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COMMENTARY

A Year of Crisis: Memory and Meaning in a Navajo Community's Struggle for Self-Determination

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On a late fall morning in 1981 in west-central New Mexico, I was making my usual morning drive from the small town of Magdalena to the Alamo Navajo reservation, some thirty miles distant. I had been making this same drive for two months. Granted a sabbatical by my university, I had jumped at the chance to spend the year serving as curriculum director of a self-determination school that had been founded two years before, one of several such schools that had emerged in the wake of the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act.[1] This landmark legislation authorized Native American communities to establish their own schools after nearly two centuries of failed government policies, at the heart of which were colonialist assumptions on the perceived cultural deficits of Indigenous societies and the necessity of forcibly acculturating them into mainstream American society. Administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), over the past century this federal project had called for shipping Native children off to distant boarding schools, where, it was believed, the process of cultural transformation could be carried out more efficiently when unencumbered by parental and community influences.[2]

I knew a good deal about this history. I was writing a history of the early federal Indian boarding school system and ten years earlier I had briefly served as a volunteer at the premier institutional model of the self-determination vision, Rough Rock Demonstration School on the Navajo reservation in northeast Arizona. Rough Rock had formulated a bicultural educational program which sought both to preserve Diné children's identities and to prepare them for life beyond the reservation.[3] Now, ten

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years later, I wanted to play some small role in helping the Alamo Navajo community chart their own path to educational self-determination.

On this particular morning I had driven several miles into the reservation when I observed that something looked wrong with the dirt airfield that the school director used when he flew his small private plane from his home in Albuquerque. The windsock was broken and several logs were strewn across the runway. Perhaps the work of some mischievous teenagers, I first thought, but on second thought, why would they select the dirt landing strip for their antics? It then occurred to me that the act might have been motivated by a desire to prevent the pilot—that is, the school director—from landing, or worse, to kill him. Given recent developments at the school, this theory was not beyond the realm of possibility. I knew one thing for certain: in this Diné community's struggle for self-determination, the school year 1981–82 was proving to be a definitive moment.

In this commentary essay, I first tell the story of how the Alamo Navajo community managed to save their fledging school, which was on the brink of collapse, from a BIA takeover. I then argue that the Alamo story raises important questions about the nature of the self-determination movement itself and the difficulties of mounting culturally sustaining, restorative pedagogies in Native American communities ravaged by conquest and colonization.[4] In telling the story of the Alamo Navajo experience, I rely principally on two sources: a lengthy script of a community meeting held at the height of the crisis, and a personal journal which I kept during the year.[5] Because this journal reveals the extent of my own participation in the drama described, I reveal at the outset that the following narrative may well prompt a degree of skepticism as to the writer's ability to tell the story with any degree of objectivity. It is partly for this reason that I have waited more than thirty-five years to tell it.

The Alamo Navajo

From a small band in 1890 that probably numbered no more than 150 souls, by 1980 the population of the Alamo had grown to approximately 1,300.[6] While the Alamo band is part of the Navajo Nation politically, geographically it is separated from the main body of the Diné to the northwest, as are Ramah and To'hajillee, two of the other "chapters" represented on the Navajo Nation's governing body. Beyond this geographical separation, the Alamo band is unique in several respects. First, in the nineteenth century the Alamo band experienced a significant Apache infusion; indeed, two prominent surnames on the reservation today are "Apache" and "Apachito." Second, very few clans (a key marker of kinship in Navajo society) are represented at Alamo compared to the far larger number of clans among their cultural cousins in the north. Finally, because of the band's small population, it never possessed a sufficient number of medicine men to sustain a complete ceremonial system, a fact that would make the Alamo particularly vulnerable to Christian missionaries. As we shall see, in the future this would strongly influence how the Alamo Navajo would come to define educational self-determination.[7]

In spite of these distinctive features, the Alamo band's cultural orientation was essentially Navajo: members spoke Navajo, lived in hogans, were clan-based, matrilineal

and matrilocal in social organization, and pursued a mixed economy of pastoralism, hunting, gathering, and agriculture. Alamo elders, meanwhile, instructed youth in the essential elements of the Diné spiritual outlook through prayers, storytelling, rituals, and ceremonies: how the Diné lived in several worlds below the earth's surface before their emergence; how First Man and Woman gave birth to Changing Woman; how Changing Woman was impregnated by the Sun and gave birth to the Hero Twins; how the Twins slew the four monsters who threatened Diné existence; how trickster Coyote was both holy and dangerous; and how one's well-being depended upon both correct behavior and the avoidance of evil forces. And at the core of this outlook was the ideal of *hózhó*, variously translated as harmony, balance, peacefulness, and beauty. "In beauty may we dwell, in beauty may we walk," the traditional Navajo prayer begins.[8] It was into this world that Alamo children were enculturated—that is to say, educated.

From 1912 to 1959 Alamo children were shipped off to one of three federal Indian boarding schools in New Mexico—Santa Fe, Albuquerque, or Crownpoint—institutions charged with the objective of forcibly acculturating Native children to mainstream American society. As the theory went, through child removal and total immersion in a military-school-style setting with uniforms, extensive drilling, patriotic rituals, strict discipline, and a curriculum divided between academic and vocational training, Native children's ancestral tribal identities would give way to their newfound American identities. [9] After 1928, the worst abuses of the system were tempered with the introduction of progressive—that is to say, more culturally sensitive—pedagogies, but children still were forcibly removed to boarding schools.[10] They responded in a host of ways. While some adjusted to the system and came to value the experience as a pathway to gaining knowledge of the wider society, most simply endured the year-long periods away from home and looked forward to release in the spring, when most returned to their homes. But some didn't wait and chose the path of escape—that is, they ran away, a perilous two- to three-day journey back to Alamo.[11]

Since the Alamo reservation was located fewer than thirty miles from Magdalena, New Mexico, in 1959 the BIA targeted it for a new program devised specifically for Indian communities near to towns located outside the reservations. For the Alamo, this meant placing their children in dormitories on the outskirts of Magdalena where they would attend local public schools instead of boarding schools. From the BIA's perspective, the program promised to quicken Alamo children's acquisition of English; from the Alamo parents' perspective, the program would dramatically shorten the distance from their school-age children.[12] But attending the Magdalena schools presented its own set of problems. Entering the schools as non-English speakers, the youngest children soon found themselves at the bottom of the academic and ethnic hierarchy. By the mid-1960s the situation improved a bit as Alamo students began being elected as school club officers and distinguishing themselves on the basketball court. But it was slow going. "Dirty Indian" came easily to the lips of their fellow students. It didn't help when the school nurse occasionally showed up to check for head lice, but only examined the Alamo children. One woman says of her experience: "I was always thinking about my family. Sometimes it seem like I'm nothing." Meanwhile, like days of old, children were escaping at night from the dormitories.[13] The road home was now much shorter.

Their Own School

Having their own school was a long-time dream of Alamo elders. While the Magdalena dormitory program was an improvement over the previous boarding school system, it still involved the old policy of forced child removal. By the 1970s, however, a new development in federal policy, educational self-determination, opened up the possibility for Native communities to gain greater control over their children's schooling. By the end of the decade, several such schools, so-called "contract" schools, were already operating among the Navajo.[14] Caught in the swirl of these developments, the Alamo Navajo were in need of an individual with the knowledge and ability to help them negotiate the complex legal, political, and bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of establishing their own school.

That person was John Loehr.[15] Several Alamo met Loehr in 1978 when he was working in a special teacher training program for Navajo at the University of New Mexico. Alamo community leaders jumped at Loehr's suggestion that they could also start their own school. Following a community vote of 92–0 on November 1978, Loehr was invited to spearhead the effort, which he quickly agreed to do. Shortly thereafter, Michael P. Gross, a lawyer with extensive experience in Indian law, was brought on board and applications to the BIA and the Navajo Nation for planning monies soon followed. In time, Abe Plummer, a Navajo educator, and William Berlin, an Anglo with experience in Indian education, also joined the project.[16]

Meanwhile there was so much to be done: the certification of an Alamo school board; meetings in Washington, DC and Crownpoint, the area BIA office; endless negotiations over contractual specifics; hiring of teachers and support staff; purchasing curriculum materials; and arranging for temporary physical facilities (administrative offices, classrooms, and cafeteria). At one juncture the goal of opening the school in the fall of 1979 seemed all but impossible. The BIA was dragging its bureaucratic feet, congenitally resistant to loosening its historic control over Indian schooling. And then there was the problem of the Magdalena school system, which quickly discerned that losing a sizable proportion of its enrollment would mean losing a sizable chunk of federal dollars. But the die was cast. Over the summer of 1979 the BIA approved the Alamo contract. The school opened in October.[17]

Crisis

It was on a September morning two years later when I, newly appointed as curriculum director for the year, first set eyes on the school. At this time it was no more than a collection of aluminum-sided mobile buildings perched on a hill, a short walk from the chapter house located on lower terrain. After I met John Loehr (until now we had only talked on the phone), who briefly outlined my chief responsibilities, I spent the next few days talking to teachers and staff about their concerns. By the week's end I was worried. Almost immediately both Navajos and Anglos began sharing their frustrations over what they saw as the school's shaky status.

At the center of this discontent was John Loehr, who for all practical purposes was in charge of running the school. His personality style, nearly all were convinced,

was simply not conducive to running a school. His headstrong and uncompromising manner may have served the community well enough in blasting through the BIA's bureaucracy, but these same qualities were ill suited for the day-to-day business of building an effective school program. Loehr's unwillingness to entertain suggestions for reversing or revising some problematic policy he deemed sacrosanct was particularly noxious. On the minds of the Navajo employees, whose opportunities for gainful employment outside the school were slim, the fear that questioning Loehr's policies would lead to dismissal weighed heavily. As one Navajo teacher expressed it: "The staff are nervous and their legs shake because of it."[18]

A second complaint was the fact that the school, now in its second year, was still without a viable academic program. In addition to concern about the lack of instructional materials, they questioned the superintendent's decision to sort students not by grade level, but according to their individual mastery of the curriculum. Many of the Navajo staff were also parents, who naturally questioned how this experimental system would translate into high school transfer credits—specifically to Magdalena, which linked academic credit to grade level. This was a major issue since some parents had chosen to keep their children in the Magdalena schools, and others wanted to keep their options open depending on developments at Alamo. Conscious of parental concerns, in early October William Berlin addressed the issue at a community meeting. Knowing the painful memories parents had of boarding school, he justified the new policy of grouping students according to mastery of the curriculum by appealing to their own history:

> A long time ago Indian parents, grandparents, and uncles took their children and taught them as individuals. They knew that each child is an individual and that they must be taught as an individual. But the white man has always taught in bunches. That is the way you were taught—in bunches. In bunches you moved along, year by year—in bunches. Some of you did well, and some of you did not do as well, because you were never taught as an individual. They never bothered to find out what you needed to learn as an individual. It is a sad thing to say, but some of you went to some of the worst schools in the country. It hurts to say that, but it's true. New Mexico has the worst schools in the whole country, with the exception of two states, and Magdalena is one of the worst schools in the whole state of New Mexico. It doesn't care about the individual—only bunches. That's why they have grade levels. But the Alamo people want to have one of the best schools anywhere, and that is why we try to teach the children as individuals. That is the old Indian way, to take each child and find out what he needs to know and teach him. That is the old Indian way. It is not the *bilagáana* [white man's] way, but it is the best way.[19]

Given the history of the boarding school experience, it was an appealing argument, but many remained skeptical.

A third issue was Loehr's deeply held conviction that behaviorist psychology held the best hope for promoting student motivation and learning. "Positive reinforcement procedures should be evident in each classroom," one early memo to the faculty declared. In practice, the principle quickly became known as the token system. In all classrooms, attentive students were rewarded with tokens or chips, which at designated

times could be cashed in at the school store for sundry items like candy, comics, and games.[20] Almost from the beginning, most teachers were either philosophically opposed to the system or convinced it was not working, especially with the older students. In early September, faced with growing staff opposition to this particular pet educational doctrine of the superintendent's, Principal Steve Hanson announced that there was actually growing evidence that the system was functioning rather well. The basis for this claim? Several students had recently been caught stealing tokens, while others were attempting to forge them. Why would they be indulging in these activities, he asked, if they placed little value in them? No, there was no going back. Teachers must simply find a way to implement the system more effectively. Later, when Loehr grudgingly admitted that there was indeed a problem with the older students not responding to the tokens, he asserted the solution was not to abandon behaviorist principles, but rather to find more meaningful reinforcing methods. As we shall see shortly, this search for bigger reinforcers would lead to a remarkably nutty proposal.

Finally, there was the plane, a constant reminder that Loehr lived in Albuquerque and only periodically flew down to Alamo to manage the school's operation. Perhaps once a week the plane slipped down out of the azure New Mexican sky and buzzed the school, a signal for a car to pick him up at the dirt landing strip a mile or two distant. I was only on the job a few days when I began hearing complaints about the arrangement. "What other superintendent," one Navajo teacher wondered, "lives so far away from the school he's in charge of? Why don't he live here"? This question even bothered one of the school board members, who, after asking me if Loehr would be coming to Alamo that day, and then hearing that he was on vacation, responded with: "He don't need vacation. He's not here enough. He always on vacation. He should put his trailer down here. He should live here." The fact that the board had signed off on the contract for his use of the plane only deepened the growing resentment. The plane was a visible reminder that something was terribly wrong.

That *something* was self-determination itself. Somehow community control had gone off the rails. Symptomatic of this was how Loehr handled the replacement of the school principal. In late September, Loehr pulled me aside and told me that Steve Hanson was leaving and that there would be a search for his replacement. "I'm going to keep it quiet," he cautioned me. "If I told the board, they would just get all upset and nervous. They can't handle changes of this sort." So, the new principal was hired without any participation from the community. Fortunately, the new principal, Dan Fox (whom the Navajos almost immediately began calling *mą'ii*, the Navajo equivalent of "fox") was a godsend. In the coming months, when the crisis finally struck, the school would need a steady and experienced administrator at the school's helm. But this would only be understood later on. At the moment, most teachers and staff lamented the school board's lack of influence over the school's operation. As one Alamo elder told me: "When I was chapter president, we talk about this school *way* back. . . . We still talk about it." As for the present, he had now come to the conclusion that Superintendent John Loehr was leading the school down the wrong path: "He messed the whole thing up."

In fairness, not all of the school's problems were because of the administration. The BIA's continued obstructionism, Magdalena's success at recruiting Alamo students, the

few Alamo-certified teachers, and community factionalism bred by the fierce competition for employment opportunities at the school all played a part. But these paled in comparison to two other factors. The first was the general lack of student discipline, including cutting classes, tardiness, verbal abuse of teachers, and general classroom behavior. In mid-September, Principal Steve Hanson issued a memorandum outlining procedures for dealing with "class cutting behavior." While the most severe cases might require a parent conference, followed by the student being sent home, the statement also reminded teachers of their own responsibilities in this area—namely, that "diligent application of contingency management and the principles of positive reinforcement should clear up this kind of problem. I'm sure all are aware that you will be individually evaluated on your ability to apply these procedures. Keep this in mind when you are making up the [absentee] lists."

When matters didn't improve, a parent advisory committee (all members had once attended boarding schools) addressed the issue and promptly recommended that the disciplinary policies should include spanking and paddling.[21] This recommendation, besides its questionable humanity, was, of course, in direct conflict with positive reinforcement philosophy, so it was never implemented. Meanwhile the problems of chronic class-cutting, absenteeism, and classroom unruliness continued unabated, with suspension and expulsion being reserved for only the most severe cases.

The second issue was the question of how much traditional Navajo culture should infuse the curriculum. I had come to Alamo assuming (naively, as it turned out) that this new self-determination school would embrace as its overarching philosophy a robust variety of biculturalism. What I soon discovered was that it was a single Native American teacher of Caddo ancestry and the few Anglos who were really interested in the idea. Most of the local Alamo teachers were conflicted. The reason: unlike most Diné in the north, the Alamo Navajo had largely converted to a fundamentalist strain of Protestantism. Speaking Navajo was one thing; teaching children about the old Navajo ways—particularly anything bordering on the spiritual outlook of the Diné—was a nonstarter.

The reasons for this conversion are rooted in the history of the Alamo band. Small in numbers and geographically isolated, from the very beginning the Alamo possessed only a truncated ceremonial system, making them especially vulnerable to missionaries. The first contact came in the form of Catholic priests, who by the nineteenth century periodically ventured into the region to conduct Mass and perform baptisms. Crucially, the mandatory church services at boarding schools reinforced whatever earlier teachings children had experienced. A particularly important development came in the 1930s when Baptist missionaries built a church at Alamo. All these factors helped lay the groundwork for the explosive wave of evangelical Pentecostalism that swept across the reservation in the 1960s, a swelling of religious enthusiasm marked by dramatic conversions, often accompanied by graphic testimonies of "healings" from all manner of maladies, including the curse of alcoholism.[22] To be sure, the shift in religious outlook across the reservation was not universal. But it created a powerful social and political force in the Alamo community. One of the foremost consequences was for the school—that is to say, the community's aversion to exposing children to traditional cultural teachings at variance with Christianity.

Explosion

However, the growing crisis was much less about disciplinary policy and curriculum than about the administration of the school. In late October, I wrote in my journal that there was a general "gloom and depression" settling in over the school. Earlier in the year, one of the Anglo teachers at the school had composed a song which he sang at a community meeting about the Alamo community and its school, how the

> People there have built a school
> To teach their children Golden Rules
> You know that they ain't got no fools
> Down in Alamo.

But by the end of the month, this optimism over the school's future had largely vanished. Teachers, staff members, and many in the community as well had come to believe that the school was on the brink of collapse.

Then suddenly there were two important developments. First, one of the Alamo employees most distraught over the state of affairs—let me call him Benny—announced to me his intention to secretly initiate a community petition calling for the superintendent's removal. The petition, he explained to me, would include a bill of particulars of what was wrong with the school's management. And then he asked me point-blank: Would I help with the technical writing? I agreed to help, but only after being convinced that the petition reflected broad community sentiments. The second development was a scheduled visit by Larry Holman, superintendent of education at Eastern Navajo Agency, whose responsibility it was to monitor Alamo's progress as a contract school.[23] What Holman heard on the appointed day was a list of damning complaints and grievances from teachers. By day's end, he was heard to mutter: "This is no school." He was right, of course. But as I wrote in my journal that evening, "All this may backfire. A poor evaluation might well result in the BIA assuming control." At stake was the very principle of community control—ironically, a principle that was being undermined by the school administration. Could the school be saved? Time was running out. It was only a matter of days before Benny presented me with a small stack of scribbled notes by various employees stating the reasons why Loehr should be fired. That evening I organized them into a formal petition.

If I had doubts about the course of action (including my own role in unseating the individual who had brought me on board for the year), they vanished by an incident the second week in November, just as the petition business was getting under way. It occurred one morning when both Dan Fox and I informed Loehr that the token system was terribly broken. This unwelcome announcement caused him to invite us to join him for a drive in one of the school's pickup trucks. We needed to talk about the issue, he said, away from the school. When the conversation resumed, Dan and I emphasized that the token system was a complete failure with the older students. But Loehr was having none of it. The problem, he insisted, was not with tokens but with the *value* students placed on them—that is to say, what they could redeem the accumulated tokens for. And then this unforgettable inspiration: wasn't this deer-hunting

season? The solution to the problem, he proposed, was to announce that once a student had acquired a stipulated number of tokens, he (or she?) could cash them in for a hunting rifle! Rifles? Was I hearing this correctly? Neither Fox nor I could bring ourselves to respond. We were truly speechless.

Meanwhile, I had pulled the petition together and Benny was collecting signatures among the employees and across the reservation. Miraculously, word of the insurrection never reached the school board or school administration. It was the morning after the conversation about hunting rifles that I placed the petition and attached signatures in the superintendent's mailbox. Since a board meeting was scheduled for ten o'clock, we knew Loehr would make an appearance. And so he did, stomping into the administration office, and then heading for his mailbox where the thick envelope lay. Watching from my desk, I saw the look of disbelief on his face as he began to read:

> In October 1979, the Alamo Navajo School opened its doors as a community-controlled school, but in the eighteen months the community has come to realize that we have lost control of our school. It is no more belonging to the Alamo people. It has become John Loehr's school, a non-Indian who chooses to live in Albuquerque, or as far away from our people as he can get. In the following way he has damaged the reputation of our school, held back the education of the children, and violated the principles of the Self-Determination Act.

Following this paragraph were fourteen reasons for removal, among them (1) the lack of a comprehensive curriculum; (2) the dearth of teaching materials; (3) the token system; (4) the failure to get input on important decisions; (5) the airplane; (6) the absence of a student discipline policy; and (6) misappropriation of funds. The document concluded:

> For these reasons and many others our patience is gone. The superintendent is not our father and we are not his Indian children. We thank him for helping us get our own school. And, we remind him, he has been well paid for this. Now it is time for him to go. This school belongs to the people of Alamo, not the superintendent. No single man has the right to dictate the lives and future of our people or to take advantage of our trusting nature. We are concerned about our young people's education. For these reasons we say these things. For these reasons we need more than a token superintendent. For these reasons we want a new superintendent who will respect our ways and who will work alongside of us in our efforts to educate our children. For these reasons it is time [to] take back our school. For these reasons it is time for John Loehr to fly away from us in his airplane.

The document ended with a request that the Alamo board of education immediately dismiss the superintendent, with the understanding that he should have no further association with the school.[24]

After other administrators arrived, the group huddled and searched for a strategy on how to respond. The meeting with the board lasted the entire day. Meanwhile, the school was awhirl in rumors. Did John get the petition"? "Did you hear that Abe was

cussing Walter Apachito [school board president] out for letting things get out of hand?"[25] "Did you hear that Abe is saying that some of the signatures are forgeries?" "Will the school board fire John?" And finally, "They're going to throw the whole question to the chapter meeting tomorrow."

The next day the chapter meeting did take place, but remarkably the school issue was ignored—at the protest of several in attendance. And so it was decided that the next day another chapter meeting would be held, one entirely devoted to resolving the school crisis. But it was clear that so far, the school board was not prepared to call for Loehr's dismissal. The same day, one of the Navajo teachers called Crownpoint and informed Larry Holman of the state of affairs. Holman's response: if things continued as they were, a BIA takeover was imminent. With self-determination in the balance, we all wondered what tomorrow would bring.

The next day, bus drivers made their usual early-morning runs across the reservation's web of rutted roads picking up children, only to learn on their arrival at the school that in protest, both Navajo and Anglo staff were headed down the hill to the chapter house for the big meeting or had remained home. Dan Fox was shutting down the school for lack of staff. The buses retraced their routes, delivering the children back to their homes.

"Our School Is a Big Chaos"

For nearly a century, chapter houses have served as the local political space where Navajo communities engaged in the deliberation on issues of wide concern, and where, whenever possible, the attempt was made to forge a consensus on the issue at hand. On this day, the two-hour meeting would be chaired by Jesse Apachito, chapter president. A decorated Vietnam veteran, Apachito knew something about conflict, and one could see on his face the pain of conducting this meeting when divisions were tearing apart both families and community. The meeting opened with comments by Walter Apachito, chapter president, who struck a note both apologetic and defiant:

> I only know about the things that are written on paper given to me. That's how it is for me these days. Right now, we will review what's going on and see what's wrong with the school policy. We'll review the case carefully. I want to say, these people you are accusing, to leave them alone, but I'll leave everything else in your hands. . . . So we will hand the school over to you. Let's see how many will learn from all of this. We wanted to have a school but look what a mess we made out of it. It's a very heavy burden for me. So it's now your own old worn-out possession. It's yours.

There to defend the board and administration was Abe Plummer. Plummer announced that John Loehr would not be attending because of a doctor's appointment, a revelation greeted with derisive laughter.

As a matter of procedure, it was decided that the petition would be read, followed by open discussion of the various charges. Following the reading, members of the community stood up to express their opinions on the various issues raised by the

petition. The following comments, organized by topic, reflect the meeting's angry tenor and near-chaos of periodic disruptive bouts of clapping, laughing, and shouting.

On John Loehr:

- I realize he is not an honest man. He is a very confused person. He is a liar and so much more. He needs to leave and we need to replace him with a better person, someone that's honest, someone we all know—for instance, one of our own people.

On the airplane:

- The airplane flies over us each day. You probably watch your clocks. John Loehr will be arriving again at 9:30. Where is John Loehr? I don't know. No one asks me. Who knows. As far as I know he could be at home. I don't know where he makes his job.
- A lot of our own people have had their wages cut. They are afraid to speak because they might further lose their jobs. They could be paid a full wage but it's lost to flying the airplane. A lot of money goes to the airplane, but it is meant for education, not for flying the airplane.

On tokens:

- Our school is a big chaos up there. That's how it is. And our children are very mischievous, too. These little things that are passed out. What are they called? Huh, tokens. The older children . . . throw theirs in the trash cans. I know, because I have seen it many times. The little ones, they take care of their tokens and they, of course, like them very much [laughter].
- He [Loehr] really likes tokens very much. The superintendent has his degree in psychology. Our children are normal, but he treats them as retards.

On the curriculum:

- We still don't have any. When they started the school, they had three years to implement a curriculum according to the contract. They still don't have a curriculum which means they are violating the contract. So the BIA can come and take over the school. Maybe we should go back under the BIA. He should be here helping us but he is never around.

On academic standing:

- There are no standards up the hill at the school. There aren't any—none. There is no school. None. No standards. Go to Magdalena. Ask the principal there. I have a daughter that's going to school there. I know. I got a letter. They said, send a transcript of what subject your daughter took. I took it to the office here in Alamo. But no one wanted to find it for me. There is none. I took it back blank. Empty! Blank!

On self-determination:

- By word of mouth from people I come to understand that our school board . . . they lost the reins. It was taken from them. That's what my people are saying. The wrong person is driving us. The wrong people has grip of the reins.
- The school board seems they got seated behind and John Loehr took the front seat. If you are riding a horse you can seat at least three people. John Loehr, however, has hold of the reins. That is no good like that. . . . Let's let our school board get the reins back.

- If you [school board] keep John, I know he will feed you his delicious words for however long he is here. That's how it is today. You were fed his delicious words. Now it no longer tastes good. Us dark-skinned people, we are called, it's up to us to run our own school, if we want to. That is the way we started. We were going to run the school, but it never happened that way. Instead, a white man took control and today is running the show. Our own words no longer became worth anything.

And so it went.

As already noted, since the entire chapter meeting was conducted in Navajo, I understood very little of the sentiments being voiced, except for abbreviated translations quickly relayed to me by those nearby. Indeed, the only words I caught were those in English spoken by one of the Navajo teachers, who while quoting former Principal Steve Hanson sometimes found no handy Navajo equivalent. Hanson, he said, predicted that "the whole program is going to hit the fan and all the shit is going to break loose." And this, of course, was exactly what was happening.

And it got no better. In the midst of the hail of criticism, Walter Apachito announced to the crowd: "Go ahead and say all those things. But we don't have to sit here and listen to it all." And then, turning to his fellow board members: "Let's go. They can remove all of us if they want. Let's go. I'm going home." After the board (accompanied by Abe Plummer) walked out, one man stood up and offered his own, rather original, solution to the problem: "If we tied their shoelaces together, it's all right with me." This prompted great laughter, after which someone suggested that the wiser course would be to coax the school board to return to the meeting. Raucous laughter again broke out when one woman shouted out the best strategy for accomplishing this: "We'll just give them tokens!"

Now it fell to Jesse Apachito, chapter president, to lead the community through the quagmire. Frustrated, he told the gathering: "A lot of this was your own fault, because I told you to get school board members from different areas and not your own relatives. Four of the school board members are my own brothers, even though I don't place favor on them because of my position." As for removing the superintendent, it would be a simple matter to do so, but for now, he suggested, the meeting should adjourn. The issue would be resolved soon enough. But this suggestion met with general protest. No, some action must be taken now. One man, noting that the school board had walked out on them, pleaded: "But our chapter president will never do that to us. He will never leave us. . . . Those men that left us, it's up to them what they do. How could they do that to the people, to jump off and we're alone rolling off on a wagon in all sorts of directions?" A woman cried out: "Jesse! We still haven't settled anything. We're still confused about everything. . . . We have children going to school there. They are innocent and it's a pity. It's something to cry about."

Finally, it was decided to vote on two resolutions: that John Loehr be removed as superintendent and that the school board, school staff, and community "do everything possible" to maintain the community-controlled status of the school. Both resolutions passed unanimously, 81–0. It was also agreed that the school should reopen the next morning. But the crisis wasn't over. Three days later the school board voted 4–1 to retain Loehr, if not as superintendent, then in some other administrative capacity.

This news sparked talk of another walkout, but then word came from Crownpoint that if the teachers remained out of school for four days, the BIA would be forced to take over the school. Then there was the news that the school board's lawyer was coming down from Santa Fe to talk to the staff, apparently to whip trouble-making employees into line.

That was the morning I saw the damaged landing strip, strewn with debris to prevent landing of Leohr's plane. The scene served as an omen for the morning's events. It began with school employees finding a memorandum in their mailboxes warning that their "unjustifiable absences" on the day of the walkout would not be permitted again. It ended with: "The Alamo Navajo School Board, Inc., cannot condone such action. It wishes here to clearly and unequivocally inform all employees that such actions in the future shall be dealt with in accordance with stated personnel policies and that no employee shall be exempt." Later the same day, the teacher of Caddo ancestry fired back with a memorandum addressed to board members, John Loehr, and Abe Plummer. Replicating the structure of the earlier memo, this one admonished the school board for its violation of the "policies and procedures expected of them," and closed with: "The actions of the Alamo Navajo School Board in this matter cannot be condoned. This memo serves clearly and unequivocally to inform the Alamo School Board that such actions in the future shall be dealt with in accordance with the stated policies for the responsibilities of contract-school boards, and that no board member (or member of the administration) shall be exempt."[26]

As might be expected, in the charged atmosphere the meeting with the lawyer and Walter Apachito did not go smoothly. Following a severe lecture from the attorney on teachers' contractual responsibilities, the staff responded with a litany of complaints against the upper administration. As one both fully cognizant of the BIA's dismal history and a supporter of the self-determination movement, I offered my own assessment that behind its veil of self-determination, this school actually was being run like a nineteenth-century Indian agency.

In one of the most painful moments in the meeting an older, very respected Navajo teacher lashed out at Walter Apachito for turning his back on his people when he walked out of the chapter meeting. The much-beleaguered board president, with tears in his eyes, responded with, "I'm trying to do the best I can. . . . I will do better." Then, another Navajo teacher stepped forward and offered his hand, saying, "Let us forget the past. Let us forget what has happened. Let us forget what is behind us. Let us begin a new day and work together as one—for the sake of our school."

Then, developments seemed to move in a more favorable direction that might save the school from a BIA takeover. Both Crownpoint and the educational division of the Navajo Nation at Window Rock entered into lengthy negotiations with the school board, which now appreciated the delicate state of affairs. By early December, Loehr and Abe Plummer were gone, and William Berlin, a less-visible member of the upper administration, was bumped up to superintendent. Meanwhile, the steady hand of Principal Dan Fox and a reinvigorated teaching staff stepped up to the challenge of building curriculum, which it was my responsibility to coordinate.

In the midst of this progress, at an early-December school community meeting the new superintendent Berlin dropped a bombshell: a proposal that the community retract its criticism of the school board, an idea apparently suggested by the school board, which was feeling much-abused from the recent events. What was needed was a new petition, their chief point being that signers of the earlier petition either didn't understand what they were signing or were coerced into signing. Berlin's announcement came as a great shock to those in attendance, prompting the same teacher who just a week before had offered his hand to Walter Apachito in reconciliation, to respond, "Here we go again." Sensibly, however, the school board reconsidered the idea of a second petition, so the school made steady progress toward sustainability. In February, an onsite evaluation from Crownpoint confirmed the school's continued existence. For now, at least, self-determination was alive and well.

Meanings

In recent years researchers and policy makers have devoted considerable attention to defining Indigenous educational sovereignty. The majority of Native American children now live in off-reservation settings and attend a variety of mixed-ethnic institutions.[27] Decolonization is especially challenging in large urban settings where Lakota, Navajo, and Cherokee may attend schools with racial and ethnic "others." In such environments self-determination will likely take pan-Indian forms and Native leaders will need to be especially creative in carving out programmatic space for Indigenous children. In comparison with these challenges, those confronting geographically compact communities like the Alamo Navajo might seem less daunting. But as this essay reveals, the attainment of educational sovereignty is not easily achieved under any circumstances.

Consider the Alamo Navajo story from two standpoints: power and purpose. Native historian K. Tsianina Lomawaima is certainly right when she argues that at base, the movement for Native American educational sovereignty is a "battle for power."[28] But the degree and location of power can be amorphous, difficult to assess or quantify. When the Alamo opened their school in 1979, it appeared at first that the battle for power had been won. To be sure, as a contract school its continued existence depended on BIA funding and monitoring—not insignificant restrictions on sovereignty—but in this case the power that the school board possessed was largely surrendered to an Anglo administrator who took the school in his own direction. As one speaker at the crucial chapter meeting pronounced: "The wrong people has grip of the reins."

And now we turn to the question, power for what purpose? The Alamo Navajo largely had wanted to establish their own school for two reasons: to end the long history of child removal, and to end what they believed was the mistreatment of their children in the Magdalena schools. Outside of language learning, cultural preservation seems not to have been a major concern. It should be noted that by year's end, some Navajo content was finding its way into the classroom. A federal bilingual education grant was written (and eventually funded); an elementary teacher instructed her class in the symbolism of the cradle board; a social studies teacher developed a lesson in

Navajo folklore; and children in another class were listening to and writing their original coyote stories. By 1990, graduating seniors' yearbook photos were accompanied with a brief statement of the student's clan lineage. For instance, we read of one student, "His clan is Big Bucket and born to Apache," and of another, "Her clan is Apache (Chishi) and born to Bitter Water (Todichini)."[29]

Nonetheless, it remained problematic that children should be exposed to traditional teachings at variance with fundamentalist Christian beliefs. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Alamo children reading this Rough Rock text describing the journey of the Diné through successive underworlds before their emergence into this, the Glittering World:

> At the beginning there was a place called the Black World, where only spirit people and Holy People lived. It had four corners, and over these four corners appeared four cloud columns which were white, blue, yellow, and black. The east column was called Folding Dawn; the south column was Folding Sky Blue; the west one was Folding Twilight, and the north one was Folding Darkness. Coyote visited these cloud columns and changed his color to match theirs; so he is called Child of Dawn, of the Sky Blue, of the Twilight and of the Darkness.[30]

Given the divergence between the school at Rough Rock and Alamo, one is left with the conclusion that there is no necessary connection between Indigenous peoples' attainment of educational sovereignty, on the one hand, and any particular model of cultural infusion, on the other. Stated differently, the degree of traditional cultural infusion in a given school will necessarily depend on what that community's educational leaders are politically able to sustain, which in turn will be determined by the community's unique historical experience and how that experience has shaped its members' collective and individual longings.

Still, the Alamo Navajo Community School had survived. A signal moment occurred in September 1986, when eight hundred persons crowded into the school's new gymnasium to hear Peterson Zah, president of the Navajo Nation, dedicate a long-anticipated modern school building to replace the original mobile units. Three years later, I attended the school's ten-year anniversary celebration, the festivities marked by the crowning of grade-level princesses, a parade, exhibitions of students' classroom work, contests in cross-country running, gunny sack races, and finally, coffee boiling (a strictly female competition). Meanwhile, under a large tent, several community leaders spoke of the past and future. One speaker observed: "Ten years is a long time. If you planted a cottonwood tree by your house in 1979 it would just be gettin' big enough to shade the house now." In 1979, he continued, the Alamo people had "dreams for a better future for our children. . . . We wanted to stop sending our children away for other people to educate them." And now, just as the ten-year-old cottonwood was giving protective shade for the house, the community school was giving protection to the children.[31] The boarding school years and the Magdalena dormitory years were over.

As I made my last drive from Alamo in the spring of 1982, past the dirt landing strip, past the reservation line, on through Corkscrew Canyon, then across the several miles of livestock grazing land, and finally, into Magdalena, where the now-abandoned

dormitories stood as ghostly reminders of an earlier day in Indian education, I reflected on the momentous events of the past year. I mostly thought of the immense courage of those Navajos who had risked so much to save their school. I had played a small part in the drama, but it was their doing, one more victory for Indigenous peoples' determination to regain control over their children's education.

Notes

1. For the federal context, see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 1139–49, 1157–62; Margaret Szasz, *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination, 1928–1973* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 149–55, ch. 13; K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty; *To Remain an Indian: Lessons in a Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), ch. 6; and Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), ch. 10.

2. The literature on Indian boarding schools has exploded in recent years, including a growing number of cultural and institutional studies not cited here. For broad overviews of the subject, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); David Wallace Adams, "Fundamental Considerations: The Deep Meaning of Native American Schooling, 1880–1900," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (1988): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.1.h57152110517nm65; Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mothers to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); and Andrew Woolford, *The Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and the Redress in Canada and the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

3. David Wallace Adams, "Self-Determination and Indian Education: A Case Study," *Journal of American Indian Education* 13 (January 1974): 21–27, 26. The most thorough examination of the Rough Rock school remains Teresa L. McCarty, *A Place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination and Indigenous Schooling* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

4. For context, see Lomawaima and McCarty, *To Remain an Indian*, ch. 6; Teresa L. McCarty and Tiffany S. Lee, "Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy and Indigenous Education Sovereignty," *Harvard Educational Review* 84 (Spring 2014), 101–36, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.q83746nl5pj34216; *Voices of Resistance and Renewal*: *Indigenous Leadership In Education*, ed. Dorothy Aguilera Black-Bear and John W. Tippeconnic (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); David Carlson, *Imagining Sovereignty: Self-Determination in American Law and Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); *Standing Together: American Indian Education as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, ed. Beverly J. Klug (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2012); Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3, 93–97, https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X12441244. For issues surrounding educational decolonization among the Navajo see *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*, ed. Lloyd L. Lee and Gregory Cajete (Tucson: University of Arizona

Press, 2014); Farina King, *Earth Memory Compass: Díne Landscapes and Education in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018).

5. Those passages and quotations not otherwise documented are based on or taken from my journal.

6. Carol K. Lujan, "American Indians and Imposed Law: The Impact of Social Integration on Legal Perceptions among Two Southwestern Tribes," PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 1986, 91.

7. For the background on the Alamo band, see David Wallace Adams, *Three Roads to Magdalena: Coming of Age in a Southwest Borderland, 1890–1990* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 11–17, 34–36, 57–61; William Quinn, "Comprehensive Ethnohistorical Report on the Cañoncito and Alamo Navajo Bands," unpublished report (Washington, DC: Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1984); and Florence Hawley Ellis, *Navajo Indians*, vol. 1 (New York: Garland, 1974), 483–87.

8. Volumes have been written on the central elements of Navajo culture. For an introduction, see Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorthea Leighton, *The Navajo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946); James F. Downs, *The Navajo* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972); Gary Witherspoon, "Navajo Social Organization," *The Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 10, *The Southwest*, ed. Alfonso Ortiz (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1983), 524–35; Leland C. Wyman, "Navajo Ceremonial System," ibid., 536–57; John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984); and Jerrold E. Levy, *In the Beginning: The Navajo Genesis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

9. For institutional histories of Santa Fe and Albuquerque schools, see Sally Hyer, *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santa Fe Indian School* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1990); and John R. Gram, *Education at the Edge of Empire: Negotiating Pueblo Identity in New Mexico's Indian Boarding Schools* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015). For the New Mexico context, readers should also consult Adrea Lawrence, *Lessons from an Indian Day School: Negotiating Colonization in Northern New Mexico, 1902–1907* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

10. Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 328–33; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, chs. 3–7; Reyhner and Eder, *American Indian Education*, ch. 8; Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), ch. 8.

11. This recollection is part of an oral history project conducted in the region during the 1980s.

12. *Navajo Yearbook: A Decade of Progress, 1951–1961*, vol. 8, ed. Robert W. Young (Window Rock, AZ: Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1961), 42. By 1977 there were eight border-town programs across Arizona and New Mexico. Magdalena, with an enrollment of 277, was the largest. See Robert A. Roessel Jr., *Navajo Education, 1948–1970: Its Progress and Its Problems* (Rough Rock, AZ: Navajo Curriculum Center, Rough Rock Demonstration School, 1979), ch. 4. For a fine anthropological study of Navajo children attending both reservation and border-town high schools, see Donna Deyhle, "Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism: Cultural Integrity and Resistance," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 403–44, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.65.3.156624q12053470n.

13. Adams, *Three Roads to Magdalena*, 248–56.

14. For and excellent case study see Kathryn Manuelito, "The Role of Education in American Indian Self-Determination: Lessons from the Ramah Navajo Community School," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2005), 73–87, https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2005.36.1.073.

15. Following his time at Alamo, John Loehr worked in the Las Vegas Public Schools, the Westinghouse Learning Corporation, and as a business consultant. An alumnus of New Mexico Highlands University, Loehr also served on the Board of Regents at this institution and as a member of the New Mexico Commission on Higher Education. See http://www.governor.state.nm.us/press/2005/april/042705-1, and Rob Niklewski, "Meet John Loehr, Arch-Critic of New Mexico Higher Ed," https://www.watchdog.org/new-mexico.

16. Before coming to Alamo, Abe Plummer had served as the founding director of Ramah Navajo High School, an early model of educational self-determination. Following his work at Alamo, Plummer had long career in Navajo affairs, including chief of social services of the Navajo Nation. See Office of Indian Education Programs, "Ramah Navajo High School Evaluation, 1971–1972" (Albuquerque, 1975); R. Marie Sanchez and Frank D. McGuirk, *The Journey of Native American People with Serious Mental Illness: Building Hope* (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1994), 43–47, 116. William "Bill" Berlin, holder of a PhD in education from Indiana State University, developed educational programs for Cheyenne and Arapaho Nations before coming to Alamo; see https://il.wp.com/winslowweskimos.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12.

17. Jennifer J. Pruett, "A History of the Alamo Navajo Community Schools," paper prepared for the Alamo Navajo School Board, December, 1979, 6–19; ACSA. Dickson is quoted in Pam Livingston, "Alamo Fighting for Educational Autonomy," *Prime Times*, August 6–20, 2.

18. Alamo Navajo chapter meeting, November 12, 1981, author's collection. All references to this eventful chapter meeting, which will be cited frequently in the discussion below, come from the translation of a recording one of the school employees made of the meeting and subsequently gave to the author.

19. Berlin's remarks were recorded in my journal later that day.

20. Quotation is from a memorandum distributed at the fall work conference, 1981, Alamo Community School Archives, author's collection; see also Memorandum, February 4, 1980, ACSA; Instructional Program of the Alamo High School, 1981, Alamo Community School Archives.

21. Memorandum from P. Stephen Hanson to all instructional staff, September 16, 1981, ACSA; and Memorandum from David Adams to John Loehr, Lynn Johnson, and Stephen Hanson, October 13, 1981, ACSA.

22. See Adams, *Three Roads to Magdalena*, 170–74, 237–38, 312–16.

23. In 1981 Larry Holman was a ten-year employee of the BIA. Beginning his career as an elementary teacher in Wingate, Arizona, he had moved up to superintendent of education for the Eastern Navajo Agency. Holman retired in 2001. See *Congressional Record*, July 11, 2001, 1306.

24. "Petition for Dismissal of John Loehr as Superintendent of Alamo School," author's collection. Also see "Alamo Community Wants Control of Their School," *Magdalena Mountain Mail*, November 28, 1981, 1.

25. Alongside John Loehr, Walter Apachito played an important role in establishing the school. Although much criticized for the direction the administration of the school had taken, he would remain a much-revered figure on the reservation.

26. Memorandum, Alamo Navajo School Board to All ANSB employees, November 17, 1981; and Anonymous to ANSB members John Loehr and Abe Plummer, November 18, 1981.

27. See McCarty and Lee, "Critical Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy"; John J. Laukaitis, *Community Self-Determination: American Indian Education in Chicago, 1952–2006* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015); Louellyn White, *Free to Be Mohawk: Indigenous Education at the Akwesasne Freedom School* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

28. K. Tsianina Lomawaima, "Tribal Sovereigns: Reframing Research in American Indian Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 1 (2000): 2, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.70.1.b133t0976714n73r.

29. Alamo Cougers, *1990 Yearbook*, 23.

30. *Navajo History*, ed. Ethelou Yazzie (Rough Rock, AZ: Navajo Curriculum Center Press, 1971), 9.

31. *Defensor Chieftain*, September 1, 1986, 3; *Defensor Chieftain*, October 19, 1989, 1, AJ.