

Oracle: The History Journal of Boston College

Volume IV | Issue I

Article 2

American Atlantis: Franklin D. Roosevelt's Attempt to Reshape the Relationship Between Native Americans and the Federal Government During the Great Depression and World War II

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**AMERICAN ATLANTIS: FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT’S ATTEMPT TO RESHAPE
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II**

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Abstract: This paper uses primary and secondary sources to review U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies toward Native Americans, commonly referred to by historians as the "Indian New Deal." Roosevelt sought to undo the injustices carried out against American Indians by the implementation of the Dawes Act, which deprived Indigenous Americans of ninety million acres of land from 1887 to 1934. His Commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, John Collier, oversaw public works projects that provided jobs to American Indians in the depths of the Great Depression while the Wheeler-Howard Act helped restore tribal sovereignty and return land to indigenous groups. Yet Collier’s weaknesses as an administrator resulted in a disastrous livestock reduction program and clashes with the Navajo tribe, which led a decade-long campaign for his ouster. Despite Roosevelt’s noble intentions, the Indian New Deal produced mixed results. The Roosevelt administration elevated standards of living among indigenous tribes and rectified many of the abuses carried out against American Indians by the federal government. At the same time, the Indian New Deal instituted policies of its own that caused severe damage to the very people who Roosevelt and Collier were trying to help.

The United States of America entered the 1930s while on a headlong spiral into economic blight, political chaos, and humanitarian catastrophe. The glittering, decadent world of the Roaring Twenties had collapsed in on itself when the stock market fell in a resounding crash that gave birth to the Great Depression. While many of the world’s leading powers from Nazi Germany to Communist Russia were consumed by the moral darkness of authoritarianism, the United States of America emerged from the 1930s as a more democratic nation that had taken a step closer to the still elusive vision of a land promised by the U.S. Declaration of Independence where, “all men

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are created equal.” Through the New Deal the U.S. government recognized the right of trade unions to organize, provided a social safety net for the elderly and unemployed, and lifted millions out of unemployment through an alphabet soup of new agencies from the Works Progress Administration to the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Nonetheless, the New Deal produced mixed results in the area of civil rights. While federal programs helped to elevate racial minorities from economic destitution, they also prevented non-white Americans from receiving an equal distribution of benefits throughout the implementation of the New Deal. The Indian New Deal — President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attempt to reform federal Indian policy and improve quality of life for America’s indigenous tribes — was no exception to FDR’s imperfect record on race relations. Although the Indian New Deal resulted in historic strides forward for American Indians, it also unleashed harmful policies that undercut Roosevelt’s efforts to aid indigenous tribes.

By the time the New Deal came to fruition in 1933, life for American Indians had been dramatically transformed in the past century. A hundred years before the Democrats were the party of Franklin Roosevelt, Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren had used the fearsome might of the federal government to force the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Tribes from their homes in the southern United States to an unfamiliar land across the Mississippi River — resulting in over three thousand deaths along the infamous Trail of Tears. In the following decades, the United States military pursued American Indians across the vast expanse of the Great Plains while consigning indigenous people to reservations where they were forced to assimilate into European-American culture. One by one, American Indian tribes from the Comanche and the Cheyenne to the Lakota and the Dakota were defeated on the field of battle and made to give up their land to the government at gunpoint. While American Indians lived on reservations overseen by Senate-appointed Indian agents, white reformers worked to assimilate indigenous tribes by converting them to Christianity and educating their children in boarding schools that stripped young American Indians of their tribal identities.²

Crucially, federal policymakers sought to transform American Indians from nomadic hunter-gatherers into individual farmers who lived off agriculture just like white settlers. This was

² Catherine Denial, “Reservations, Resistance, and the Indian Reorganization Act, 1900-1940,” *Digital Public Library of America*, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/reservations-resistance-and-the-indian-reorganization-act-1900-1940>.

the intended purpose of the 1887 Dawes Act, named after Republican Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts. Also known as the General Allotment Act, the bill inaugurated a system of allotment that allowed the President of the United States to break up land on American Indian reservations and allocate it to individuals rather than tribes. The Dawes Act read that the President could allocate:

To each head of a family, one-quarter of a section; To each single person over eighteen years of age, one-eighth of a section; To each orphan child under eighteen years of age, one-eighth of a section; and To each other single person under eighteen years now living, or who may be born prior to the date of the order of the President directing an allotment of the lands embraced in any reservation, one-sixteenth of a section.³

After the allocated land had been held in trust by the government for twenty-five years, American Indians would be eligible for U.S. citizenship and permanent ownership of their land.

The Dawes Act had a profound and ultimately destructive impact on the American Indian communities. Testifying before the U.S. Senate in 2005, Cherokee Nation Chief Chadwick Smith described how, “the most tragic days fell upon the Cherokee Nation with the Dawes Act of 1887, which stripped lands and all government buildings and property from the Nation and paved the way for Oklahoma statehood. Even the Cherokee National press was taken and sold under the Dawes Act.”⁴ In 2005 Executive Director of the National Council of Urban Indian Health Beverly Russell, a member of the Carlos Apache Tribe, presented a report to the U.S. Senate that described how the primary goals of the Dawes Act were to, “break down the authority of tribal governments,” by “allocating communal tribal land to individual Indians” while also providing for “unallotted land (two-thirds of the Indian land base) to be transferred to non-Indians.”⁵ This fulfilled the U.S. government’s long term objectives of assimilating American Indians into white culture while increasing direct federal control over indigenous tribes and opening up their land to European-Americans.

The large-scale breaking-up and allotment of American Indian lands shifted indigenous people from living in a system of communal land use to a capitalist economic structure that

³ “Transcript of Dawes Act (1887),” *Our Documents*, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=50&page=transcript>.

⁴ Qtd. in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs, *Indian Health: Hearing Before the Committee on Indian Affairs*, 109th Cong., 1st Session, 2005, 150, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Indian_Health/SCUBM5FiwSoC?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁵ Qtd. in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs, *Indian Health*, 124.

revolved around private ownership. Under this new social order, American Indians were at a stark disadvantage compared to white Americans. The majority of the land was sold off to whites rather than to American Indians, who were often paid less than what the land was actually worth. Further, the lands American Indians received tended to be smaller and more arid territories that were poorly suited for agriculture while whites were sold the most economically profitable areas with richer soil and more space for farming. The Dawes Act had intended to transform American Indians into individual farmers, yet the inequities of the allotment system made this transition extremely difficult. Writing for *Sunset Magazine* in November 1922, James Willard Schultz described his time living amongst the Montana Blackfeet tribe from 1887 to 1904. Schultz reported that during the first seventeen years of life under the Dawes Act he had witnessed the Blackfeet, “starve to death by hundreds,” and, “decline in prosperity until today most of them are pauper citizens of the state of Montana.”⁶

While American Indians struggled to survive on newly allotted lands, their tribal governments found themselves fundamentally weakened by their loss of territory. In total, allotment led to the gradual reduction in the amount of land held by American Indians from 138,000,000 acres in 1887 to 48,000,000 acres in 1934 — a loss of 90,000,000 acres in almost half a century.⁷ This loss of land destabilized the political structure of American Indian communities, as tribal governments commanded far less authority on reservations than they had prior to the introduction of allotment. This change precipitated the outright abolition of certain tribal governments by the 1898 Curtis Act, an amendment to the Dawes Act which expanded its provisions to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Muscogee Tribes. The Curtis Act terminated tribal governments in Indian Territory, what is today Oklahoma, establishing direct federal control over the region’s indigenous tribes.⁸

Although they were granted U.S. citizenship in 1924, American Indians had a living standard that remained drastically worse than that of America’s white population as a result of the Dawes Act. In 1928 the Institute of Government Research — known today as the Brookings

⁶ James Willard, “America’s Red Armenians,” *Sunset Magazine*, Volume 49, November 1922, <https://www.google.com/books/edition/Sunset/ycxBAQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=james+willard+sunset+magazine+1922&pg=RA4-PA19&printsec=frontcover>.

⁷ “History and Culture: Allotment Act — 1887,” American Indian Relief Council, http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_allotmentact.

⁸ M. Kaye Tatro, “Curtis Act 1898,” *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History & Culture*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100720014537/http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/C/CU006.html>.

Institution — released a survey entitled “The Problem of Indian Administration.” More commonly referred to as the “Meriam Report,” named after researcher Lewis Meriam, the study painted a disturbing portrait of American Indian life and excoriated federal Indian policy since 1887. In particular, the allotment system was shown to have a devastating effect on American Indian communities which suffered from higher rates of disease, unemployment, poverty, and mortality than that of white communities.⁹

The Meriam Report presented damning evidence that federal policy under the Dawes Act had left American Indians economically destitute. The first chapter of the Meriam Report states that the economy of American Indian civilization, “has been largely destroyed,” by the encroachment of white Americans.¹⁰ The report showed that, “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.”¹¹ Further, American Indians, “are living on lands from which a trained and experienced white man scarcely could wrest a reasonable living.”¹² The findings of the report indicated that, “The Indians can no longer make a living as they did in the past by hunting, fishing, gathering wild products, and the extremely limited practice of primitive agriculture. The social system that evolved from their past economic life is ill-suited to the conditions that confront them, notably in the matter of the division of labor between the men and the women.”¹³

The Meriam Report blamed American Indians’ economic woes on the allotment system, faulting it for the staggering loss of tribal land since 1887. Criticizing allotment, the Meriam Report noted that, “In some instances the land set apart for the Indians was of little value for agricultural operations other than grazing,” while in other instances, “part of the land was excellent but the Indians did not appreciate its value. Often when individual allotments were made, they chose for themselves the poorer parts,” because these parts of the land were close to supplies vital to a particular tribe.¹⁴ The study had found that on, “almost every reservation may be seen families living in poverty,” as “much of the Indian's property consists of land that is often arid, semiarid,

⁹ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration (1928),” The Johns Hopkins Press, 1928, 3 <https://narf.org/nill/resources/meriam.html>.

¹⁰ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 6.

¹¹ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 3.

¹² The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 5.

¹³ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 6.

¹⁴ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 5.

or mountainous, valuable chiefly for grazing, unsalable except in very large tracts, and often capable of little development for other agricultural purposes.”¹⁵

The Meriam Report demonstrated that federal policy under the Dawes Act had dire consequences for the overall health of indigenous tribes. While the national average income in 1920 was \$1,350 a year, it was a meager \$100 for American Indians. Because of this, indigenous tribes could scarcely afford a proper intake of nutrition. American Indians’ diet, especially for children, had become “deficient in quantity, quality, and variety.”¹⁶ Due to a weak diet and filthy living conditions that were usually overcrowded and poorly ventilated, tuberculosis and trachoma had become rampant on reservations. Tuberculosis alone was responsible for 26.2% of American Indian deaths.¹⁷ The Meriam Report noted that, “The two great preventive elements milk, and fruits and green vegetables, are notably absent. Most tribes use fruits and vegetables in season, but even then the supply is ordinarily insufficient. The use of milk is rare, and it is generally not available even for infants.”¹⁸ As a result, American Indian children suffered from horrifying mortality rates. In 1925, American Indians under three years of age accounted for 16.2% of all deaths in the U.S.¹⁹

While the Meriam Report shocked many Americans, it had little effect on that year’s upcoming presidential election as most voters were satisfied with the direction that the United States was taking in 1928. Unemployment stood at 4.4%, while the United States’ gross domestic product had grown from \$687.7 billion in 1920 to \$921.3 billion eight years later.²⁰ Although the U.S. entered a recession in October 1926, by November 1927 the economy had recovered and throughout 1928 stock prices boomed 39%.²¹ Few prominent Democrats wanted to challenge the GOP in what looked like an easy Republican year. Incumbent President Calvin Coolidge, known as much for his austere personality as his steadfast dedication to laissez-faire economics, declined to run for a second full term. In his place, the Republicans nominated Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover. His running mate, Senator Charles Curtis, was the member of the Kaw Nation

¹⁵ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 430.

¹⁶ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 11.

¹⁷ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 199.

¹⁸ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 3.

¹⁹ The Institute for Government Research, “Meriam Report,” 199.

²⁰ Kimberly Amadeo, “1920s Economy With Timeline and Statistics,” *The Balance*, last modified March 31, 2021, <https://www.thebalance.com/roaring-twenties-4060511>.

²¹ *Id.*

who had written the 1898 Curtis Act which strengthened federal control over American Indian reservations. Aided by anti-Catholic prejudice against Democratic nominee Al Smith, Hoover rode a wave of economic prosperity to secure a crushing victory over his opponent.

As President, Hoover displayed a keen attentiveness to American Indian issues. Hoover agreed with the findings of the Meriam Report and opposed the policy of allotment for having deprived American Indians of nearly ninety million acres of land by 1929. Hoover had lived with the Osage Nation on a reservation in Oklahoma at the age of six while his uncle worked as an Indian agent, making him the only U.S. President to have lived on an American Indian reservation. Hoover's childhood experiences with the Osage informed his mission to improve living conditions for American Indians. In his memoirs Hoover explained that his administration endeavored to, "make the Indians self-supporting and self-respecting. They were to be viewed no longer as wards of the nation, but as potential citizens. I secured from Congress additional appropriations of about \$3,000,000 per annum to finance a vigorous program directed to this end."²² Indeed, Hoover doubled federal funding of American Indian education and healthcare during his four years as President.

Yet Hoover's efforts to improve the welfare of American Indians were overwhelmed by a sudden and dark turn of events that would come to define his Presidency. On September 4, 1929 American stock prices began a steep decline before investors entered a mad dash to sell off their shares on October 24, also known as Black Thursday, when nearly thirteen million shares were traded in one day. The following Monday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 13.47%—the largest ever drop up to that point—before declining another 11.7% on Tuesday, October 29.²³ The economic fallout of the 1929 stock market crash was more severe than anything the United States has experienced before or since. By 1930, banks began closing nationwide, reaching a peak of nine thousand bank closures in 1933. From 1929 to 1933 industrial production fell 47%, gross domestic product dropped 30%, while "the wholesale price index declined 33 percent."²⁴ Unemployment had been 4.4% the year of Hoover's election, yet by the time he left office a quarter of the nation's

²² Herbert Hoover, "The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency," The MacMillan Company, 1952, 318, https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf.

²³ Kimberly Amadeo, "Stock Market Crash of 1929 Facts, Causes, and Impact," *The Balance*, last modified September 2, 2020, <https://www.thebalance.com/stock-market-crash-of-1929-causes-effects-and-facts-3305891>.

²⁴ Christina D. Romer et al, "Great Depression," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified November 20 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression>.

workforce was unemployed—the highest rate of unemployment ever recorded in the U.S.²⁵

American Indians, already struggling to survive in desperate conditions, were especially hurt by the Depression. Iroquois Chief Clinton Rickard reported that, “During the distressing time of the depression, we had the utmost difficulty in securing enough money to buy seeds, horses, mules, or other necessities required for agriculture. We were unable to farm, we were unable to be self-reliant,” showing that the Dawes Act had utterly failed to transform American Indians into self-sufficient farmers. Further, American Indians were actively discriminated against when they sought jobs off the reservation. According to Rickard, “The white people were taken care of first, and those of our men who were fortunate enough to find work were usually soon discharged to give the job to a white man,” and, “White men less destitute than we [Iroquois] were readily given work.”²⁶

For all his organizational genius, Hoover was both politically tone deaf and stubbornly committed to a notion of rugged individualism that hardened his heart against efforts to directly intervene in the economy. Although Hoover ordered the construction of the Hoover Dam and created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932, he vetoed one relief bill after another while signing the Smoot-Hawley Tariff into law, initiating a trade war that exacerbated the effects of the Depression. When WWI veterans marched on Washington, DC, demanding their bonuses to be paid, Hoover militarily forced the veterans from the capital. The optics of an American President using the armed forces to attack veterans of his own nation were so damaging to Hoover that his opponent, New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, remarked to Felix Frankfurter that, “this will elect me,” upon hearing the news.²⁷ He was right. On election day 1932, Hoover was cast out of the White House in the same way that he had entered it — a landslide of epic proportions.

When Franklin Roosevelt accepted the 1932 Democratic nomination for President, he declared that, “I pledge myself, to a New Deal for the American people” and promised to relieve America’s economic woes through aggressive government intervention in the economy.²⁸ The

²⁵ Stanley Lebergott, “Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900-1954,” The National Bureau of Economic Research, 1957, <https://www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c2644/c2644.pdf>.

²⁶ Qtd. in Lawrence M Hauptman, *The Iroquois and the New Deal*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 60.

²⁷ Qtd. in, Stephen Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era*, (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 59.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago,” *The American Presidency Project*, July 2, 1932, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-chicago-1>.

New Deal constituted an unprecedented effort by the federal government to not only chart the nation's economic course, but provide direct aid to the average American. Within two days of taking the oath of office, Roosevelt declared a national bank holiday on March 6 and on March 9 he pushed the Emergency Banking Act through Congress — saving the banking industry from complete collapse. This was followed by a sweeping program of deficit spending designed to reverse the rising trend of unemployment. The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Civil Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the Public Works Administration, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration all provided jobs to millions of unemployed Americans during Roosevelt's first two terms. The FERA alone had employed twenty million people by December 1935.²⁹

But a critical and often overlooked aspect of the New Deal was FDR's attempt to undo the damage done by the Dawes Act. Like Hoover, FDR agreed with the findings of the Meriam Report and sought to rectify the unjust nature of government policy since 1887. Roosevelt viewed the government's administration of American Indian reservations as a form of "autocratic rule" that was "incompatible with American ideals of liberty" and "destructive of the character and self-respect of a great race."³⁰ In April 1934, Roosevelt put his political weight behind the Indian Reorganization Act, also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act, which became the cornerstone of the Indian New Deal. The bill was designed to abolish the allotment system, extend trusts on Indian land, give the Interior Secretary the power to restore land to tribal ownership, and return natural resources to indigenous control. Additionally, the Indian Reorganization Act was meant to reverse the weakening of tribal authority that resulted from the Dawes Act by allowing tribes to form their own autonomous governments with written constitutions and elected tribal councils.³¹

The main driving force behind the Indian New Deal was John Collier, a Columbia-educated sociologist from Georgia. Collier's views on American Indians were shaped by his early interactions with indigenous Americans more than a decade before Roosevelt's election to the presidency. In 1920 Collier ventured to the Taos, New Mexico art colony sponsored by Mable

²⁹ John P Deeben, "Family Experiences and New Deal Relief: The Correspondence Files of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 1933–1936," *National Archives*, Fall 2012, Vol. 44, No. 2, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2012/fall/fera.html>.

³⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Statement on the Wheeler-Howard Bill," *The American Presidency Project*, April 28, 1934. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-wheeler-howard-bill>.

³¹ "Indian Reorganization Act (1934)," *The Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/indian-reorganization-act-1934/>.

Dodge Luhan. During his stay there, Collier encountered the Pueblo Indian Tribe and closely studied their culture. Luhan's husband Antonio would later tell a group of Pueblo leaders that, "We have got a real friend in John Collier. He really likes Indians" following Collier's experiences with American Indians in Taos.³² As he observed Pueblo religion, domestic life, politics, dances, and art, Collier became infatuated with what he called a "Red Atlantis" — an idyllic way of life that he saw as uncorrupted by the materialistic individualism of America's dominant white culture.³³

Collier also put forth harsh criticisms of federal Indian policy under the Dawes Act. In an October 1922 article describing his stay in Taos, Collier despaired attempts to assimilate indigenous tribes, noting that a Pueblo Indian, "is compelled as a child to attend a school," which, "conscientiously ignores the Indian and even the surrounding Mexican past and present." Then, says Collier, the Pueblo, "is taken away to a boarding-school which is co-educational and where many tribes are mixed indiscriminately together," with the intended goal of shaming the American Indian out of their indigenous identity.³⁴ Additionally, Collier argued that reservations were subject to the tyrannical rule of Indian agents who trampled over the very people they were appointed to help. To remedy this, Collier proposed that American Indians be granted citizenship, that their reservations should be preserved by the federal government, that they be allowed greater autonomy under their tribal governments, and that indigenous peoples, "must be given advantages equal, and in the main the same as, those claimed by white farming communities all over this country."³⁵

With his criticisms vindicated by the Meriam Report, Collier was appointed to be Roosevelt's Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933. Collier led the charge to repeal the Dawes Act and introduce a radical new policy towards indigenous Americans. Joining forces with Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler and Nebraska Representative Edgar Howard, Collier made a powerful moral case for ending the allotment system and beginning a New Deal for American Indians. Writing for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1934, Collier asked, "Who can look at the

³² Qtd. in, "We Have Got a Good Friend in John Collier: A Taos Pueblo Tries to Sell the Indian New Deal," *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/26/>.

³³ "We Took Away Their Best Lands, Broke Treaties': John Collier Promises to Reform Indian Policy," *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5058>.

³⁴ John Collier, "The Red Atlantis," *The Survey*, Volume 49, no. 1, October 1922: 19, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Survey/--5EAQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=john+collier+red+atlantis&pg=PA3&printsec=frontcover

³⁵ John Collier, "The Red Atlantis," 20.

condition of the Indians today — poverty stricken, dying at twice the white man’s rate of mortality, limited in education and opportunity, hopeless, distrustful — and not say that a reversal [of Government policy] is indicated?”³⁶

On June 18, 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt, setting the Indian New Deal into motion. The Act ended the allotment system, extended \$4.4 million in loans for the development of reservations, created a \$10 million credit fund dedicated to the economic development of indigenous tribes, and forced the Bureau of Indian Affairs to give priority to American Indian candidates during the hiring process. Further, the bill appropriated \$250,000 a year for the federal government to charter corporations on American Indian reservations. Run not by white officials but by indigenous tribal councils, these corporations, “could employ legal counsel, prevent the leasing or sale of land without tribal consent, and negotiate with federal or state governments for public services.”³⁷ Federal spending towards the welfare of indigenous tribes rose from \$23 million when FDR took office to \$38 million in 1940.³⁸ Using the authority granted to him by the Indian Reorganization Act, Roosevelt used executive orders to extend public trusts on American Indian lands — preventing them from being sold to individuals as private property.

In its most important objective of stopping the reduction of American Indian lands, the Indian New Deal was a triumph. Rather than being sold to white homesteaders, surplus lands were now given to American Indians. The federal government even went a step further to purchase privately owned lands and return them to indigenous tribes. By 1953, two million acres of land had been restored to American Indians through the Indian Reorganization Act.³⁹ Additionally, the bill encouraged American Indians to seek greater autonomy from federal rule. Section 16 of the Indian Reorganization Act read that, “Any Indian tribe, or tribes, residing on the same reservation, shall have the right to organize for its common welfare, and may adopt an appropriate constitution and bylaws, which shall become effective when ratified by a majority vote of the adult members

³⁶ Qtd. in U.S. Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 90th Congress Second Session*. 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968. Vol. 114, Part 10, pt. 13381., https://books.google.com/books?id=JOyIiER0MFoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁷ Floyd A O’Neil, *The Indian New Deal: An Overview*, (University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press, 1986), 40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt46nr85.8.pdf>.

³⁸ Robert Longley, “Indian Reorganization Act: A ‘New Deal’ for American Indians,” *ThoughtCo.*, last modified July 3 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/indian-reorganization-act-4690560>.

³⁹ Id.

of the tribe, or of the adult Indians residing on such reservation” in a special election organized by the Interior Secretary.⁴⁰ By 1940, 135 new tribal constitutions had been ratified by American Indian tribes as a result of the Indian Reorganization Act — reversing the effects of the Curtis Act which had abolished tribal governments in Indian Territory.⁴¹

The successes of the Indian New Deal were not limited to the Indian Reorganization Act, as indigenous Americans benefited from the federal unemployment programs that Roosevelt created to relieve the effects of the Great Depression. One of the most important initiatives of the Indian New Deal was the Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was established in 1933 to create jobs for the unemployed, and throughout Roosevelt’s presidency it would provide critical economic assistance to indigenous tribes. Not only did the CCC’s Indian Division employ 85,000 American Indians from 1933 to 1942, but the Indian Division improved fifty million acres of reservation land during this nine-year period.⁴² In July 1936, Cleveland F. Allen of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota reported that working for the CCC, “has provided an income for us and has enabled us to keep alive while, at the same time, it has given us a better perspective on our goals in life.”⁴³ On the Rosebud Reservation, the CCC’s Indian Division and the Works Progress Administration were the largest and second largest employers of American Indians respectively. With federal jobs providing a steady source of income to American Indians nationwide, by 1938 Collier could confidently claim that American Indians, “are increasing at almost twice the rate of the population as a whole.”⁴⁴

As Commissioner, Collier terminated the policy of assimilation and shifted towards the preservation of American Indian culture. Collier transferred American Indian students from the boarding schools where they had previously been stripped of their tribal identities to community day schools where conversion to Christianity was not required. American Indian children were taught about their own history and culture — encouraging them to carry on the traditions of their

⁴⁰“Indian Reorganization Act, 1934.” Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/new-deal/indian-reorganization-act-1934>.

⁴¹ “Indian Reorganization Act (1934),” *The Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/indian-reorganization-act-1934/>.

⁴² “American Indians and the New Deal,” *The Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/what-was-the-new-deal/new-deal-inclusion/american-indians-and-the-new-deal/>.

⁴³ Qtd. in, “Indians At Work: A News Sheet for Indians and the Indian Service,” Office of Indian Affairs, Vol. 3, no. 22, July 1 1936, 19., <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/indiansatwork32219361unit>.

⁴⁴ Qtd. in, “We Took Away Their Best Lands, Broke Treaties’: John Collier Promises to Reform *Indian* Policy.” *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5058>.

respective tribes. Under the terms of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1935, Collier oversaw an Indian Arts and Crafts Board that educated American Indians in commercial trades in order to produce, “pottery, rugs, blankets, and other goods and handicrafts” unique to indigenous culture.⁴⁵ The IACB promoted the manufacture and sale of American Indian products such as jewelry and textiles while prosecuting whites who sold counterfeit items. By 1938, “the annual income from American Indian arts & crafts was \$863,267, and a year later it was estimated to be about \$1,000,000,” providing American Indians with an additional source of revenue.⁴⁶

Yet the Indian New Deal, for all it achieved, also produced damaging effects on many American Indian tribes. Collier’s usage of the term “Red Atlantis” to refer to American Indian civilization, alluding to the mythical island that Plato described as an idealized state in his *Critias*, portrays a simplistic vision of indigenous people that would cause Collier to stumble on certain tribal issues. Perhaps no case demonstrates this more poignantly than the example of the Navajo. Collier was determined to solve the problem of overgrazing on the Navajo Reservation, which threatened the survival of the Navajo if their livestock’s excessive consumption of grassland caused sheep and goat herds to run out of food. The Navajo requested that Collier increase the size of the reservation in order to spread their livestock across a larger area. Instead, Collier introduced a livestock reduction program to the Navajo tribal council in October 1933. Collier proposed the voluntary reduction of Navajo sheep and goat herds by 400,000 each in exchange for financial compensation if the Navajo lost income from the death of their livestock. The Navajo refused, and in 1934 they rejected the Indian Reorganization Act when it came to a tribal vote.⁴⁷

Collier would not back down. Rather than compromising with the Navajo, Collier made the livestock reduction program mandatory. When the Navajo would not cooperate in the mass killing of their livestock, Collier dispatched federal agents to slaughter hundreds of thousands of sheep and goats on the Navajo Reservation. In total, more than half of Navajo livestock were wiped out under Collier’s orders. Marsha Weisiger notes that, “in their haste to respond to an environmental crisis, Collier and his conservationists unwittingly made matters worse ecologically

⁴⁵ “American Indians and the New Deal,” *The Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/what-was-the-new-deal/new-deal-inclusion/american-indians-and-the-new-deal/>.

⁴⁶ “Indian Arts and Crafts Board (1935),” *The Living New Deal*, [https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/indian-arts-and-crafts-board-1935/#:~:text=The%20law%20had%20the%20E2%80%9Cthree.and%20Crafts%20Board%20\(IACB\).](https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/indian-arts-and-crafts-board-1935/#:~:text=The%20law%20had%20the%20E2%80%9Cthree.and%20Crafts%20Board%20(IACB).)

⁴⁷ Catherine Denial, “Reservations, Resistance, and the Indian Reorganization Act, 1900-1940,” *Digital Public Library of America*, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/reservations-resistance-and-the-indian-reorganization-act-1900-1940>.

and culturally. They ignored the importance of long-established cultural patterns, disparaged local knowledge and cultural understandings of nature, and refused to listen to Navajos' advice in implementing the livestock reduction program.”⁴⁸ Collier’s livestock reduction program was particularly damaging to Navajo women, who were excluded from the Navajo tribal council. During the Great Depression, Navajo women were heavily dependent upon their livestock to make a living. Having been robbed of their livelihoods, many of them were plunged into abject poverty. After years of protests by the Navajo, the livestock reduction program was finally ended in 1943.

Collier’s zealotry in destroying Navajo livestock was informed by his view of American Indian civilization as “Red Atlantis” that could provide a model to white society. The fictional Atlantis of Greek mythology was a utopian state that was consumed by the ocean after angering the gods through its hubris,. Likewise, Collier saw the Navajo as, “paragons of self-sufficiency and cultural integrity,” who were so dependent upon the land that if the federal government did not save them from overgrazing then their people would starve and perish.⁴⁹ Collier’s view of American Indians was mostly based on his experiences with one group, the Pueblo, and he failed to understand the many differences between individual tribes. Collier did not recognize that the Navajo were just as dependent upon the land as they were upon their livestock, which were revered in Navajo culture in addition to serving as a valuable source of income. The Livestock Reduction Program was not only economically harmful, but also an attack on tribal culture in the eyes of the Navajo.

Collier’s actions angered the Navajo so deeply that they opposed both his leadership as Commissioner and the Indian New Deal as a whole. This animosity was compounded by the fact that Navajo who resisted the program were arrested and jailed by federal agents. With more than half of Navajo livestock gone and the government cracking down on opposition, the Indian Rights Association, “branded John Collier a ‘dictator’ and accused him of conducting a ‘near reign of terror’ on the Navajo reservation.”⁵⁰ On November 4, 1944, at a meeting in the McKinley County Courthouse in Gallup, New Mexico the Navajo issued a statement formally requesting that, “Commissioner John Collier be removed as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for Mr. Collier has

⁴⁸ Marsha Weisiger, “Gendered Injustice: Navajo Livestock Reduction in the New Deal Era,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, Winter, 2007, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), 441, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25443605.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ab40f192c0f6e762071aecb7ee58c8ba3>.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Marsha Weisiger, “Gendered Injustice,” 441.

⁵⁰ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982), 335.

proved himself a very inefficient administrative head.”⁵¹ Collier would eventually leave his post in March 1945, the month before President Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The Navajo were not the only indigenous tribe to oppose the Indian New Deal. While the Indian Reorganization Act granted tribes greater sovereignty by encouraging them to form their own governments, several new tribal constitutions came under criticism for not establishing separation of powers. Edward Boyer, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe, charged the Indian New Deal with reducing tribal sovereignty rather than expanding it. He argued that the Indian Reorganization Act provided:

No separate judicial, legislative, and executive branches of tribal government. For this reason, I believe we were intentionally set up to fail. The checks and balances of these three powers are taken for granted in the white man's world. To the reservation Indian, these guarantees of freedom do not exist. As an example, the reservation Indian has no grievance recourse but to a tribal court. All other non-Indian citizens can go to the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court.⁵²

A review of the many constitutions ratified during Collier’s tenure at the Bureau of Indian Affairs shows that in some circumstances, the Indian New Deal actually limited tribal sovereignty by making indigenous tribes more dependent upon the federal government. The Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota, for example, ratified constitutions that made them less independent than before the Indian New Deal. The Lakota on both reservations already used written constitutions of their own prior to the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, but after the bill was signed into law they were forced to draft new constitutions that contained so-called “limiting clauses” which made decisions by their tribal councils subject to approval by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.⁵³ Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes rarely vetoed the decisions of tribal councils, only doing so if they violated federal law, yet many American Indians nonetheless resented what they saw as increased intrusion into their affairs. At an April 1939 Congressional hearing, Clement Smith spoke on behalf of the Yankton Lakota when he argued that the Indian New Deal had expanded federal control over American Indians. Smith and many of his fellow

⁵¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Indian Affairs, *Investigate Indian Affairs: Hearings Before the Committee on Indian Affairs*, 78th Cong., 2nd Session, 1944, 891, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Investigate_Indian_Affairs/D0flAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁵² Qtd. in Floyd A. O’Neil, *The Indian New Deal: An Overview*, 28.

⁵³ Richmond L. Clow , "The Indian Reorganization Act and The Loss of Tribal Sovereignty: Constitutions on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations," *Great Plains Quarterly*, Spring 1987, Vol. 7, No. 2, 131, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/317>.

Yankton Lakota opposed the Indian Reorganization Act because, in his words, “it changes the functions of Government that the Indian as a citizen should absolutely enjoy as a citizen of the United States. It takes away rights and sets up a dual government for the Indians” under both tribal and federal authority.⁵⁴

Despite its flaws, the Indian New Deal was supported by most tribes and individual American Indians. When the Indian Reorganization Act was subject to tribal approval, a majority of 181 tribes approved of the bill while 77 voted it down. According to historian Floyd A. O’Neil, “those who voted for the IRA had an aggregate population of 130,000 Indian people,” while, “those who rejected it had an aggregate population of somewhere between 85,000 and 90,000 persons.”⁵⁵ Supporters of the Indian New Deal included Shoshone-Paiute leader Arthur Manning, who proclaimed that the Indian Reorganization Act, “has worked out very well for our reservation. We have six council men, a chairman, and a chartered livestock association. The IRA revolving credit fund enabled many of our younger tribal members to obtain loans and get started in the cattle business.”⁵⁶ While Manning’s reservation was sorely in need of water at the height of the Great Depression, under the Indian New Deal the federal government built a new storage dam that provided “plenty of water” to his tribe.⁵⁷

The Indian New Deal was a bold but imperfect effort to reverse the effects of the Dawes Act. The Indian New Deal reduced indigenous unemployment, significantly improved reservations, abolished the allotment system, and encouraged greater tribal self-government. Yet the Indian New Deal also made certain reservations more restricted by federal authority, not less, and it destroyed more than fifty percent of Navajo livestock — worsening economic conditions for the very people that Collier had wanted to help. Collier’s high-handed approach to tribal issues saw him run roughshod over American Indian property rights and incarcerate those who opposed his policies, earning the ire of the Navajo who ultimately called for his ouster. While John Collier learned the hard way that his utopian “Red Atlantis” did not line up with reality, the Indian New Deal was ultimately a noble attempt to atone for half a century of sins by the federal government.

⁵⁴ Qtd. in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Indian Affairs, *Yankton Tribe - Amend Wheeler-Howard Act: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs*, 76th Congress, 1st Session, 1939, 9, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d01063175x&view=1up&seq=5&q1=dual%20government%20for%20the%20indians>.

⁵⁵ Floyd A. O’Neil, *The Indian New Deal: An Overview*, 41

⁵⁶ Qtd. in Floyd A. O’Neil, *The Indian New Deal: An Overview*, 29.

⁵⁷ Floyd A. O’Neil, *The Indian New Deal: An Overview*, 29.

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