Was the Indian New Deal a major change in federal policy toward Native Americans?

Viewpoint: Yes, the Indian New Deal was a dramatic change in federal policy, allowing Native Americans to develop their own governments and economic policies.

Viewpoint: The Indian Reorganization Act, while implementing some important changes in political and social rights for Native Americans, was also designed to protect first the interests of the U.S. government.

The Indian New Deal during the Great Depression promised a change in U.S. policy toward Indians. Brought on by the dynamic leadership of reformer John Collier, the Indian New Deal reversed the long-standing policy of extinguishing Indian titles to land and encouraging Indians to renounce their identities and become citizens.

In these two essays, scholars Carlos Turpin and Malinda Maynor take closer looks at the Indian New Deal. Turpin argues that the Indian New Deal and the leadership of Collier were important turning points in Native American history. For the first time federal Indian policy would be charted according to what the Indians wanted, rather than by what whites thought the Indians should want.

Malinda Maynor, a Lumbee scholar, moviemaker, and activist, takes a more critical look at the Indian New Deal, which she sees as driven by the same cultural myopia that pervades all dealings between whites and Native Americans, and thus regards it as not much of a change.

What are the criteria Turpin and Maynor use to analyze the Indian New Deal? Turpin’s history is one drawn from legislative debates and newspapers, while Maynor looks into broader cultural questions. Which of these interpretations is more accurate? More importantly for historians, how should they evaluate policies and actions?

Viewpoint: Yes, the Indian New Deal was a dramatic change in federal policy, allowing Native Americans to develop their own governments and economic policies.

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) marked a bold departure in U.S. policy toward Native Americans. Though this act, and the “Indian New Deal” that it ushered in, are most closely associated with John Collier, the IRA was the outgrowth of a long challenge to federal policy. The IRA marked a transformation in federal policy, and while it was not an unqualified success, it was a positive change in the relationship between the U.S. government and Indians.

Sophisticated cultural antennae may detect problems in the IRA and Indian New Deal, but this policy must be contrasted with the long series of previous disastrous federal Indian policies. In the 1880s federal
policy toward Indians changed from trying to kill them to trying to save their lives. Under the Dawes Severalty Act (1887), Indian reservations were to be broken up into individual plots of land, not to be held by the community as a whole but by individual Indians. The long-range goal was to make Indians into farmers. The “Americanization” policy, under which Indians were sent to boarding schools, forced to learn English, and trained in industrial and manual arts, tried, as its proponents said, to save the man but kill the Indian. Whites had long believed that Indians could not survive in competition with whites—that the only way to prevent the complete extermination of Indians was to turn them from hunters and gatherers into farmers and laborers.

This Americanization policy of the 1880s, launched by well-intentioned but completely misguided reformers, calling themselves “Friends of the Indian,” resulted in the loss of land and culture. Collier, a New York radical, after ten years of working among poor immigrants in New York City, “discovered” the Indians in 1920, when he visited Mabel Dodge Luhan, another New York radical, who had moved to Taos, New Mexico. Luhan was the center of an intellectual community in Taos, a Hopi Pueblo, which at times included novelist D. H. Lawrence. Collier’s visit to Taos was a revelation; alienated from American society, the radical thought he saw in the Hopi people a lost world.

Collier visited Taos at a moment when the Pueblo tribe was threatened by the same forces that had brought on the Dawes Act. In 1913 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, against the wishes of New Mexico land developers, that the Spanish land grants made to the Pueblos in the 1600s were valid, that the Pueblos constituted reservations, and that these communities could expel non-Indians. Many non-Indians had taken up lands that were claimed by each Pueblo

Be it enacted . . . That hereafter no land of any Indian reservation, created or set apart by treaty of agreement with the Indians, Act of Congress, Executive order, purchase, or otherwise, shall be allotted in severally to any Indian.

Sec. 3. The Secretary of the Interior, if he shall find it to be in the public interest, is hereby authorized to restore to tribal ownership the remaining surplus lands of any Indian reservation heretofore opened, or authorized to be opened, to sale, or any other form of disposal by Presidential proclamation, or by any of the public land laws of the United States: Provided, however, That valid rights or claims of any persons to any lands so withdrawn existing on the date of the withdrawal shall not be affected by this act. . .

Sec. 16. 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 of the tribe, or of the adult Indians residing on such reservation, as the case may be, at a special election authorized and called by the Secretary of the Interior under such rules and regulations as he may prescribe. Such constitution and bylaws when ratified as aforesaid and approved by the Secretary of the Interior shall be revokable by an election open to the same voters and conducted in the same manner as herein above provided. Amendments to the constitution and bylaws may be ratified and approved by the Secretary in the same manner as the original constitution and bylaws.

In addition to all powers vested in any Indian tribe or tribal council by existing law, the constitution adopted by said tribe shall also vest in such tribe or its tribal council the following rights and powers: To employ legal counsel, the choice of counsel and fixing of fees to be subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior; to prevent the sale, disposition, lease, or encumbrance of tribal lands, interests in lands, or other tribal assets without the consent of the tribe; and to negotiate with the Federal, State and local Governments. The Secretary of the Interior shall advise such tribe or its tribal council of all appropriation estimates or Federal projects for the benefit of the tribe prior to the submission of such estimates to the Bureau of the Budget and the Congress.

under these grants, and now three thousand ranchers and settlers were threatened with eviction. Senator Holm Olaf Bursum (R-New Mexico) proposed a bill to validate the ranchers' claims by putting some sixty thousand acres under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, which then was under the secretaryship of former senator Albert Bacon Fall (R-New Mexico).

Collier mobilized to block the Bursum Bill. He worked with the different Pueblos to form the American Indian Defense Association (AIDA) and convened a conference of all the Pueblos in 1922. This conference was the first time the different Pueblos had worked together since 1680, when they had united to revolt against Spanish rule. AIDA successfully defeated the Bursum Bill, and marked a departure in Indian agitation. The leading Indian rights organization at the time, the Indian Rights Association, hoped to transform the Indians and make them fit into American society. AIDA, on the other hand, sought to preserve and protect Indian religions and cultures, and while its driving force may have been Collier, the organization's real strength was among Indian people. While the Indian Rights Association joined with the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to suppress traditional dancing and other activities it considered lewd or barbaric, AIDA embraced traditional activities and religions. The Indian Rights Association wanted to turn Indians into Christians; AIDA celebrated traditional worship.

The conflict meant that AIDA's focus had two prongs—on the one hand, it protected Indians against white attacks that came under the guise of government policy. On the other hand, it protected Indians against the more subtle assaults by their self-professed "friends." AIDA succeeded in convincing the federal government to review its Indian policies, and in 1923 the Interior Department commissioned such a study. The committee, led by Lewis Merriam, issued its report in 1928. The eight-hundred-page report, The Problem of Indian Administration, detailed both the problems Indians suffered—ineffective housing, malnutrition, poor schooling, susceptibility to epidemic diseases—and laid the blame for them on federal policy and on the BIA, the agency created to solve these problems. Incompetence in the BIA was one problem, but more fundamental was the BIA's misguided mission.

The Merriam report noted that the government had undertaken to divide land holdings into individual plots to turn the Indians into farmers. "It almost seems as if the government assumed that some magic in individual ownership of property would in itself prove an educational civilizing factor, but unfortunately this policy has for the most part operated in the opposite direction." Herbert Hoover's administration adopted the report's recommendations to spend more money on solving Indian problems, but ultimately the administration ran out of funds, and the Great Depression prevented Hoover from trying to resolve the problem of Indian relations with the United States.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, with or without financial resources, was committed to action. Among the most notable steps the Roosevelt administration took to resolve the problems of Native Americans was to appoint Collier as commissioner of the BIA. Collier took immediate steps to change federal policy. Americanization, which had been the goal of whites since 1607, was reversed. Indians were to retain their own languages and cultures; native art and religion would not only be tolerated, they would be encouraged; and the BIA would hire Native Americans without requiring them to take the Civil Service exam. By 1940 fully 60 percent of BIA employees were Indians. Federal agents, which meant BIA officers and teachers, could not compel Indians to attend religious services. Indian boarding schools were closed and replaced by day schools so that Indian students could return to their own homes and cultures at night. The federal government would also not move to prohibit the use of peyote in religious ceremonies.

The IRA was as striking a piece of legislation as any other New Deal statute. It reversed the Dawes Act policy of land allotment, instituting in its place a program to allow Indian communities to buy back their land. Under the Dawes Act, by 1933, Indians had lost some eighty-seven million acres. The IRA attempted to buy land back. It increased reservation size, but at the time, it may have been too late to restore Indian landholdings to the extent that reservations could be self-supporting. The IRA also appropriated $10 million in a revolving fund to finance Indian businesses. Tribes that controlled some asset—a natural resource or other potential basis for development—were encouraged to develop or exploit it to support the tribe. This feature of the Indian New Deal promised, or at least offered, to make the Indians self-supporting communities, but the central problem was the lack of resources. Another feature of the IRA was the creation of governments for Indian tribes. The law granted $250,000 for tribes to draw up new constitutions. This government plan was a dramatic departure from the Dawes Act, which had envisioned making Indians independent citizens of the United States, replacing their allegiance to community with allegiance to the United States. The IRA sought to restore Indian self-government, though the constitutions would be drawn up in accordance with U.S. standards of majority rule (most Indian communities operated rather under the principle of consensus) and the democratic process.
In accordance with its mandate to do what the Indians wanted, the new governments had to be accepted by the tribal members. Each tribe was allowed to vote on whether it wanted to have a new government. Two hundred and fifty-eight tribes voted: 181 accepted the IRA, while 77 rejected it. The largest tribe to reject the IRA was the Navajo, which already had a functioning government and resisted another New Deal program to shore up the price of livestock by killing off sheep. The Navajo could not see any U.S. program as beneficial and would not give up their traditional form of government to adopt majority rule. In the contest among Indians over the IRA, a split developed between traditionalists and assimilationists. Indians who had adopted Christianity or other trappings of white civilization opposed the IRA.

Among the IRA’s other opponents were people and groups working from a variety of conflicting positions. Christian missionary groups and the Indian Rights Association opposed the IRA, seeing it as a step backward in their mission to Christianize and civilize the Indian. Native Americans who had successfully maintained their sovereignty, such as the Navajo or Onondaga, also opposed the IRA because it vested too much authority in the secretary of the interior. Members of Congress who did not want Indians to have any power also opposed the IRA, as did Indian reformers who wanted the tribes to have more power. Collier did not ask Indians what they wanted, but instead, like other white opponents of Indians, imagined that they knew what they wanted. Collier had enemies among Indians, but his more important adversaries were among whites anxious to get control of Indian land. An abrasive and opinionated man, he was forced out of office in 1945, and the U.S. government changed its policy yet again, seeking to terminate the relationship between the tribes and the U.S. government.

Was the IRA successful? This depends on how success is measured. The IRA did not raise the standard of living for Indians, but it made it possible for Indians to speak for themselves. While it did not reverse three centuries of bad policy, it began the reexamination of that policy.

--CARLOS TURPIN, APACHE JUNCTION, ARIZONA

Viewpoint:
The Indian Reorganization Act, while implementing some important changes in political and social rights for Native Americans, was also designed to protect first the interests of the U.S. government.

According to Cahuilla scholar Rupert Costo, in an article in *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492–1992* (1991), “The Indian Reorganization Act was the last great drive to assimilate the American Indian. . . . All else had failed to liberate the Indians from their land: genocide, treaty-making and treaty-breaking, substandard education, disruption of Indian religion and culture, and the last and most oppressive of such measures, the Dawes Allotment Act.”

In his litany against the abuses against American Indians, Costo forgot one of the things that preoccupied Americans most in 1934, the year the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) was passed: the movies. That year audiences were still adjusting to “talkies,” and Indians led the list of popular hits—*The Star Packer, Wagon Wheels, Wheels of Destiny, West of the Pecos,* and *The Miracle Rider.* John Ford, who defined the American Western and most Americans’ ideas about Indians, had already directed fifty movies. Audiences had seen *The Vanishing American* in 1925, and he followed it up with *Massacre* in 1934; both movies were meant to be sympathetic to the poor, dead Indian and were made ostensibly to champion the Indian cause, as well as demonstrate the inhumanity of white traders, bureaucrats, and politicians. As Ralph E. and Natasha A. Friar point out in *The Only Good Indian: The Hollywood Gospel* (1972): “there’s nothing America likes better than rooting for an underdog.”

The IRA represents the congressional version of rooting for the underdog, while at the same time making sure the cowboys always win. Indian commissioner John Collier, and others who supported the IRA, may have been well-intentioned, but the legislation was based on popular notions of vanishing Indian communities, not much different from the movie image. According to Alvin M. Josephy Jr., in an article in *Indians in American History* (1998), edited by Frederick E. Hoxie and Peter Iverson, “To most non-Indians during that period, contemporary Indians were largely out of sight and out of mind. . . . Most Americans actually did believe that Indians were disappearing, if not physically, then as identifiable Indians.” Movies, exclusively based on Indians of the past, reinforced this notion.

The loss of the savage hunter-gatherer in the modern American mind inspired several contradictory feelings within policymakers. Collier, Indian commissioner under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and several other reform groups were inspired by the communal integration that Indians seemed to have perfected, especially in contrast to the Great Depression’s social squalor and alienation. The destruction that American soci-
ety had wrought upon this Indian Utopia was regrettable, and Collier was sincere in his concern and his efforts to salvage what he could. In his quest he seems to have left out a key element: Indian opinion. Oliver LaFarge, novelist and one of Collier’s allies, wrote concerning Hopi reorganization in 1936: “The Indians didn’t think this up.”

While the disappearance of “real Indians” invoked a universal sense of sadness and pity, it also conveniently opened the door for a solution to Congress’s “Indian problem”—domestic dependent nations that hoarded valuable natural resources and that were seen as pits of corruption and paganism that blocked the advancement of better parts of society; for example, non-Indian ownership of tribal lands. The myth of the vanishing Indian reassured congressmen bent on getting rid of the Indian problem that forcing them to absorb the “prevailing civilization” would soon extricate the federal government from the Indian business altogether. The IRA was a delicate balance of these competing emotions within policymakers, an act that ultimately provided little except frustration to the “beneficiaries” of its provisions.

The IRA that Roosevelt signed in 1934 was radically different from the bill that Collier originally drafted. While Collier was not completely successful in revolutionizing the federal government’s approach to protecting and encouraging the development of Indian cultures, land rights, and nationhood, he was able to reverse some of the damaging legislation that previous administrations had enacted. The act’s most significant provision was the termination of the allotment policy. The 1887 Dawes Act had transferred Indian land from tribal to individual ownership. After each member of the tribe received his tract, the remaining reservation land was sold to non-Indians, with many individual allotments wrested from their owners unfairly. In the end the tribes lost 80 percent of their lands through allotment. The IRA also contained provisions for acquiring land, water, and surface rights for the tribes and placed restrictions on the sale, transfer, and consolidation of tribal lands. The act further gave tribes the option of organizing for limited self-government, including the right to write constitutions and elect tribal councils. It established a credit fund for economic development, and removed restrictions on the practice of Indian arts and religions. Finally, its educational provisions included school loans and civil-service training, with a hiring preference for Native Americans in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The act’s history reflects the competing forces with which policymakers struggled—Collier on the one side, with his belief in an Indian utopia that the government had a duty to preserve, and more conservative lawmakers on the other, with their conviction that the government must break all ties with its Indian wards. Ultimately, however, the national debate on the future of Indian communities was little more than the message conveyed in the movie Massacre, a rerun of The Vanishing American: assimilation was inevitable as Indians were incapable of exercising their own social and political institutions in the face of superior Anglo-American institutions.

Collier entered Indian affairs through his role as a social worker and urban reformer in New York City. He was a fringe member of Mabel Dodge Luhan’s influential salon in New York and Taos, New Mexico. Taos was a popular spot for the social elite to escape from American materialism in the early part of the twentieth century, and Luhan invited Collier there in 1920. That experience was seminal for Collier, who saw in the Taos Pueblo what modern American culture was missing. Watching a Christmas Deer Dance at Taos, he had a personal revelation, as reported in his From Every Zenith (1963):

... the discovery that came to me there, in that tiny group of a few hundred Indians, was of personality-forming institutions, even now unweakened... which were going right on in the production of states of mind, earth-loyalties and human loyalties, amid a context of beauty which suffused all the life of the group. What I observed and experienced was a power of art—of the life-making art—greater in kind than anything I had known in my own world before... I was conscious all the time, that the significance was not local to Indians, but was universal. Yet it might be that only Indians, among the peoples of this hemisphere at least, were still the possessors and users of the fundamental secret of human life—the secret of building great personality through the instrumentality of social institutions. And it might be, as well, that the Indian life would not survive.

Collier wanted to preserve his vision of this “Red Atlantis,” as he called it, not just for Indians, but so all Americans could have access to the mystical arts of a community that lived in harmony with one another and their surroundings.

To stave off what seemed to be the inevitability of assimilation, Collier founded the Indian Defense Association in 1923, one of several groups that claimed to speak for the Indian’s best interests. Most well-established reform groups, some with Indian members, aggressively advocated assimilation, boarding school education, and Christianization for Indians. Collier’s group, on the other hand, lobbied for American Indian religious freedom in the Southwest and carried that fight into the preservation of land titles for Pueblo Indians, always portraying Indians as underdogs with a fragile future. Collier’s
radical ideas gained momentum among lawmakers through the Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover administrations. These ideas, however, brought little visibility to Indians themselves in Washington. Indian realities were only seen through reformers' rose-colored glasses (in the case of Collier), or through their demonic nightmares (in the case of reformers such as Clara True of the Indian Rights Association, who advocated the firm repression of all indigenous religions)—in other words, through the framework of popular culture.

Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle point out in their study of Indian policy, _The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty_ (1984), that "federal Indian policy had been made sporadically on the basis of personal belief and philosophy among administrative and legislative members." That personal belief was, and largely still is, drugged by the persistent and powerful image of the "traditional" Indian, forever defiant, never able to negotiate the stonelike rationality of Euro-American institutions. Whether lawmakers believed in the civilizing influence of private property and Christianity or in the pristine merit of indigenous religions, the primary purpose of Indian policy through the 1920s and 1930s was to protect the federal government's interests.

Ideologically opposed lawmakers yearned for the same Indian stereotype, and in one example of the IRA's implementation, that yearning ultimately undermined the goals of all sides involved. In the effort to incorporate as many tribes as possible, Collier sought to include Eastern tribes, many of which had been long rejected by federal policy. The Lumbee Indians of North Carolina were such a group, but since they were not recognized by the federal government as Indians, Collier had to find another way to bring them under the act's provisions. The IRA mandated that only Indians of one-half blood or more be included, and the Bureau first had to determine the Lumbees' blood quantum.

Anthropologist Carl Seltzer was sent to North Carolina to measure skulls, eyes, lips and teeth, take hair samples, assess skin pigmentation, and develop a "racial diagnosis" for each person surveyed. One particularly hilarious test is remembered by the Lumbees as the "pencil test": a pencil was slipped into a subject's hair; if the pencil stayed after mild-to-vigorous shaking of the head, the subject's hair was deemed too tight or "non-Indian"; if the pencil fell, it was understood to have fallen out of real "Indian" hair. The Bureau's "scientific" experiment turned into a joke; less than 10 percent of the Indians surveyed were found to fit the blood criteria, and there were several cases where one sibling fit the criteria while the other was rejected. Lumbees, therefore, were judged too "assimilated" to be considered Indians. The all-inclusive spirit of the liberal policymakers such as Collier could not envision a nonstereotypical Indian, and neither could the awedly assimilationist goals of more conservative lawmakers withstand a tribe as "assimilated" as the Lumbee. The IRA and its authors could not have encountered many more embarrassing trials than this one.

Deloria and Lytle describe the debate over the IRA and Collier's impact this way:

The assumption of Congress, and generally of the executive branch, is that some kind of well-conceived federal infrastructure already exists on Indian reservations; the task is to make it more responsive to Indian needs or, in the conservative alternative, to dismantle it and allow social and economic Darwinism to take its course... Everyone knew that federal Indian policy was bankrupt, but no one had any idea what could be substituted in its place. Almost all of the suggestions for reform prior to John Collier, and all of the suggestions since Collier, have accepted the federal institutions as a given element in the equation and sought to adjust other factors.

Collier intended his bill to "replace almost all of existing federal Indian law," but the resulting IRA was a compromise between forces that wished to reform the government institutions already present in Indian areas, not eliminate the institutions themselves. Deloria and Lytle point out that the federal government has never considered working cooperatively with tribes' preexisting political and social structures. This unquestioned philosophy of federal Indian policy results in the subordination of Indian needs and priorities to non-Indian paternalistic imperatives, as evidenced in the debate over Indian self-government.

Prior to Collier's appointment as Indian commissioner in 1933, other administrators had tested the congressional waters regarding limited tribal powers. For example, Charles Rhoads, during the Hoover administration, sent four letters to Congress in 1931, one of which outlined directions for managing tribally held natural resources. He warned that the current administration of tribes' natural resources could continue indefinitely if tribes were not incorporated to manage the resources themselves, and he encouraged Congress to authorize tribes to control their own properties. Rhoads's suggestion highlights the perplexing nature of Indian policy reform during the Great Depression and New Deal; while ostensibly advocating Indian self-government, Rhoads's interest in incorporating tribes under Anglo-American economic and political systems also coincidentally secures U.S. access to those natural resources. His recommendation suggests that Congress could rid itself of
the Indian problem and at the same time ensure federal access to the wealth of timber, coal, oil, and other resources that the tribes owned.

Collier called Rhoads's recommendations "epoch-making announcements" and "the most adequate statement, official or unofficial, ever made, dealing with those phases of the Indian problem which are more baffling and more insistent than any others." When Collier himself faced the daunting task of Indian policy reform in 1934, he followed the trend set by Rhoads and earlier policymakers, but went even further in allocating government resources for Indian economic and educational advancement, as well as limited self-government.

True to his predecessors, Collier set out to convince Congress that his bill would end federal guardianship of Indians. Many members of the House and Senate Indian affairs committees, however, were concerned that Collier's proposal for Indian self-government, fairly conservative though it was, would result only in the further segregation and isolation of Indian tribes from their non-Indian neighbors. They feared that such isolation would delay the assimilation process, resulting in further dependence on the federal government and limitations on U.S. access to natural resources on Indian lands. Consequently, many of Collier's intended land-management and self-government reforms were scaled back to ensure that the home rule that Indians did practice was strictly Anglo-American in form and subject to veto by the secretary of the interior and that tribes would not be able to make too many decisions regarding land use that might run counter to the interests of the U.S. government.

Anthropologist Richard O. Clemmer, in Roads in the Sky: The Hopi Indians in a Century of Change (1995), argues that the "IRA granted certain representatives of Indian interests some access to political power. The arena was circumscribed and the amount of power was small, but the access provided tribes with real power because, ironically, it required a certain amount of incorporation into dominant political institutions. Thus most tribal governments became both creations and replicas of those dominant institutions." Such paradox was not new to Indians who had negotiated with the U.S. government before. The re-creation of dominant institutions on tribal lands conveniently allowed Congress and the BIA to ensure that in future legislation and administration, its interests would always be protected, while ostensibly addressing the needs and realities of the underdog.

Collier's intention to preserve his "Red Atlantis," where indigenous social and political institutions were left intact, might have succeeded had he listened more closely to one Hopi who wrote to him in March 1934 about the IRA: "regarding the matter as in forming a self-government, we already have [one] that has been
handed down from generation to generation up to this time." Nevertheless, Collier believed that the IRA balanced the conflicting impulses behind federal Indian policy, so he did not include a provision for bringing the law to Indians for their approval: Congress had to insist that a majority of tribes approve the act before its implementation: 181 tribes approved the IRA and 77 rejected it. The tribes that abstained were considered to have approved the act and were incorporated under it anyway. So much for Collier's proclaimed consideration for "traditional" Indian governance and self-determination.

The ultimate failure of the IRA to accomplish its intended revolution in federal Indian policy was a result of complex factors, including many Indians' resistance to the termination of the allotment policy. In addition, after World War II had ushered in American prosperity, and Indian self-government had resulted in the overall increase, rather than decrease, of federal Indian service, Congress began to interpret tribal governments as a further excuse to terminate the federal relationship with Indian tribes altogether. As a consequence, there was plenty of support for Congress's reactionary termination policies of the 1950s, when, among other injustices, according to Josephy, "trusteeship of tribal property was shifted from federal government to trust officers of private banks," allowing Indian lands to be leased to the highest corporate bidder.

Federal Indian policy in the 1920s and 1930s looked suspiciously like the images presented in popular movies that suffused American culture at that time. Just as in the Westerns, Indians were props in policymaking, one-dimensional background figures for the various sympathetic, nostalgic, hostile, greedy, or brutal desires and fantasies of Americans. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., in The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (New York: Knopf, 1978), writes that "one finds the same fundamental imagery serving both as moral and intellectual justification for White policies and as explanation for their failure or success." This circular logic does more damage to the American political experiment, and to the consumers of the images, than it does to our history's supposed "underdog." the American Indian. The IRA demonstrates that policymakers have actively sought an oversimplified understanding of Indians that chokes their ability to maintain a reasonably consistent, objective policy standard. Such an approach endangers the fragile balance of powers that checks our decision-making, leaving little but an entertaining vacuum in democracy's place.

—MALINDA MAYNOR

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