private charities, and the federal government were responding to their needs.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs maintained a very low profile in 1947, making no effort to ward off or deny massive media and congressional criticism it received after the release of the Navajo Welfare Report. However, rumors did circulate that Navajo Reservation Superintendent Stewart would be fired immediately for allowing the "starving Navajo propaganda to get out of hand." In 1948, Congress sent ample relief supplies to the reservation and greatly increased the Navajo Service budget. And when Allan Harper replaced Stewart, Bureau officials explained to the Navajos that they had sent their "best administrator" to the reservation in order to make sure that the allocated funds resulted in the greatest possible benefit for their people. Furthermore, the BIA told the Navajos that Harper was the man for the job because he would discuss his administrative decisions with tribal leaders.

The Navajos did not protest the removal of Jim Stewart even though he had earned their respect by not flaunting his authority. He had shown great patience in working with individual tribal leaders, securing their Council's approval of policies and decisions that, in reality, had already been made by the BIA offices in Washington.

When Harper arrived in Window Rock, he was truly "a man with a mission." Stating that it was necessary to get agency files cleared and ready for expanded programs, he ordered that all records and correspondence that did not apply to an ongoing program should be removed from the files and destroyed. Special attention was given to the Stock Reduction Program and to interagency correspondence that had taken up so much filing space in the 1930s and early '40s. Medical records, Navajo death records, and doctors' reports that were "cluttering" the files also were removed. By the time this "search and destroy" operation was completed, it was apparent that the BIA in Washington did not want to retain any archival material at the agency level. In 1968, I had an opportunity to study the 1947 reports retained in the Bureau's archives. The welfare report written by Elizabeth Chief and myself had been carefully edited; it was not the same report that we had submitted.

From 1848, when the Indian Bureau was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior, until 1947, the Bureau of Indian Affairs managed the personal, political, and financial affairs of Indians in almost total secrecy. Congressional respect for Navajos, generated by the outstandingly loyal service of both military and civilian members of the tribe during World War II, resulted in appropriations that improved the life of every Navajo. The year 1947 thus became the low point and a turning point in Navajo history. Today, Navajos who lived through the post-World War II era are reluctant to describe their suffering. All they say is "Things got better."

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