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Paternalism

One of the enduring issues facing the government and the people of the United States through two centuries of existence is the place of American Indians in American society. Unlike other ethnic minorities that emigrated to the New World in historic times, the native Americans were in a sense indigenous. They laid claim to the land of the entire continent, which they had inhabited since their own migrations from Asia twenty-five to forty thousand years ago. By the time Europeans came to settle permanently in the New World, the Indians had developed a remarkable diversity of languages, political organizations, and other cultural patterns, but the European invaders lumped them all together as “Indians” and then devised political, economic, and often military arrangements for intercultural contacts. From 1607, the date of the first permanent English settlement in North America, to the Revolutionary War, more than a century and a half later, the American colonies and the British imperial government established procedures that formed the basis for the Indian policy of the United States. Yet responsible officials of the new nation had to adjust and adapt and create as the relations between the two races and cultures changed.

There have been numerous attempts to narrate the history of the United States government’s relations with

the Indians and to describe the principles of American Indian policy. It is not an easy task, for the subject is too complex to be seen accurately in black and white. The relations were increasingly anomalous, and historical patterns could not be applied automatically by the United States in its encounter with the aboriginal peoples. Nor did the Indians, on their side, have coordinated strategies for dealing with the newcomers. The outcome during the two centuries of United States national existence, however, was clear enough: Europeans and their descendants replaced the Indians on the continent, and ownership of the land was transferred from Indians to whites.

How did the officials of the American government who were responsible for Indian affairs view the relations between whites and Indians? How did they understand the plans and policies they proposed and implemented? What were the roots of American Indian policy?

Some recent attempts to answer these questions, unfortunately, tell us more about the views and commitments of the writers than about the historical reality itself. In the guilt-ridden decades of the 1960s and 1970s, we were regaled with accounts of ruthless extermination—not of whites by ferocious savage Indians, a once-popular view in the early history of American settlement, but of Indians by whites. The story was about a “conquistador mentality” that sought to eliminate the Indians physically in order to fulfill the covetous desires of the whites for Indian lands. The emphasis has been on dispossession, on a heartless disregard of the rights of Indians, and on universal treaty-breaking by the United States government. “It is doubtful,” one Indian writer declared in 1969, “that any nation will ever exceed the record of the

United States for perfidy.”¹ The scene is studded with special villains, of whom President Andrew Jackson is perhaps the most infamous. A scholar of the early national period has written: “Jacksonian Indian policy was a blending of hypocrisy, cant, and rapaciousness, seemingly shot through with inconsistencies. Inconsistencies however are present only if the language of the presidential papers is taken seriously.” In removing the Indians, this historian says, “the federal government had to display tact, cunning, guile, cajolery, and more than a hint of coercion. That it proved more than equal to the task was due in no small measure to Andrew Jackson’s dedication to it. His performance was not that of responsible government official deferring to the will of constituents but rather that of a zealot who fully shared their biases and rapacity.”²

We have been treated to a Marxist interpretation that claims, in the words of one writer, that “the *existence* of the United States is the result of the massive robbery of an entire continent and its resources from its aboriginal owners.” According to this theory, “American Indians have experienced modern colonialism, that is, the expansion of the capitalist regimes into foreign areas, and capitalist exploitation of lands, resources and labor. American Indians have resisted colonialism using both defensive and offensive techniques. The United States as a socioeconomic and political entity is a result of that process. American Indian communities today are societies formed by their resistance to colonialism.” Moreover, in this view, genocide was part and parcel of colonialism, and racism was “a principal ideological tool.” The Marxists want us to consider Indian resistance

as class struggle and focus our attention on “the relationship of the indigenous peoples to capital, not just on the cultural relationships of Europeans and Indians.”³

On the other hand, practitioners of psychohistory would have us believe that Indian policy can be explained in Freudian or other psychoanalytical terms. “Replacing Indians upon the land,” one such historian has written, “whites reunited themselves with nature. The rhetoric of Manifest Destiny pictures America a ‘young and growing country’; it expanded through ‘swallowing territory,’ ‘just as an animal eats to grow.’ Savagery would inevitably ‘be swallowed by’ civilization. Whites imaginatively regressed, as they described expansion, to fantasies of infant omnipotence,” he says. “They entertained the most primitive form of object relations, the annihilation of the object through oral introjection.” In this view, whites infantilized Indians in order to regain parental authority, which had been repressed in the liberal politics of the day. Andrew Jackson’s subjugation of the Indians, in the same author’s analysis, was a result of separation anxiety; Jackson proved his manhood by destroying Indians.⁴

Of course these approaches to the history of the Indians in the United States offer some truth, but they all exhibit an *a priori* commitment to a set of principles, procrustean beds on which to stretch the events and personalities of the past. The first paints United States policy as black as possible in order to make the Indians look as noble as possible and thus hopes to win support for today’s Indian programs; it uses the past as a means to gain certain ends in the present. The second is an ideological pattern imposed upon the historical past, in which classes—capitalists and workers—are set in opposition. The third

overemphasizes psychological categories in an attempt to delve deeply into the motivation of leaders (like Andrew Jackson) or whole societies (like the North as opposed to the South) in terms that might be understandable to Freudian aficionados today but that would have been incomprehensible to the people it tries to explain.

Now if the responsibility of historians is to understand the past, and understand it, too, in some measure, on its own terms, we must look at what the actors in the events said and did and examine the society in which they lived. We must be immersed as much as possible in the outlook of their times and grasp sympathetically the perceptions of the men and women who were responsible for directing the United States government in its relations with the American Indians. We cannot, therefore, write the history of Indian-white relations in the United States in terms of biological racism (as the twentieth century knows the concept), or in terms of extermination and physical genocide, or in terms of class struggle (colonialism or neocolonialism), or in terms of separation anxiety of national leaders and conflict between “anal” and “oral” societies.

Historians of Indian-white relations face the special problem of dealing with two diverse cultures, for we must understand two *others*, quite diverse in themselves. We realize that it is necessary to know something of the worldview of the Indians (because it is so different from our own), and we do not want to judge one culture by the norms of another. But we must also understand past white societies and not assume that the 1830s can be judged by the norms and values of the 1980s.

American society in the period from 1776 to 1920 was an heir of the Enlightenment. It believed in the power of

human reason to fathom the principles of natural law and to organize society in accord with them. But it was even more a deeply religious society, in which a commitment to biblical truths and norms was assumed to be necessary for both individuals and the nation. Within these intellectual boundaries was fashioned an Indian policy that rested upon three fundamental principles.

The first was that all mankind was one, that all human beings were created innately equal by God and were descendants of one set of parents, Adam and Eve. Thus Thomas Jefferson believed in an essential, fixed human nature, unchangeable by time or place, and he wrote unequivocally in 1785: "I believe the Indian then to be in body and mind equal to the whiteman." If the circumstances of the Indians' environment could be changed, Jefferson thought, "we shall probably find that they are formed in mind as well as in body, on the same module with the 'Homo sapiens Europaeus.'"⁵

This view was the common one of the age, bolstered by a literal reading of Genesis. When, in the 1840s, the so-called American School of Ethnology proposed polygenesis—multiple creation of the races—and then argued that the separate creation of the nonwhite races accounted for innate inferiority of blacks and Indians, their innovations were rejected by the government officials who handled Indian affairs. Thomas L. McKenney, called by his modern biographer the "architect of America's early Indian policy," flatly rejected these first attempts at a scientific racism. He held firm to monogenesis and wrote in the 1840s:

I am aware that opinions are entertained by some, embracing the theory of multiform creations; by such, the doctrine that

the whole family of man sprang from one original and common stock, is denied. There is, however, but one source whence information can be derived on this subject—and that is the Bible, and, until those who base their convictions on Bible testimony, consent to throw aside that great landmark of truth, they must continue in the belief that “the Lord God formed *man* of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, when he became a living soul.” Being thus formed, and thus endowed, he was put by his creator in *the* garden, which was eastward, in Eden, whence flowed the river which parted, and became into four heads; and that from his fruitfulness his species were propagated.

The propagation of the entire human race from “an original pair,” McKenney asserted, “is a truth so universally admitted, as to render any elaborate argument in its support superfluous.” Since the Eden of Adam and Eve was not in America, the Indians could not have been indigenous to America. McKenney believed that the Indians were of Asiatic origin and had migrated to the New World by way of Bering Strait.⁶

The polygenesis of the American School, in fact, became a scientific oddity. The Indian reformers universally held to the identity of the Indian’s human nature with that of the whites and thus to the reformability of the Indians. The commissioner of Indian affairs in 1868 asserted that “the fact stands out clear, well-defined, and indisputable, that Indians, not only as individuals but as tribes, are capable of civilization and of christianization.” And one of his successors declared of Indian children in 1892: “They, too, are human and endowed with all the faculties of human nature; made in the image of God, being the likeness of their Creator, and having the same possibilities of growth and development that are possessed by any other class of children.” He added, “The

essential elements of human nature are the same in all [races] and in each, and the possibilities of development are limited only by the opportunities for growth and by culture forces.”⁷

Even though unity of mankind with its corollary of innate equality of Indians and whites was firmly held and universally proclaimed by makers of Indian policy, a second principle must also be noted: The Indians in their existing cultural circumstances were inferior to the whites.

This inferiority was seen in many aspects of Indian life, for the whites (unaware of the concepts of cultural relativism and cultural pluralism that mark our own day) looked upon the Indians from a superior ethnocentric plateau. They saw cultures with primitive technologies, engaged in some limited agriculture yet dependent to a large extent upon hunting and gathering for food and apparel. It was common for white Americans to refer to Indian communities as hunter societies as opposed to white societies engaged in agriculture and domestic industries.⁸ They saw pagan religion, and although they were no longer inclined (as had been the early Puritans) to see Satan immediately behind Indian beliefs and ceremonies, they compared the Indians' religions unfavorably with their own biblical Christianity. They contrasted the preliterate Indian societies (which had no written languages) with the accomplishments of their own society and judged the Indian languages generally worthless even though of scientific interest. They saw the increasing dependence of the Indians upon trade for the goods they had come to rely upon—guns and ammunition, kettles, knives, and other metal implements, and woven cloth—and they saw their own rapidly multiplying population

overwhelming the static or declining numbers of the Indian tribes.

As early as 1803 Jefferson, who generally urged humanity in dealing with Indians but who was willing to fall back upon fear if need be, wrote to a territorial governor, "We presume that our strength and their weakness is now so visible, that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them." And as the years passed, the disparity between the Indian and white societies increased. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in January 1820 noted "partial advances" made by the Indians, but he urged more radical measures and reported to Congress:

They must be brought gradually under our authority and laws, or they will insensibly waste away in vice and misery. It is impossible, with their customs, that they should exist as independent communities, in the midst of civilized society. They are not, in fact, an independent people, (I speak of those surrounded by our population,) nor ought they to be so considered. They should be taken under our guardianship; and our opinion, and not theirs, ought to prevail, in measures intended for their civilization and happiness. A system less vigorous may protract, but cannot arrest their fate.⁹

According to the Jeffersonians, however, the Indians' inferiority was due to circumstances, not nature. The Jeffersonians and their intellectual heirs were committed environmentalists. The condition of the Indians, they were convinced, was due to their way of life. Commissioner of Indian Affairs T. Hartley Crawford noted in 1844 that the Indian race was "in no respect inferior to our own race, except in being less fortunately circumstanced." And Commissioner Thomas Jefferson Morgan insisted a half century later that "whatever of savagery or brutishness there has been in the history of

[the Indian] people has been due rather to unfortunate circumstances, for which they were not always responsible, than to any inherent defect of nature. Under proper conditions the Indian baby grows into the cultivated, refined Christian gentleman or lovely woman."¹⁰

Hence the third fundamental principle: The Indians' culture could and should be transformed to equal or approximate that of their white neighbors. The inexorable progress exhibited in the history of human societies meant that the Indian would move through stages of society, from savagery to barbarism to ultimate civilization, just as the ancestors of the Europeans themselves had passed through those stages centuries ago. But Christian benevolence could not wait for the evolutionary progress to work itself out over centuries. It was the duty of Christians to speed up the process and to reform the Indian societies through positive and sometimes forcible means, the chief of which were instruction in agriculture and education in Christian schools.¹¹

The outcome, as it took form in the Indian policy of the United States, can be expressed best by the word *paternalism*. Christian statesmen and their missionary allies looked upon the Indians as children toward whom they had a parental or paternal responsibility. It was the duty of parents to provide what was best for their minor children, look out for their best interests (which the children themselves could not judge), and assist the children to move to full maturity. A parallel concept was that of guardian and ward, in which the duties of the one toward the other rested upon what was almost a parent-child relationship. Guardian-ward was a legal relation, yet it had some of the connotations of love and religious

concern that surrounded the common nineteenth-century view of parental or paternal responsibilities.

We need to note, of course, that paternalism could be either benevolent or oppressive. Parents tended to see it as benevolent; children often viewed the same actions as unduly restrictive. Since children were defenseless, they required assistance and support, and since children were not fully responsible, they required guidance. These ideas underlay the benevolent mode of paternalistic action, and they dominated the thought of humanitarian reformers who naively believed that with guidance and protection the Indians would move quickly toward their majority and take their place as independent citizens of the Republic. But this paternalism seemed never-ending, partly because, as the nation expanded westward, the United States government again and again came into contact with new groups of Indians, for whom the process was renewed; and partly because many Indians were slow to assume the mantle of full independence and self-sufficiency within the white man's world.

The more sinister connotations of paternalism are hinted at in the dictionary definition: "a policy or practice of treating or governing people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs without giving them responsibility." Worse still, children were ignorant; they could be deceived or treated in a way that served the interests of adults—a kind of exploitative paternalism.¹²

The paternalistic approach to Indian affairs was firmly in place by the time of Thomas Jefferson's administration. The object was to turn the Indian hunters into yeoman farmers (a policy that fitted well with Jefferson's

agrarian propensities). If the Indians came to rely on agriculture and domestic manufacture for their food and clothing, they would no longer need extensive hunting grounds and would willingly give up their unneeded lands for white settlement (an outcome that fitted well with Jefferson's expansionism). Following the earlier example of George Washington and Henry Knox, Jefferson supported programs to promote agriculture and spinning and weaving among the tribes in close contact with white settlement, and he repeatedly urged his ideas upon the Indians who came east to meet with the Great Father. He told a group of Miami, Potawatomi, and Wea Indians in January 1802, "We shall with great pleasure see your people become disposed to cultivate the earth, to raise herds of useful animals and to spin and weave, for their food and clothing. These resources are certain, they will never disappoint you, while those of hunting may fail, and expose your women and children to the miseries of hunger and cold. We will with pleasure furnish you with implements for the most necessary arts, and with persons who may instruct [you] how to make and use them."¹³

Although it is possible to see Jefferson's motive simply as covetousness for Indian lands, such a view does violence to the thinking of the age. Jefferson and his contemporaries saw a mutual exchange between Indians and whites, as Jefferson himself told Congress: "In leading them thus to agriculture, to [domestic] manufacture, and civilization; in bringing together their and our sentiments, and preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefits of our Government, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good."¹⁴

The best exemplification of this Jeffersonian paternalistic bent in Indian policy was the work of Thomas

L. McKenney, a man of Quaker background who served as superintendent of Indian trade from 1816 to 1822 and then as the first head of the Indian Office, 1824–1830. Although at first officially only superintendent of trade, McKenney in fact made his office a center for humanitarian concern for the Indians, and he used his official position to encourage the work of missionaries to the Indians. He was especially interested in schools for Indian children, but he believed that all federal relations with the tribes should be directed toward their civilization. He spoke of Indian affairs as “the great cause of justice and benevolence”; his concern was to Christianize and civilize the Indians as rapidly as possible, and he regarded them as children who had to be guided on the way. As head of the Indian Office he urged the Indians to emigrate to western lands where they would be out of contact with the vices of white society and could escape the pressures on their lands. McKenney saw the program he promoted as a triple one—emigration, preservation, and improvement of the Indians—all suffused with a paternal spirit.¹⁵ Lamenting the sad condition of the Indians in their present situation, he wrote: “Seeing as I do the condition of these people, and that they are bordering on destruction, I would, were I empowered, take them *firmly* but *kindly* by the hand, and tell them they must go; and I would do this, on the same principle that I would take my own children by the hand, firmly, but kindly and lead them from a district of Country in which the plague was raging.”¹⁶

McKenney was not alone in thinking of Indian emigration to the West in paternalistic terms. Whatever may have been the purposes of the proponents of removal (and some historians delight in charging them with all

sorts of evil motivation), the rhetoric of the age described the Indians as children or wards, in need of guidance from white officials who would work for their best interests. Even John Marshall in his landmark case of 1831, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, spoke of the Indians as in “a state of pupilage” and declared that their relation to the United States “resembles that of a ward to his guardian.” The Indians, he said, “look to our government for protection; rely upon its kindness and its power; appeal to it for relief to their wants; and address the president as their great father.”¹⁷

Andrew Jackson, Marshall’s great opponent on Indian removal as on other crucial issues, was especially forceful in justifying his position in terms of a father looking after his children. He wrote in 1829:

You may rest assured that I shall adhere to the just and humane policy towards the Indians which I have commenced. In this spirit I have recommended them to quit their possessions on this side of the Mississippi, and go to a country to the west where there is every probability that they will always be free from the mercenary influence of White men, and undisturbed by the local authority of the states: Under such circumstances the General Government can exercise a parental control over their interests and possibly perpetuate their race.¹⁸

He saw removal of the Indians from the jurisdiction of the eastern states as a prelude to the government’s “exercising such a general control over their affairs as may be essential to their interest and safety.” In his Farewell Address of March 4, 1837, Jackson reverted to the same theme:

This unhappy race—the original dwellers in our land—are now placed in a situation where we may well hope that they will

share in the blessings of civilization and be saved from that degradation and destruction to which they were rapidly hastening while they remained in the States; and while the safety and comfort of our own citizens have been greatly promoted by their removal, the philanthropist will rejoice that the remnant of that ill-fated race has been at length placed beyond the reach of injury or oppression, and that the paternal care of the General Government will hereafter watch over them and protect them.¹⁹

A superficial argument against the view of a paternalistic Indian policy was the use of treaties to deal with the Indian nations. The use of such formal instruments bespoke relations between equal sovereign political entities, not a parent-child relationship. While such a case might be made for the early years of the United States, when the emerging nation was faced by Indian tribes of considerable power, as the nineteenth century progressed, the treaty system changed radically in nature. Treaties (although retaining the old forms) became in fact instruments used by the United States government for its own purposes; treaties became instruments of American paternalism.

Why treaties continued to be used is easy enough to understand, for they were a convenient means ready at hand, and the treaty-making power of the federal government established by the Constitution was a principal support for centralized (rather than state) control of Indian affairs. To be sure, as early as 1817 Andrew Jackson, then commanding the Military Division of the South, questioned the wisdom of the traditional procedure and declared that to treat the Indians as though they were independent nations rather than simply subjects of the United States was nonsense. The treaty policy had grown up out of necessity, he argued, when the United States

had been too weak to enforce its regulations among the Indians or keep peace in any other way. President Monroe and Secretary of War Calhoun approved Jackson's views, but Congress would not abandon the treaty system, which continued in force until 1871, modified in practice to serve the purposes of the federal government.²⁰

Treaties became civilizing instruments intended by the federal government to move the Indians from their aboriginal cultural patterns to the agricultural existence that was deemed necessary for the Indians. Elements of Indian policy were embedded in the treaties, which were then presented to the Indians in council for their acquiescence. It is tempting to view this simply as a fraud, to characterize the treaties, as Commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis A. Walker did in the early 1870s, as "a mere form to amuse and quiet savages, a half-compassionate, half-contemptuous humoring of unruly children."²¹ But that would be to ignore the strong strains of benevolent paternalism that shine through the numerous treaties made with the Indians in mid-century.

We can take as one example the series of treaties signed in the 1850s, as the United States sought to open up new areas in the Trans-Mississippi West to white settlement and exploitation. Regardless of the tribes concerned—whether Plains Indians in Kansas, salmon fishermen in the Pacific Northwest, or the Utes of New Mexico—the treaties contained set provisions aimed at transforming cultural patterns in order to enable the Indians to survive and prosper under the new circumstances of American expansion. These were (1) reduction of the Indian landholdings and designation of limited reservations, either as part of the old lands or in entirely new locations; (2) provision of farm-sized plots of land for