

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Native Americans in Cold War Public Diplomacy: Indian Politics, American History, and the US Information Agency

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2q53z47j>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 36(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Denson, Andrew

Publication Date

2012-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

ARTICLES



Native Americans in Cold War Public Diplomacy: Indian Politics, American History, and the US Information Agency

Andrew Denson

“Well, let’s begin by making an admission—that very few Americans would defend the treatment the Indians have received in the past.” So began a September 1963 episode of *Questions and Answers*, a weekly program on the Voice of America (VOA) radio network. A listener from South Korea had written to VOA to ask whether American Indians lived as equal citizens in the United States. With this admission, the presenter acknowledged that Indians had not always possessed that status. Early settlers had driven them from their land, he explained, and the United States had frequently broken treaties. Americans had warred upon the tribes for many years, until even the bravest resistance collapsed. Thankfully, the story did not end there. “From the beginning,” the presenter continued, “there had been some Americans who protested the treatment of the Indians. As the years went by, more and more Americans began to feel this way—in other words, the American conscience became awakened. As a result, the people of the United States, through their federal government . . . began making amends.” Today, he noted, Indian people enjoyed equality before the law, protection in the use of their property, and a host of federal programs to help them become full participants in American life. The history of the United States might not be spotless, the program suggested,

ANDREW DENSON teaches history at Western Carolina University and is the author of *Demanding the Cherokee Nation: Indian Autonomy and American Culture, 1830–1900*. He is currently writing a book about the public memory of Indian removal in the modern South.

but Americans were people who recognized their errors and corrected them through the operation of their democratic system.¹

This radio program provides a typical example of the depiction of Native Americans by the US Information Agency (USIA) during the Cold War. The USIA was the American government's overseas public diplomacy service, charged with explaining American politics and life to a worldwide audience. During the 1950s and 1960s, USIA broadcasts and publications frequently discussed the history and contemporary politics of race in America. That theme reflected the emergence of the African American civil rights movement, which received a great deal of international attention and thus required a USIA response. The agency, however, never limited discussion of racial politics to the black struggle in the South. Native American material also appeared regularly in USIA productions, and like the radio feature just described, much of this work focused on acknowledging past oppression while recounting a modern history of justice and government-led improvement. In dozens of broadcasts and publications, the agency reviewed the crimes of the past—the broken treaties, relentless warfare, and steady theft of tribal land. Yet it always reassured its audience that the situation had changed by the mid-twentieth century. Modern Americans had repented their forebears' misdeeds, and a responsive federal government had committed itself to better treatment in the future. The USIA framed Indian affairs as a moral political drama, in which American democracy overcame the nation's history of greed and racial hatred.

The agency began broadcasting this narrative during an important period of debate and activism in Native American politics. Its appearance coincided with tribal leaders' fight against the termination policy and the emergence of a broad movement to protect and strengthen tribal sovereignty. Placed in this context, the USIA portrayal of Native Americans suggests the possibilities and the limitations of the Cold War as a framework for Indian politics. The agency's moral drama allowed for and could even celebrate Native American resistance to assimilation-minded federal policies, but it offered little room for Indian nationhood and discussions of tribal sovereignty. During an era when the pursuit of self-determination transformed Indian politics, the USIA ignored that goal with apparent ease. Indian people and their cultures found a place in the agency's vision of Cold War America, but Indian nations generally did not.

In recent years, historians have developed a small but important literature on civil rights activism and the Cold War. Scholars like Thomas Borstelmann and Mary L. Dudziak have examined the black freedom struggle and civil rights politics in a Cold War context, adding an international dimension to our understanding of these vital subjects. Students of Native American history have lately begun to follow suit. Recent books by Daniel Cobb and Paul Rosier,

for example, chart significant connections between the Cold War and Native American activism. In particular, Cobb and Rosier document a pervasive internationalism among Indian activists, who drew inspiration and arguments from Cold War politics and the decolonization movements of the developing world. This article contributes to that literature by treating American overseas propaganda as an additional point at which Indian politics and the Cold War intersected. In doing so, it offers a cautionary note about the limits of activist internationalism. USIA personnel apparently agreed with the activists that the Cold War granted new meaning to Indian affairs. The agency's disregard for tribal sovereignty, however, suggests that federal officials, rather than activists, retained much of the power to define that meaning and to determine the roles that Indians would play in America's great international struggle.²

SELLING AMERICA

The USIA emerged from the American propaganda campaigns of World War II. The Office of War Information (OWI), best remembered today for its work on the home front, maintained an overseas operation devoted to propaganda and psychological warfare. The VOA, for example, developed as part of the OWI. Although the OWI quickly shut down at the end of the war, the overseas network survived in diminished form under the authority of the State Department. The Truman administration then revived this service during the late 1940s, as the Cold War began and the United States adopted the role of "leader of the free world." Truman called for a global Campaign of Truth against the Soviet Union, and Congress steadily increased the service's appropriation. In 1953, the Eisenhower administration reorganized the service, separating it from the State Department and creating an independent USIA.³

Selling American policy around the world proved a monumental task, and the agency grew rapidly during its early years. By the mid-1960s, it employed close to twelve thousand workers, with 3,200 stationed in the United States and the remainder operating abroad. From their headquarters in Washington, D.C., the directors of USIA consulted with the White House and State Department on current foreign policy and determined the general premises that would shape USIA media content. Six area offices then adapted these broad directives to the conditions and perceived needs of particular global regions.⁴ Each area office, in turn, supervised scores of individual overseas posts, where field operatives distributed USIA materials, coordinated cultural events, and worked with local media to present the agency's preferred understanding of the news. Fieldworkers also gathered information about their host countries, reporting back to Washington regarding local political developments

and the success or failure of the agency campaigns. Ideally, this far-flung operation allowed the USIA to tailor its messages to many different nations and cultures, while maintaining agency-wide themes tied to the current state of American foreign policy.⁵

The job of producing the actual information that circulated through this system fell to the agency “media services” branch, which employed a variety of methods for addressing its diverse audiences. Radio proved one of the more powerful tools. By the mid-1960s, VOA was broadcasting close to eight hundred hours of programming each week in more than thirty languages. VOA operated one of the world’s largest long-range transmitters (built in Greenville, NC, during the early 1960s), along with several dozen smaller transmitters spread across the United States and in countries overseas. The combined power of this network allowed the VOA signal to reach almost any spot on the globe. In addition to radio, the USIA worked extensively through magazines and newspapers. Its signature publication was *Amerika*, a Russian-language periodical modeled on *Life* that the USIA distributed in the Soviet Union. In India, the agency published *American Reporter*, and in the Middle East it circulated the Arabic-language *USA News and Review*. For East and Southeast Asia, it produced the magazine *Free World*, with editions in several different languages. The agency also created smaller-form publications, such as pamphlets, transcriptions of certain VOA programs, and some fascinating anticommunist comic books. It operated a news service called the “Wireless File,” which sent short reports and American policy statements by teletype to the agency’s overseas stations. Field officers translated these documents into local languages and then distributed them to media outlets. The USIA sent American films to its posts around the world and produced documentaries of its own, and in later years it created television programs. Finally, the agency maintained a system of overseas public libraries, which it stocked with American books and periodicals, along with its own publications. Taken together, these services amounted to one of the largest and farthest-reaching communications networks of the time.⁶

During the early 1950s, the media content produced by the agency followed an approach that one officer called “consciously propagandistic.” Embracing its role as a voice of the US government, the USIA mounted an uncompromising defense of American foreign policy, while condemning what it termed Soviet and Chinese imperialism. Concerned with directly refuting communist doctrine, these early messages often employed shrill and sharply combative language. By the end of the decade, however, the agency had shifted its methods. Directors worried that the “hard sell” approach alienated audiences, and in response, the media services adopted a more neutral tone, offering their broadcasts and publications as straightforward information rather than

propaganda. VOA personnel, for instance, worked to make the radio network resemble a private-sector news service. During this same period, USIA media broadened their subject matter to include much more than international politics. Aware that domestic developments could powerfully influence the nation's standing abroad, the agency began to pay closer attention to matters at home in the United States. USIA media covered more domestic political news, while also working to illuminate American society, culture, and history. Although these efforts always remained tied to the goal of containing communism, the agency's altered approach meant that almost any American topic could find its way into a VOA script or agency magazine. If a story illustrated the benefits of democracy or the dynamism of American life, or if it could be fashioned to serve those purposes, it had a place in public diplomacy.⁷

THE STRUGGLE OVER TERMINATION

The development of the USIA coincided with a significant moment in the history of Native American politics. On the same day that the agency's separation from the State Department took effect, Congress approved House Concurrent Resolution 108 (HCR 108), by which it formally endorsed the termination policy.⁸ Termination was the campaign to end the separate status of Indian tribes and, in the process, disentangle the federal government from Indian affairs. Terminating a tribe involved removing the trust status of reservation lands, dissolving the tribal government, and withdrawing special federal services from the Indian community.⁹ As a preliminary measure, Congress had established the Indian Claims Commission (ICC), which sought to resolve grievances arising out of treaties and other tribal relations with the federal government. The ICC, it was hoped, would clear the way for termination by addressing the tribes' outstanding complaints, while claims settlements would provide funds that would help Indian communities cope with the withdrawal of federal services.¹⁰ As the federal government retreated, reservations would become subject to state regulation, a principle enshrined in Public Law 280 (PL 280), which Congress passed a few weeks after HCR 108. PL 280 allowed several states to extend civil and criminal jurisdiction over tribal lands within their borders, while authorizing those states to provide government services to Indian communities. During this same period, under the policy known as relocation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) encouraged Native Americans to migrate to cities, where presumably they would find greater economic opportunities than on rural reservations.¹¹ Together, these initiatives amounted to a comprehensive effort to end the special relationship between Indian nations and the United States.

For their supporters, these policies promised to bestow full equality upon Indian people by freeing them from a debilitating federal guardianship. Living as “wards” of the United States, termination advocates reasoned, had kept Native Americans poor and powerless. Removing that status would allow them to join American society’s prosperous mainstream. Many Indian people, however, viewed the postwar policies as a renewed push for total assimilation and an attempt to destroy what remained of tribal landholdings. Relocation, they worried, would erode tribal communities, while termination would leave reservation lands subject to state and local taxation, which might compel the sale of tribal property. In seeking to eliminate tribal dependency, it appeared, the federal government had decided to eliminate the tribes. Those fears, along with the impoverishment suffered by communities that experienced termination, sparked a political response among Native Americans that proved to be as significant as the policies. Individual tribes resisted government efforts to terminate them, while the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) mounted a campaign to convince federal lawmakers to repudiate HCR 108. NCAI denounced termination as an abandonment of the US treaty obligations and an expression of colonialism, and it detailed the economic hardship that followed the policy’s implementation. Some activists, meanwhile, began to insist that any alternative to termination should start with a stronger commitment to tribal self-government.¹²

The Cold War colored both sides of this argument. For its supporters, termination promised to grant Indians the full benefits of individual freedom and capitalist prosperity, the very values that cold warriors associated with the United States in its international struggle. The policy, moreover, would end a form of collective landowning on reservations that, to some, looked like homegrown communism. Native activists, for their part, argued that imposing this destructive policy would undermine America’s international reputation, making its Cold War efforts that much more difficult. They defined the termination battle as a test of political morality that would have consequences far beyond Indian country. As historian Cobb writes, the NCAI and other termination opponents adopted the language of foreign relations in explaining their position. They likened Indian tribes to the world’s developing countries that received American economic aid and called upon the federal government to grant similar assistance to tribal communities. The government’s approach, they suggested, should be to help tribes become economically self-sufficient while preserving the protective trust status of reservation lands and recognizing tribes’ distinct political status as Indian nations.¹³

Toward the end of the 1950s, in response to Indian opposition, Congress and the BIA backed away from termination, promising not to force the policy on tribes that did not want it. The future, however, remained unclear. Activists

and tribal leaders increasingly advocated self-determination and economic development within a continuing federal trust relationship. At the same time, many in the government still considered Indian assimilation to be the principal goal of federal policy. If termination had proved too drastic, then other measures could be devised.¹⁴ During this period of uncertainty, the USIA began to pay greater attention to domestic matters, including Indian affairs. As the 1960s began, agency media covered a variety of Native American topics, shaping them to perform the work of public diplomacy. In depicting the debate over the future of Indian nations, however, the agency would find some positions better suited for Cold War propaganda than others.

WRITING INDIANS INTO THE COLD WAR SCRIPT

A 1961 publication provides a useful introduction to the agency's methods. *The American Indian: Questions and Answers* was a short, illustrated booklet that, as the title implied, responded to common queries about Native peoples in the United States. Some of the questions, it noted, had been selected from those submitted by visitors to the 1959 American Exposition in Moscow. Many people, it began, still thought of American Indians as "painted warriors attacking wagon trains," but such images belonged to the past. "Indians now form an integral part of American life," it explained, "and have long accepted the duties and responsibilities of citizenship." Did they own much land? Yes, reservations contained more than twenty million hectares (about 50 million acres), although admittedly many communities lay in areas of the West where the arid climate limited agriculture. Had they been adequately paid for the territory they once owned? In the past, the pamphlet noted, Indians had often fallen victim to unfair land deals. Today, however, "the government has made every effort to ensure just compensation" through initiatives like the ICC. Were Indians required to live on reservations? No, Native Americans, as full and equal citizens, were free to reside anywhere they pleased. Did the old dances and customs survive? Yes, Indian peoples worked to preserve their cultures, and activities like ceremonial dance and traditional artwork remained important in many communities. Could Indians vote in American elections? Yes. Did they live in wigwams? No, although one could still find the occasional hogan in Navajo country.¹⁵

In much of the pamphlet, the goal of the USIA seems to have been to dispel the idea that modern Indians were downtrodden victims. In the past, it acknowledged, Native Americans had suffered great injuries, but the mid-twentieth century offered a different picture: "Each year has seen a steady improvement in Indian life and marked new progress in the adjustment from

ancient ways to modern living.” Indian communities were growing, thanks to better education and health care and “new economic opportunities opened through commercial and industrial development.” The pamphlet credited much of this progress to improved federal policies. “In recent years,” it explained, “the government has taken a positive attitude toward Indian affairs,” investing millions of dollars annually in tribal services. Guided by this new outlook, Americans had put their history of Indian wars and broken treaties behind them.¹⁶

The pamphlet registered the fact of contemporary political change but addressed few of the specific terms of the ongoing policy debate. It never mentioned termination and praised the government-administered tribal services that termination had promised to eliminate. It lauded the ICC without noting the commission’s role in the termination campaign. In ignoring the policy, however, it also ignored the Native American response to termination and the alternatives advocated by tribal leaders and Indian activists. It included no discussion of tribal sovereignty and made only one brief reference to tribal governments. When it celebrated the persistence of Indian cultures, it suggested that the United States no longer demanded complete assimilation. Its language of Indian “adjustment” to “modern living,” however, sounded like assimilation by another name.¹⁷ Employing broad generalities, the pamphlet took a contentious and, as yet, unresolved political argument and transformed it into a story of American consensus.

As noted earlier, the objective of the USIA in expanding its coverage of domestic affairs was to illustrate the benefits of democracy and the vitality of American life. *The American Indian: Questions and Answers* exemplified several of the most common ways in which agency media applied Indian topics to this purpose. First, the agency frequently drew upon Native cultures to demonstrate American diversity, and this theme suggests that some forms of Indian cultural persistence proved useful in a Cold War context. Many of the VOA Indian-themed broadcasts were brief features providing colorful snapshots of American life. They profiled exhibits of Indian art and performances of Native American music and dance, or they described elements of traditional cultures, such as medicine ways.¹⁸ In October 1961, for instance, the series *American Scene* offered a program titled “Meet the Pueblo Indian.” Pueblo peoples, it explained, possessed some of the oldest cultures on the continent. They had lived in the American Southwest for more than a thousand years, farming corn in their dry environment and building their distinctive adobe houses. Their cultures were rich in ceremony and music, and the program illustrated this point with taped inserts of Pueblo songs. “Yes, the Pueblo Indians have many songs and dances,” the presenter intoned, “one for every activity in their lives.” The show also mentioned traditional medicine, antelope and fox hunting,

and the fact that “probably no other Indian nation had better story-tellers than the Pueblo Indians.”¹⁹ Programs like this one celebrated the continued strength of tribal cultures, but they did so outside of any particular historical or contemporary context. They offered topics like Pueblo music simply as signs of the richness and diversity of the broader American culture. Tribal traditions provided evidence that, in the words of *Amerika* magazine, “the Indian heritage is a bright thread in the fabric of American life.”²⁰

In addition, USIA media frequently identified individual Native Americans who succeeded in business, sports, the arts, or public affairs. *The American Indian: Questions and Answers* mentioned the dancer Maria Tallchief (Osage), scholar Arthur C. Parker (Seneca), and athlete Jim Thorpe (Sauk-Fox), while noting that Will Rogers “always took pride in his Cherokee Indian ancestry.” The pamphlet also explained that Indians had held some of the highest political offices in the land, listing Vice President Charles Curtis (Osage and Kaw), Congressman William Stigler (Choctaw), and Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice N. B. Johnson (Cherokee).²¹ In a 1962 feature, *Amerika* offered Soviet readers a similar collection of Indian success stories. Johnson and Tallchief again appeared, along with physician and public health official Lucille Marsh (Tuscarora) and William Wayne Keeler, a Philips Petroleum executive and principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.²² These lists served to illustrate the openness of American society, while suggesting that Native Americans faced little discrimination. The agency assured its audience that, like any other citizens, Indian people were free to pursue their particular American dreams.

Meanwhile, the USIA portrayed modern Indian affairs as a case study in progressive American policy making. Take, for example, a VOA series titled *Birthright*, broadcast throughout several months during the spring of 1962. The program explained the benefits bestowed upon Americans by the modern liberal state and, in doing so, tried to show that a capitalist nation could still provide aid and protection to disadvantaged citizens. As Abraham Ribicoff, John F. Kennedy’s Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, affirmed in the first episode, “The United States is a nation of many paradoxes. Not the least of these is the fact that we, the foremost capitalist nation on earth, spend seventy-nine billion dollars a year” on programs for needy Americans. “We are not a welfare state,” he continued, “nor is ours a socialist system. But we have learned how to incorporate the most desirable aspects of welfare and social security into our dynamic system of free enterprise.”²³ Throughout twelve episodes, the series cataloged the constituencies that benefited from this arrangement. The Social Security Administration protected the aged and unemployed, the Food and Drug Administration safeguarded consumers, federal education grants ensured that young people attended decent schools, and the BIA helped Native Americans.²⁴

Programs like *Birthright* located Indian people in America's Cold War struggle by defining Indian affairs as just the sort of issue a democratic system was suited to address. They depicted Indian tribes' historic dispossession and impoverishment as unfortunate by-products of the nation's rise to greatness and then explained that Americans had constructed their modern government to solve precisely those problems. Rapid westward expansion had been necessary for America's development; however, these programs admitted that it had come at a price. Heedless farmers and extractive industries had abused the land and its resources, while the United States, in its eagerness to promote expansion, had disregarded the rights of indigenous peoples. "The great Indian nations had been almost destroyed beneath the Westward rush," one episode explained, "their legacy and their claim to their land shamefully ignored."²⁵ Yet American leaders had recognized this state of affairs, and during the twentieth century, they employed the growing power of the central government to repair some of the damage. In the case of Indians, the leaders charged the BIA with protecting remaining tribal property and aiding Native communities, "so that they might enjoy their land, participate in American life, and have equal citizenship privileges."²⁶ These programs defined Indian affairs as a prime example of the enlightened management possible under America's capitalist but caring system.

These broadcasts and periodicals reflected the federal government's retreat from termination. By the early 1960s, they seldom spoke explicitly of assimilation or the dismantling of special government services for tribes. As a program called *Dynamics of Change* explained, Native Americans "want a better life, but they want it realized on the reservations."²⁷ That acknowledgment represented a significant departure from the outlook of the termination and relocation campaigns, in which a "better life" almost always required the abandonment of tribal communities. At the same time, the USIA emphasis on exhibiting the American government's prudent oversight meant that agency media would have little use for discussions of nationhood or tribal sovereignty. The agency depicted the government's special services to tribes as products of modern American liberalism, rather than as expressions of the trust relationship or the rights of indigenous peoples. Many programs, meanwhile, failed even to mention tribal governments, and those that did depicted them as little more than local councils, the equivalent of municipal administrations in small American towns. One radio show, in praising the successful tourism projects of the Eastern Band of Cherokees, referred to the tribal council's role in economic planning, but then immediately assured listeners that the Cherokees' elected leaders did not truly manage reservation affairs. "That is the job of the superintendent of the reservation [the federal agent]."²⁸ USIA media also ignored Indian political activism during this period. Take the 1961 American Indian

Chicago Conference, for example, a landmark event in modern American Indian political revival. Hosted by the University of Chicago and endorsed by the NCAI, this meeting brought together tribal leaders from across the country to discuss federal policy and make recommendations to the new Kennedy administration. Delegates drafted a “Declaration of Indian Purpose,” which called for an end to the termination campaign and increased aid to tribes in areas like education and health care. Although the conference garnered national media attention, it seems to have escaped the notice of the USIA. VOA, for instance, neglected to cover the event in its regular news programs.²⁹ For the agency, the Cold War required Indians to play the role of beneficiaries of a wise liberal state. That being the case, there was little reason to complicate matters with discussions of self-government or Native American activism.

PROGRESSIVE HISTORIES

A particular style of history helped the agency establish its preferred Native American image. As the examples already cited demonstrate, the agency drew contrasts between abusive American actions in the past and the generous federal policies of the present. Invariably, it located the shameful part of American history during the nineteenth century, the era of American expansion and the wars on the Great Plains. It generally excluded discussion of the more recent past, instead jumping from the end of Western warfare directly to modern times. The best example of this method came in the VOA series *The American Indian: Past and Present*, aired during the spring and summer of 1965. At thirteen episodes, the program offered one of the most detailed discussions of Indian topics ever attempted by the agency. VOA devoted the first half of the series to Indian history—or, more accurately, the nineteenth-century history of Indian resistance and defeat. Episodes described the removal policy and the forced migration of the Five Civilized Tribes, the wars on the Great Plains, and the Ghost Dance of the 1880s and 1890s. Much of this material came from Ralph Andrist’s *The Long Death* (1964), a best-selling history of the Plains Wars. Andrist adopted a style later associated with Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971). He portrayed nineteenth-century Indians as heroic fighters overwhelmed by American expansion and cheated by an unscrupulous American government. They were admirable but doomed patriots of a lost cause. When defeat inevitably arrived, they became the “vanishing American,” confined to reservations and bereft of hope. “There was not much to do,” Andrist wrote, “but sit in the sun, and perhaps let a handful of dust trickle through his fingers, and think of how little it was to have left.”³⁰

From the bleak 1890s, the VOA series skipped ahead to describe a present-day Indian country transformed by generous federal policies and forward-looking tribes. Far from the broken people of the late nineteenth century, Native Americans were flourishing and making rapid progress in their “adjustment” to the modern world during the 1960s. Like most USIA productions, the series lingered over the services provided by the federal government, emphasizing education and what Commissioner of Indian Affairs Philleo Nash called “the most complete program of medical care, to my knowledge, that any country in the world affords any part of its population.”³¹ As usual, it avoided questions of tribal sovereignty and self-government. It managed to shun these topics even when it employed commentary by significant Native American activists. The series, for instance, included frequent remarks by scholar and educator Robert K. Thomas (Cherokee), who, during this period, helped to radicalize a generation of young Indians through his teaching at the Workshop on American Indian Affairs, a Colorado-based summer program for Native American college students. In the workshop, Thomas encouraged Indian students to think of their tribal communities as colonized peoples, and he taught that Indians must gain the authority to develop solutions to the problems those communities experienced. The VOA series, however, did not include his thoughts on present-day Indian politics, limiting his comments largely to nineteenth-century events and elements of traditional tribal cultures.³²

The progressive history of the VOA made the contrast between the abuses of the past and modern Indian affairs particularly stark, and it set a rather low standard for success in federal policy. If the United States were not actively assaulting Indian tribes, the present would glow in comparison. It avoided discussion of a variety of failed policies that, like the modern services described in the radio series, had been intended to help Indian people “adjust.” The allotment and assimilation campaigns at the end of the nineteenth century, after all, had also been sold as efforts to rescue Native Americans from decline by incorporating them into a modernizing United States. Termination advocates had promoted their chosen initiative in similar terms. By ignoring these episodes, agency media permitted only the most clear-cut and favorable comparisons between past and present, and they made good intentions the primary test of Indian policy. America had a “bad conscience about its Indian people,” the VOA explained in the final episode of *American Indian: Past and Present*, but the nation was “working very hard to make up for lost time . . . and to offer the Indian of the future some of the opportunities he was denied many years ago.”³³ This outlook reduced Indian affairs to a question of the attitude of the federal government, rather than the rights of Indian nations.

Dudziak describes a similar use of history in her study of the Cold War and African American activism. In responding to the civil rights movement, she argues, the State Department and the USIA employed a carefully molded narrative about race relations in the United States. American spokesmen could not deny the existence of Jim Crow laws or the “massive resistance” offered civil rights activists by southern whites. They could, however, depict the events of the 1950s and 1960s as parts of a longer American history that tended toward progress. As Dudziak explains, USIA publications and government-sponsored speakers acknowledged America’s history of racial oppression, discussing slavery and segregation; however, they assured their audiences that life for black Americans had improved steadily in more recent times and would continue to improve, as the American political system responded to the just appeals of black citizens. They suggested, moreover, that an American-style democracy was the only form of government that would enable this kind of peaceful social change. In this way, American spokesmen worked to transform the country’s troubled history of race from a Cold War liability to an advantage.³⁴

This model of race relations, Dudziak suggests, legitimized black protest, while placing distinct limits on acceptable goals and forms of activism. The USIA and State Department could depict the dismantling of Jim Crow through peaceful protest and federal legislation as a triumph of the American system and thus as evidence of democracy’s superiority in a world defined by the Cold War. Anything more radical ran the risk of being condemned as dangerously un-American.³⁵ During the 1960s, a similar dynamic was at work in the USIA version of Indian affairs. In this case, however, the agency did not disparage Indian nationalism and the calls for greater tribal self-government; it simply ignored them, excising them from the Cold War script.

The USIA may have based some of its approach to Indian affairs on the methods it applied to the civil rights movement. Its coverage of the black freedom struggle was far more extensive than that of Native American issues, and the agency began paying serious attention to black activism some years before it noticed Indian policy. Moreover, some broadcasts and publications treated American Indian affairs as a logical extension of the politics of black civil rights. Many listeners who submitted Indian-themed queries to the VOA *Questions and Answers* program, for example, clearly wanted to know whether Native people faced the kinds of discrimination experienced by African Americans. Did Indians have equal rights as citizens in the United States? Were they barred from public accommodations like restaurants and cinemas? Or, as an Indonesian listener asked, “What is the difference between Indian reservations and the so-called Black Belt?”³⁶ The agency, meanwhile, sometimes brought Native American material into its coverage of the civil rights movement. During 1963, the VOA launched a series called *Perspectives*

that followed the major desegregation campaigns and the battles over civil rights legislation. It included a program dedicated to Indians and civil rights. Native people, the presenter noted, represented “the next largest minority” after African Americans and were thus a topic of interest to those following developments in American race relations. The program then explained that Indian people had exactly the same rights and privileges as other citizens, before detailing the special health and education programs that the BIA provided to tribes.³⁷

The civil rights movement, it seems, encouraged the agency to examine Native American issues. The movement created room for a broader discussion of race within Cold War public diplomacy, and that discussion could include Indian affairs. Like the agency’s preferred version of history, however, the civil rights context restricted debate, directing conversation away from tribal sovereignty. Integration, after all, could look very much like assimilation as a goal of public policy, and focusing on the rights of Indian people as individual American citizens made discussion of Indian nationhood irrelevant. Native Americans became simply another race, the “next minority” on the list.

ACCEPTING SELF-DETERMINATION

The general themes described in this article dominated USIA coverage of Indian affairs until the early 1970s, when the agency at last began to include the idea of tribal self-determination in its media productions. USIA made this change only after federal officials began to embrace some of the goals long advocated by tribal leaders. In 1968, Lyndon Johnson sent a special message to Congress identifying self-determination as the proper objective of federal Indian policy. Two years later, Richard Nixon issued an even stronger statement, in which he repudiated the termination campaign and endorsed self-determination. By this time, moreover, federal officials had largely abandoned the practice of classifying Indians as “wards” of a federal guardian and instead identified tribes as beneficiaries of a federal trustee, a conceptual shift long advocated by some activists. Under the emerging self-determination policy, the federal government, in its trustee role, would continue to protect tribal property and provide services to Native American communities while working to transfer management of tribal affairs to Indian groups.³⁸ These developments rendered self-determination safe for inclusion in American public diplomacy because they allowed the USIA to depict the new course as yet another example of sensible reform by a responsive American government. VOA news programs celebrated the shift in approach, predicting a “new era for the American Indian,” and the network produced admiring features on some

of the initial expressions of the policy, such as the federal government's return of Blue Lake to Taos Pueblo and the founding of Navajo Community College (known as Diné College today). Where in earlier years radio broadcasts had emphasized the prudent leadership of reservation agents, they now spoke of tribes running their own affairs. At times, the agency even implied that self-determination had been the government's goal all along.³⁹

As historian Rosier notes, Nixon and his advisers turned to self-determination partly in response to the emergence of Red Power activism, in particular the occupation of Alcatraz, which began in November 1969. The policy change involved an effort to isolate radical activists through a measured acceptance of the goals of more moderate organizations like the NCAI. Rosier likens this action to Nixon's foreign policy of *détente*, in which the administration sought to open dialogue with communist leaders in the hope of defusing the more dangerous tendencies of the Cold War rivalry. Renouncing termination, Rosier writes, represented the "rhetorical and programmatic containment of 'explosive' American Indian radicalism."⁴⁰

The USIA depiction of Red Power during this period displayed a similar "containment" effort. Although the agency had ignored Indian nationalism throughout most of the 1960s, actions like the Alcatraz occupation or the standoff at Wounded Knee received too much public attention to be excluded from USIA coverage of Indian affairs. In explaining Indian radicalism to its international audience, however, the agency routinely minimized its significance, while suggesting that Red Power threatened to do more harm than good during a period of federal reform and steadily improving Indian relations. VOA programs invariably noted that the radicals represented a minority among Native Americans and did not officially represent their tribes, while stating that many tribal leaders worried that the radicals' actions might hurt their own people. When members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied and then vandalized the BIA Washington headquarters in 1972, for instance, the VOA explained that "tribal authorities not only deplore the extremist actions, but feel that the week of destruction has set back the Indian cause and obstructed national discourse."⁴¹ The program then contrasted the activists' misbehavior with the "almost unbelievable restraint" exercised by federal authorities, who allowed the activists to exit the building peacefully. Although the vandalism jeopardized progress in Indian affairs, "the government has managed, through restraint, to keep the way open to continued communication and reforms."⁴²

The following year, the VOA employed almost identical terms in covering the AIM seizure of Wounded Knee. "Many wonder whether the Wounded Knee affair will not harm rather than help the Indian cause," one broadcast observed before explaining, once again, that AIM did not represent the Indian

majority, “which has sought—and frequently gained—relief through courts and federal legislation.”⁴³ Native Americans had valid grievances, USIA media implied, and actions like Wounded Knee might help to raise public awareness of the “Indian cause.” Only the American political system, however, could properly address those grievances, and it could do so only by responding to the reasonable claims of moderate tribal leaders. Following the approach it already applied to black activism, the agency recognized the legitimacy of Native American protest, while dismissing radicalism as misguided and potentially harmful. The government’s turn toward self-determination might herald a “new era,” but that era could only be realized through patient reform.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

The broadcasts and publications discussed in this article offer further justification for the inclusion of Native American topics in the scholarship on race and the Cold War. Although this literature often limits its definition of race to black and white, America’s propaganda workers clearly believed that Indians, no less than African Americans, had roles to play in the fight against communism. Like slavery and segregation, the history of Indian dispossession needed to be explained to the USIA audience, and modern Indian people proved suitable for inclusion in the agency’s vision of a vibrant egalitarian American society. Like many activists and tribal leaders, the USIA identified Indian policy as a test of American political morality. It accepted the idea that the United States could be judged abroad according to the fairness of its American Indian relations. Acknowledging that point, however, did not require the agency to embrace Indian activists’ long-term goals of protecting tribal sovereignty and strengthening the power of Indian communities to determine their own futures. USIA media celebrated the persistence of Native peoples, but only as part of a narrative of government-led progress. Indian affairs, in this model, turned upon the wise exertion of federal power, rather than the rights of Indian nations. Continued progress did not require the United States to cede significant authority to tribes; it simply required that federal officials carry on using their powers well. Although the goal of greater tribal autonomy did eventually appear in the agency’s stories, it did so only when USIA media could define self-determination as just such an example of wise federal action. Even then, the agency granted legitimacy only to the narrowest versions of the concept, while dismissing or ignoring Indian activists’ more sweeping aspirations. In Cold War public diplomacy, the acknowledgment of past crimes always reinforced American authority in the present, and communism was not the only thing subject to containment.

NOTES

Thanks to Elizabeth McRae, Jessie Swigger, Sarah Judson, Frederick Hoxie, Gael Graham, Brian Delay, David Nichols, Hilary Lindler, and the anonymous reviewers at the AICRJ.

1. *Questions and Answers*, September 12, 1963, Voice of America Scripts, US Information Agency, Library of Congress (Washington, DC) (hereinafter referred to as VOA, USIA, LOC), 34–35.

2. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Black Americans and United States Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black America and Anti-Colonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Daniel M. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008); Daniel M. Cobb, “Talking the Language of the Larger World: Politics in Cold War (Native) America,” in *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900*, ed. Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2007), 161–77; Paul C. Rosier, “‘They are ancestral homelands’: Race, Place, and Politics in Cold War Native America,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1300–26; Paul C. Rosier, *Serving Their Country: American Indian Politics and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

3. Robert E. Elder, *The Information Machine: The United States Information Agency and American Foreign Policy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 34–39; Wilson P. Dizard, *The Strategy of Truth: The Story of the US Information Service* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 1961), 32–44.

4. During the 1960s, USIA maintained one area office for each of the following regions: Europe, Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, Near East and South Asia, and the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Elder, *Information Machine*, 14.

5. Dizard, *Strategy of Truth*, 48–63; Elder, *Information Machine*, 52–78, 120–77.

6. Dizard, *Strategy of Truth*, 69–87, 120–53; Elder, *Information Machine*, 6–10.

7. Dizard, *Strategy of Truth*, 65–66, 74–75.

8. Both of these events took place on August 1, 1953. Robert I. Rubin, *Objectives of the US Information Agency: Controversies and Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 127; Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York: Norton, 2005), xiii.

9. Major works examining the termination era in American Indian policy history include Larry W. Burt, *Tribalism in Crisis: Federal Indian Policy, 1953–1961* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 2: 1013–84; Donald Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945–1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933–1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

10. Prucha, *The Great Father*, 1017–23; Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 25–29; Philp, *Termination Revisited*, 16–33. In some cases, federal officials and legislators used claims settlements to convince tribes to make termination agreements, tying disbursement of settlement funds to tribal acceptance of termination. See, e.g., David R. M. Beck, *The Struggle for Self-Determination: History of the Menominee Indians since 1854* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 137–43; R. Warren Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy: The Discarded Indians of Utah* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 58–59, 98–100.

11. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 111–57; Prucha, *Great Father* 1044–46, 1079–84. See also Philp, *Termination Revisited*, 140–52.
12. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 11–17; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 64–86, 104–6; Thomas W. Cowger, “The Crossroads of Destiny’: The NCAI’s Landmark Struggle to Thwart Coercive Termination,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20, no. 4 (1996): 121–44; Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123–27, 192. For the termination debate in individual tribes, see Burt, *Tribalism in Crisis*, 29–47; Susan Hood, “Termination of the Klamath Tribe in Oregon,” *Ethnohistory* 19 (Fall 1972): 379–92; Nicholas Peroff, *Menominee Drums: Tribal Termination and Restoration* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Kathleen A. Dahl, “The Battle over Termination on the Colville Indian Reservation,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 1 (1994): 29–53; Metcalf, *Termination’s Legacy*; Beck, *Struggle for Self-Determination*, 129–78.
13. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 13, 17–22; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 67–69.
14. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 21–29; George Pierre Castile, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 3–18.
15. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, 1961, Record Group 306 (hereinafter referred to as RG), USIA, Press and Publications, National Archives II (hereinafter referred to as NA II), (College Park, MD), 1, 5–8, 10, 20–21.
16. *Ibid.*, 3–4, 6–7.
17. Daniel Cobb notes that, when the termination campaign failed, federal lawmakers and the Bureau of Indian Affairs turned to “modernization” as their preferred approach to Indian issues. Cobb argues, however, that this modernization campaign was still an assimilation policy. *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 27–28, 43–45.
18. For instance, *Critic’s Choice*, “Reflections of an American Indian Writer,” July 14, 1969; *San Francisco Reporter*, “Medicine of the American Indian,” May 25, 1970; *Books in America*, “The Indian Heritage,” June 11, 1970; *New York Reporter*, “Art of the American Indian,” November 17, 1971, VOA, USIA, LOC.
19. *American Scene*, “Meet the Pueblo Indian,” October 25, 1961, VOA, USIA, LOC, 2–3.
20. *Amerika*, May 1962, Special Supplement on American Indians, RG 306, USIA, Press and Publications, NA II (quote from English-language insert).
21. *The American Indian: Questions and Answers*, 22.
22. *Amerika*, May 1962, Special Supplement on American Indians, 39–43, and English-language insert.
23. *Birthright*, “The Aged and Aging,” March 27, 1962, VOA, USIA, LOC, 3.
24. *Ibid.*; “Birthright: Fifth World of the Navaho,” April 17; “High School USA,” May 22; “Pure Food and Drugs: The Nation’s Official Taster,” June 21, 1962, VOA, USIA, LOC.
25. *Birthright*, “The Promised Land,” June 29, 1962, VOA, USIA, LOC, 15.
26. *Ibid.*, 17.
27. *Dynamics of Change*, “The American Indian II,” May 27, 1966, VOA, USIA, LOC, 2.
28. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, “Indian Country,” July 26, 1965, RG 306, USIA, Sound Recordings, VOA, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records Section, NA II.
29. Cobb, *Native American Activism in Cold War America*, 30–57; Cornell, *Return of the Native*, 124, 189; “Declaration of Indian Purpose,” June 1961, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, exp. ed., ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 244–46. There were exceptions to this general neglect of Indian political action. During 1958 and 1959, e.g., VOA produced two short features on the Tuscaroras’ opposition to the New York Power Authority’s efforts to condemn tribal land that was going to be flooded by the construction of a hydroelectric dam.

Special Feature, "500 Indians vs. New York State," November 25, 1958; "Tuscaroras Keep Their Land," February 4, 1959, VOA, USIA, LOC.

30. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, "Legend in His Own Land," April 23; "The Great Chiefs," April 28; "Trail of Tears," May 31; "Warpath," June 16; "Long Hair," June 29; "Battle of the Little Bighorn," July 5; "Walk in the White Man's Road," July 20, 1965. Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), 3. Quotation included in "Legend in His Own Land," April 23, 1965.

31. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, "Indian Country," July 26; "Navajo Land," July 31; "The Modern Indian," August 7; "The Old Ways," August 14; "The Indian of the Future," August 14, 1965. Philleo Nash quotation included in "The Modern Indian," August 7, 1965.

32. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, "Warpath," June 16; "Walk in the White Man's Road," July 20; "The Modern Indian," August 7; "The Old Ways," August 14, 1965. Cobb, *Native American Activism in Cold War America*, 58–68.

33. *The American Indian: Past and Present*, "The Indian of the Future," August 14, 1965.

34. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 47–78.

35. *Ibid.*, 11, 13, 61–77, 243–45.

36. *Questions and Answers*, September 12, 1962; November 23, 1962; March 28, 1963, VOA, USIA, LOC (quotation in November 23, 1962, episode 5).

37. *Perspectives*, "American Indians and Civil Rights," October 30, 1964, VOA, USIA, LOC.

38. Castile, *To Show Heart*, 68–70, 91–98. On the trust responsibility concept, see Prucha, *The Great Father*, 1202–6; Felix Cohen, "Indian Wardship: The Twilight of a Myth," in *The Legal Conscience: Selected Papers of Felix S. Cohen*, ed. Lucy Kramer Cohen (New York: Archon Books, 1970), 328–34.

39. *News Analysis*, "The Emerging Indian," December 4, 1970; *Young World*, "Navajo College," December 28, 1971; *Political Feature*, "Autonomy for the Navajos," August 25, 1972, VOA, USIA, LOC.

40. Rosier, *Serving Their Country*, 258–59. For federal policy makers' responses to Red Power activism, see also Castile, *To Show Heart*, 111–46.

41. *News Analysis*, "The American Indian Protests," November 10, 1972, VOA, USIA, LOC, 2.

42. *Ibid.*, 3.

43. *News Analysis*, "Wounded Knee: Indian Activists in Search of a Symbol," March 5, 1973, VOA, USIA, LOC, 2.

44. *News Analysis*, "The Sioux and the Drama at Wounded Knee," March 12, 1973; "Sioux Differences," March 22, 1973; "Cost of Wounded Knee," May 10, 1973, VOA, USIA, LOC.

