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**Title**

Limited Vision: Carl Albert, the Choctaws, and Native American Self-Determination

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8752n5qf>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

2002-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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## Limited Vision: Carl Albert, the Choctaws, and Native American Self-Determination

DEAN J. KOTLOWSKI

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Between 1945 and 1975, United States policy toward Native Americans underwent a 180-degree shift, from an assault on tribal authority to almost total recognition of it. Under presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, the federal government had sought to terminate its trust relationship with Indians and assimilate them into Anglo society. But this effort waned and the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson missed an opportunity to break with the past. During the 1960s, federal officials spoke of a “new emphasis” that moved away from termination and toward tribal self-determination without repudiating assimilation and economic development, Anglo style, as policy aims.<sup>1</sup> In 1970, however, President Richard M. Nixon denounced termination and pledged to end the federal government’s “suffocating paternalism” toward American Indians.<sup>2</sup> Five years later, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act which allowed tribes to run many federal programs themselves. Scholars have published a number of studies of recent Native American policy,<sup>3</sup> but the role of Congress in shaping Indian policy, especially individual members and their Native American constituents, remains largely unexplored.<sup>4</sup>

Representative Carl Albert, Democrat of Oklahoma, possessed a limited vision regarding Native American self-determination. The “Little Giant” was one of the few congressmen who saw his career, from 1947 to 1977, span the era of termination, gradual assimilation, and self-determination. A nationally known figure who became majority whip in 1955, majority leader in 1962, and house speaker in 1971, Albert was in a position to influence federal policy. And he was conscious of Indian concerns, since the population of his home state was one-quarter American Indian and his district, the Oklahoma Third, included Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles, members of the Five Civilized

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Tribes. Yet Albert's relations with the Choctaws, who first backed, then opposed termination, exemplifies the ambivalence of many Great Society liberals toward Native American self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

Two themes permeated Albert's approach to Indian matters. First, taking a micro rather than macro perspective, Albert focused on assisting his Indian constituents rather than changing the thrust of federal policy. Listening to Oklahoma's Indians, he insisted that tribal consent must precede termination and, in so arguing, helped to modify that policy rather than end it. Second, as a liberal who wanted to include all Americans in the tent of opportunity, Albert favored gradual assimilation for Indians. He supported LBJ's War on Poverty which funded economic development on reservations and fostered demands for self-determination among Indian activists. During the final stage of his career, from 1970 to 1977, Albert reached the pinnacle of his power in Congress, but remained on the sidelines on Indian issues as Native American protest crested and Republican presidents outdid their Democratic predecessors in advancing tribal self-determination. Despite his large Indian constituency, Albert never took a leading role in reforming Native American policy.

#### ALBERT, TERMINATION, AND THE CHOCTAWS

Albert's life was quite remarkable. He lifted himself from rural poverty then worked to expand economic opportunities for all Americans. The son of a coal miner and farmer, Albert was born in MacAlester, Oklahoma, in 1908. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Oklahoma and then studied on a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University, where he received two law degrees. During the 1930s, Albert practiced law in Oklahoma City and described himself as a "down-the-line, Franklin Roosevelt, New Deal Democrat."<sup>6</sup> After earning a Bronze Star for his service in World War II, Albert won his House seat in 1946, when Democrats were losing their long-held majority, and represented the western counties of Oklahoma in Congress for the next thirty years. A Cold War liberal, he supported President Truman's foreign policy and such domestic programs as public power, public housing, farm price supports, and federal aid to education. "Because my state was poor and my district poorer, federal aid was no demon," he recalled, "it was a deliverer."<sup>7</sup> The young congressman also appeared eager to listen to both colleagues and constituents, whether Indian or Anglo. Devotion to district, party, and existing lines of authority within the House defined Albert's service in Congress.

Albert entered Congress at a time when federal officials were moving to assimilate American Indians into Anglo societies. During the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had approved limited tribal autonomy under the Indian New Deal. John Collier, FDR's commissioner of Indian affairs, secured passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which initiated procedures for tribal constitution-writing and self-government. But during World War II, Collier began to urge the assimilation of Indians, a goal which the Truman Administration endorsed.<sup>8</sup> "The ultimate integration of the American

Indian—is inevitable,” Commissioner of Indian Affairs Dillon S. Myer said in 1950.<sup>9</sup> During the 1950s, western senators, led by Arthur V. Watkins, Republican of Utah, pressed the Interior Department to terminate federal responsibility for tribes and bring Indians into white society. Under termination, tribes would lose all privileges under treaties with the federal government, tribal lands once held in trust by the government would be opened to sale, and Indians would become subject to the same laws as Anglos.<sup>10</sup>

While termination attracted bipartisan support, a Republican-controlled Congress seized the initiative. In 1953 the lower chamber approved termination in House Concurrent Resolution (H.C.R.) 108, which listed the tribes to be freed “from federal supervision and control and from all disabilities and limitations applicable to Indians.”<sup>11</sup> The same year Congress passed Public Law 280, which allowed designated states to assume jurisdiction over Indian tribes if those states so desired.<sup>12</sup>

The program of termination and assimilation partly reflected the philosophy of each party. Conservative Republicans, who exalt private initiative and local authority over government control, cast termination as a blow against “federal paternalism” and for “Indian freedom.”<sup>13</sup> Liberal Democrats wanted to use federal power to expand opportunities for all citizens, regardless of class or race. The Great Depression of the 1930s enabled them to promote economic security for Americans. Accordingly, New Dealers such as Collier pointed to Indian communities as examples of cooperation and rejoinders to capitalism’s competitive, materialistic ethos. Following World War II, when Albert entered Congress, liberals had shifted their focus by stressing individual rights, economic growth, and equal opportunity.<sup>14</sup> They worked to end discrimination against racial minorities and bring them into the American mainstream. A report drafted by Truman’s staff defined the government’s “ultimate goal” as “plac[ing] the Indians on exactly the same basis as the rest of the population.”<sup>15</sup>

Representative Albert did not challenge the postwar stress on assimilation. His first encounter with Indian affairs came one month after entering Congress, when he sought a meeting with Truman to discuss the Indian Claims Commission (ICC), a federal agency recently formed to resolve disputes between the government and Indians.<sup>16</sup> Rather than restore lands to tribal control, the commission provided cash compensation to Indians on a per capita basis. In so doing the ICC advanced the cause of assimilation, since final settlement of all Indian claims was one way to end the special status of Native Americans.<sup>17</sup> There is no indication that Albert opposed the assimilationist charge of the commission.

Contrary to official promises, termination and assimilation did not bring further “advances” to Native Americans.<sup>18</sup> Following their loss of federal status, the Menominees saw their once-prosperous timber industry struggle while the Klamaths, who had sold their lands, disappeared as a community.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), a pan-Indian, tribal-based group formed in 1944, “vigorously” opposed proposals to end federal supervision of tribes<sup>20</sup> while the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA), an advocacy group led by the anthropologist Oliver La Farge,

an Anglo, only found the methods and timing of the policy unsavory.<sup>21</sup> Early in Eisenhower's term, Angie Debo, an Oklahoman and historian of American Indians, complained of BIA officials who, citing H.C.R. 108, had tried to "browbeat" the Fort Sill Apaches into accepting a "voluntary" termination plan. After reading Debo's account, Representative Tom Steed, Democrat of Oklahoma, promised to oppose legislation to terminate this tribe.<sup>22</sup> Steed disagreed with terminationists who seemed eager to "get out of the Indian business" under the guise of granting Indians "additional rights" as citizens.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding termination, Albert faced pressure from both sides. Representative Toby Morris, a fellow Oklahoma Democrat who chaired the subcommittee on Indian affairs, urged a more vigorous relocation program to "integrate" Indians "into the overall economy" and remove "their special status."<sup>24</sup> Yet some religious groups, moved by conscience, perceived termination as yet another effort by the white man to acquire Indian lands. In 1955 members of Oklahoma City's Capitol Presbyterian Church asked Albert to oppose the "relinquishing" of federal "supervision" over any tribe "without their consent."<sup>25</sup>

Albert decided to shield his state's Indians from termination without disavowing the overall policy. As the House opened debate on H.C.R. 108, the Osage tribe, which owned over one million acres of land in Oklahoma, much of it "excellent for grazing," and \$131 million worth of mineral rights, mainly in gas, oil, and coal, demanded exemption from termination.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, Albert, Steed, and other members of Oklahoma's congressional delegation, along with Osage leaders, conferred with Assistant Secretary of the Interior Orme Lewis to gain his support. They then removed the tribe from the resolution. Paul Pitts, the Osages' principal chief, later thanked Albert for his "untiring efforts" on "this vital matter," and the congressman declared himself "happy" with the result.<sup>27</sup>

From the Osages, Albert learned a lesson: termination had to be carried out slowly, with the approval of the tribes involved. In recommending their exemption from H.C.R. 108, Albert and the members of Oklahoma's House delegation portrayed the Osages as unique. Under earlier federal legislation, which protected their property, the tribe had achieved "development and progress." The delegation noted that Osages were assimilating at their own pace, attending public schools, using community hospitals, and paying taxes.<sup>28</sup> Such an argument substituted a direct assault on H.C.R. 108, which Albert endorsed, with a plea for gradual assimilation.

Albert's support of H.C.R. 108 came as no surprise. In an early speech on Native American policy, he had listed improving health and education, not tribal self-determination, as his chief concern.<sup>29</sup> When Angie Debo protested against the Eisenhower Administration's "violent 'termination' policy," Albert, unlike Steed, did not second-guess the program and simply promised to advance "legislation which would favor the Indian."<sup>30</sup> In 1955, however, he strongly opposed Senate Resolution 401, which would have abolished the BIA and ended federal trusteeship over all tribal lands within three years. Referring to this bill, Albert informed Alice Jones, secretary of the Federation of the Western Oklahoma Indians, that he had "always maintained [that] it is the responsibility of the Federal government to look after the welfare of the

Indians” and rejected “any measure which, in my opinion, would not assist them.”<sup>31</sup> For Albert, sudden termination without tribal consent was not in the Indians’ best interest.

Native American complaints forced the Eisenhower Administration to modify its termination program. Interior Secretary Douglas McKay and Indian commissioner Glen L. Emmons rejected S. 401, which never passed the Senate.<sup>32</sup> Then in 1958, Fred A. Seaton, McKay’s successor at Interior, vowed not to end the government’s trust relationship with any tribe unless the tribe understood the consequences of termination and a majority of its members backed such a course.<sup>33</sup> Such remarks positioned the administration closer to liberals, such as Albert and La Farge, who espoused gradual assimilation.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the interior secretary remained confident that, when given a choice, Native Americans would opt for termination.<sup>35</sup>

But who spoke for the American Indian? As the story of the Choctaw termination illustrates, discerning the will of a tribe proved tricky. Choctaw relations with the United States had long been tragic. As one of the Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaws had farmed the lower part of present-day Mississippi. Following the arrival of white people, they adapted Anglo law, religion, and education to their ancient traditions. After President Andrew Jackson compelled the Choctaws to resettle in southeastern Oklahoma, white settlers continued to covet the tribe’s lands. In 1906 Congress passed legislation that disbanded the Choctaws’ elected government and forced them to accept allotment, the transfer of tribal-owned land to individual Indians. This law gave the US president the power to appoint the tribe’s chief, who was to help disperse Choctaw land. When allotment proceeded slowly, the authority of the chief, the tribe’s voice, grew. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, one Choctaw chief admitted, entrusted him “to act and speak for the tribe,” even though his office technically possessed “more influence than power.”<sup>36</sup>

An incestuous relationship soon developed. As Choctaw chiefs became attached to the establishment in Washington, tribal elections became less frequent. “You seem to align yourselves with [the leadership’s] cause,” one Choctaw wrote the assistant commissioner of Indian affairs in 1946, “forming an ingenuous coalition with them in order to keep them in power.”<sup>37</sup> Federal policy regarding Choctaw elections shifted over time. In 1952 Interior Secretary Oscar L. Chapman allowed Choctaws to elect their principal chief.<sup>38</sup> But six years later Assistant Secretary of the Interior Roger Ernst rejected a canvass on grounds that it “would cost the Choctaw people \$6,000 to \$10,000.”<sup>39</sup> While Ernst never would have placed a price tag on US elections, federal officials, during the era of termination, were reluctant to take steps that might sustain tribal authority.

Advocates of termination found an ally in Choctaw chief Harry J. W. Belvin, an assimilated Indian. Born in 1907, Belvin possessed Choctaw, Cherokee, Scottish, and Irish blood and had married an Anglo. To cultivate an Indian appearance, he donned a feathered headdress, the “warbonnet” originally worn by Plains, not Choctaw, chiefs.<sup>40</sup> After becoming chief in 1948, Belvin opposed efforts to keep Choctaw land under tribal control. Such restrictions, he reasoned, only punished enterprising Choctaws for the errors

of past generations, which had sold their lands to whites and squandered their money. He often advised Indians to sell their property if they possessed "good command of English" and were "skilled" tradesmen.<sup>41</sup> Belvin later applauded public schools for teaching "good citizenship" to Native Americans. Indians, he argued, "are first, citizens of the United States. Second, they are citizens of the state in which they live. And third, they are citizens of their Tribe."<sup>42</sup>

Belvin's assimilationist message must have struck a cord with at least some Choctaws, who by the 1950s had no reservation, lived in rural poverty, and lacked the resources for self-sufficiency. Moreover, he believed that Choctaws, armed with education, "the white man's weapon," would not "sit supinely by and let the benefits for which they have prepared themselves slip away from them."<sup>43</sup> Rather than fear termination, Belvin welcomed it. The chief's optimism and political success won him a national following, leading some Indians to advocate his appointment as commissioner of Indian affairs in 1953. But President Eisenhower passed over Belvin, a Democrat, in favor of Emmons, a Republican and an Anglo.<sup>44</sup>

Belvin was also a wily opportunist. Since Albert served in the House from 1947 to 1977 and Belvin led the Choctaws between 1948 and 1975, the two men formed a long association. Belvin's ascent began in the mid-1940s when he successfully lobbied the Interior Department to hold a tribal election. The Choctaws elected Belvin on 21 June 1948, and President Truman named him chief. Belvin, with Albert's backing, pressed for additional canvasses and was twice reelected.<sup>45</sup> Then, secure in his office, he stopped requesting elections, which ceased after 1954. Albert, eager to keep his district Democratic, had no incentive to seek Belvin's removal. When a BIA official aspired to become Choctaw chief, Belvin contacted Albert. The congressman referred the matter to Interior, which warned the man "against engaging in tribal politics."<sup>46</sup> Representing a state with a weak reservation system and an assimilated Indian population, Albert had to work with the tools at hand. Nevertheless, he might have been more skeptical of the Choctaw chief. Oliver La Farge regarded Belvin as a "controversial figure, not necessarily acting for the best interests of the Choctaw Nation" and held him at arm's length.<sup>47</sup>

In 1959 Belvin and Albert secured legislation to terminate the Choctaw tribe.<sup>48</sup> Tribal leaders cleared their plans with BIA officials in Oklahoma and then enlisted the Interior Department in drafting the bill.<sup>49</sup> The measure, H.R. 2722, provided for the sale of over 16,000 acres of Choctaw land within three years and distribution of the proceeds to members of the tribe on a per capita basis.<sup>50</sup> After the tribe had disposed of its property or moved it to a private corporation, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Ernst informed Albert, "no direct relationship between the Federal Government and the Choctaw Tribe" would exist.<sup>51</sup> The office of principal chief would be abolished along with "federal supervision of tribal properties."<sup>52</sup> Belvin asked Albert to introduce this bill. The congressman found the measure "in good form" and shepherded it through the House.<sup>53</sup> H.R. 2722 passed both chambers and became law during summer 1959.

Although termination remained a controversial policy, H.R. 2722 aroused scant opposition. Proponents of termination reminded the public that

Choctaw leaders had requested the bill, leaving gradual assimilationists little to criticize.<sup>54</sup> The AAIA put the best possible face on the measure, noting that it placed the Choctaws “once more in control of their property” and allowed them to form a private corporation and elect their own chief.<sup>55</sup> Even Steed, who had been skeptical of termination, backed the Choctaw bill.<sup>56</sup> Interior Department officials thought it was time to end the federal relationship with this tribe because, as the historian Donald Fixico explained, the Choctaws “appeared successfully integrated with local whites and were considered to be one of the more advanced Native American groups.”<sup>57</sup>

The Choctaw act appeared to meet Albert’s demand that tribal consent must precede termination. But how could one know what the Choctaws desired when their leaders were tied to Anglo politics and society? To make matters worse, Albert misled the public on the bill. He assured concerned constituents that H.R. 2722 “was not a general termination bill” since the federal government would continue to protect parcels of land allotted to individual Choctaws.<sup>58</sup> He neglected to mention that federal supervision of the *tribe* would cease three years after the measure’s passage. In their communiques to Albert, Belvin’s aides correctly labeled the bill the “Choctaw Termination Act.”<sup>59</sup> By the late 1950s, it seems fair to say, termination had become a buzzword that Albert was reluctant to use.

Throughout the 1950s, Albert did not question the assumptions of termination as he worked to modify the policy. Still, he might have been more critical of the Choctaw act. In 1959, when one Choctaw complained that the sale of the tribe’s property would put only \$20 in the pocket of each member, Albert was unmoved.<sup>60</sup> “It was the view of the tribal representatives that a liquidation of these remnants of tribal property . . . would be advantageous to the Tribe,” he replied.<sup>61</sup> Albert’s dealings with Belvin support the journalist John A. Farrell’s claim that he “could be tugged every which way by more decisive personalities.”<sup>62</sup> Albert, at the very least, placed too much faith in established authority and was more follower than leader on Indian policy, a trend that intensified during the 1960s.

### THE 1960S: “GRADUAL” ASSIMILATION

The 1960s was a transitional decade for Native Americans and for Albert. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations promised to change Native American policy, but seemed ambivalent toward tribal self-determination. They accepted the Albert/Seaton formula that tribal consent must precede termination, while promoting gradual assimilation via economic development. Indian activists, partly inspired by the Great Society, demanded something more: self-determination. With termination out of fashion though not yet dead, the Choctaws faced an uncertain fate. And Albert, tied to both the White House and the Choctaw leadership, failed to resolve the tribe’s status. As he climbed the leadership ladder, Albert’s focus broadened, though not necessarily in the area of Native American affairs.

By the 1960s, Albert was becoming a power in the House. Representing a safely Democratic district, to whose needs he attended, Albert gained senior-



ity. He caught the eye of Speaker Sam Rayburn, who named him majority whip in 1955. "I can tell big timber from small brush," Rayburn quipped, referring to Albert's five-foot, four-inch, 140-pound frame.<sup>63</sup> Rayburn was familiar with both brush and the Oklahoman since his Texas district adjoined Albert's. A self-effacing man of gentle nature, the new whip practiced the "Rayburn ethic," "work hard, go along, and get along."<sup>64</sup> The Speaker once said that nobody knew as much about legislation as Albert did. Yet Farrell detected a "certain smarminess" in the freckle-faced Oklahoman's "teacher's pet" persona that had "served him well on the way up but proved little help when he was called upon to exercise power."<sup>65</sup>

Following Rayburn's death late in 1961, John W. McCormack, Democrat of Massachusetts, became Speaker, and Albert succeeded McCormack as majority leader. In addition to handling the day-to-day duties of leadership, Albert, from his seat on the Education and Labor Committee, helped enact President Johnson's Great Society legislation. Civil rights, a growing concern for liberals in the 1960s, vexed the Oklahoman whose district, nicknamed Little Dixie, was conservative on race. He belatedly endorsed the weak Civil Rights Act of 1957, then played a major role in passing the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, siding with the Democratic leadership against the wishes of white Oklahomans. With Congress approving a flurry of legislation, Albert described his years as majority leader, from 1962 to 1971, as the most satisfying period of his career.<sup>66</sup> For Native Americans, his ascendancy cut two ways. Albert enjoyed sufficient clout to address the concerns of his Indian constituents. Yet the majority leader remained aligned with Democratic presidents who showed little interest in advancing tribal self-determination.

Two themes defined Indian policy during the 1960s: the "persistence of termination" and the desire to promote economic development.<sup>67</sup> In 1960 presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, echoing Seaton, vowed to make "no change in treaty or contractual arrangements without the consent of the tribes concerned." JFK blamed Republicans for initiating termination and credited his party, which controlled Congress, with "slowing" it down.<sup>68</sup> But the Kennedy and Johnson teams pressed no further and termination endured. Under Eisenhower, federal officials had terminated four tribes and Congress had passed laws to withdraw recognition of eight others, including the Menominees, who, after securing a brief stay, lost their federal status in April 1961.<sup>69</sup> The Choctaw Termination Act bolstered the case of terminationists, who claimed that Indians themselves favored withdrawal of federal status.<sup>70</sup> As late as 1967, Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall, who openly empathized with Native Americans, expressed his support of "gradual termination."<sup>71</sup>

The gradualist approach had implications for the Choctaws, who were scheduled to lose their federal status in 1962. Belvin and his aides learned that requesting termination was one thing; carrying it out was quite another. The Choctaws, due to staff shortages in the BIA, lacked a full accounting of their property, and they faced lawsuits from parties who claimed title to their lands.<sup>72</sup> To make matters worse, they could not agree on whether to enlist a trustee or form a corporation following termination; without a legal entity, the Choctaws stood to lose one-half of their mineral rights once their federal sta-

tus expired. In 1961, Belvin, who was committed to termination, informed acting Indian commissioner John O. Crow of the tribe's problems and requested a three-year extension, not a repeal, of the act. Crow, eager for H.R. 2722 to take effect, demurred.<sup>73</sup> A year later, Belvin appealed to Indian commissioner Philleo Nash, who earlier had backed a delay for the Menominees.<sup>74</sup> Nash agreed to support an extension, and the BIA then began drafting amendments to the Choctaw act.<sup>75</sup>

Belvin, Albert, and Representative Ed Edmondson, Democrat of Oklahoma, scrambled to extend the Choctaw act. Belvin reported "great concern about this matter" among the tribe, while W. F. Semple, a Choctaw lawyer, admitted to "getting worried" as the deadline for termination, 25 August 1962, neared.<sup>76</sup> Edmondson, who represented Oklahoma's Second District, introduced the three-year extension, H.R. 12355, and lobbied for its passage.<sup>77</sup> Albert, moreover, wrote Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho and chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, that he "would be particularly grateful if you could get this one out as soon as possible."<sup>78</sup> H.R. 12355 won unanimous support from the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and passed the House and Senate in August 1962. Belvin and Albert breathed easier when President Kennedy approved the extension on 24 August, one day before termination was to take effect.<sup>79</sup>

Extension of the Choctaw Termination Act did not end the tribe's problems. In 1964, the year before termination was to take place, Belvin requested another delay. The BIA again demurred, mainly to give the Choctaws time to fulfill the terms of the act.<sup>80</sup> During 1965, Albert and Belvin rallied Mike Monroney and Fred Harris, Oklahoma's Democratic senators, to support another three-year extension.<sup>81</sup> "It is very important to Congressman Albert that this bill pass the Senate," an Albert aide wrote Monroney.<sup>82</sup> The measure cleared the House and Senate in June and July, allowing LBJ to sign it on 5 August 1965 and beat the deadline by three weeks.<sup>83</sup> Yet policymakers had learned few lessons. In 1966 BIA officials in Oklahoma asked Choctaws for their views on termination, then declined to hold a referendum on the tribe's future.<sup>84</sup> Two years later, Congress, at the behest of Albert and Belvin, again postponed the date of termination, until 25 August 1970.<sup>85</sup>

Such delays exemplified the uncertainty in federal Indian policy during the 1960s. After terminating the Menominees in 1961, the administration, in the Choctaw case, more closely followed the wishes of tribal leaders. Yet it ignored grassroots perspectives and selected a moot remedy. In 1962 Albert's staff learned that lawsuits against the Choctaws could require at least ten or twelve years to settle, meaning that "simple extension [of the act] is not the answer to the problem."<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, with terminationists ensconced on the Senate interior committee and with Congress considering a bill to terminate the Colvilles, a tribe in the Pacific Northwest, repeal of the Choctaw act was unlikely.<sup>87</sup> Policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches lacked either the desire, will, or imagination to break with the past, leaving termination alive, if not particularly well, during the 1960s.

Unlike previous administrations, the Kennedy and Johnson teams refused to cut Indians loose to fend for themselves. In 1960 Kennedy pro-

posed a range of measures, including expanded credit and vocational training, to promote economic development on reservations.<sup>88</sup> The next year Interior Secretary Udall formed a task force on Indian affairs which recommended bringing Native Americans “into the mainstream of American life.” It stressed that only when “Indian resources have been developed to their maximum extent” was it “justifiable to terminate the special relationship between the Indians and the federal government.”<sup>89</sup> Udall endorsed the panel’s report, which shaped federal policy between 1961 and 1966.<sup>90</sup> Udall made economic matters his focus by drafting an Indian resources development bill.<sup>91</sup> Economic progress and gradual termination went hand in hand for liberal assimilationists.

Albert supported economic development for Native Americans. As majority leader, he helped pass the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which founded the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to wage the War on Poverty. Sargent Shriver, JFK’s brother-in-law and OEO’s first director, even moved into Albert’s office to help direct the legislative battle.<sup>92</sup> The act comprised many parts, including Title VI, which formed Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a domestic Peace Corps.<sup>93</sup> VISTA, Albert argued, would allow young Anglos to enter Indian villages, teach the “rudiments of farming,” and uplift the Indian’s “educational background.”<sup>94</sup> More importantly, Title II initiated the Community Action Program (CAP), which offered the poor “maximum feasible participation” in designing anti-poverty measures.<sup>95</sup> Through its “Indian Section,” CAP encouraged reservations and Native American groups to apply for leadership-training, educational, and youth-oriented grants.<sup>96</sup> Because Oklahoma had no reservations, LaDonna Harris, a Comanche and the wife of Senator Fred Harris, founded Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO) to bring Indians into OEO projects.<sup>97</sup> Albert endorsed both the Indian CAP and OIO. When LaDonna Harris testified before Congress on OEO, Albert was there, she recalled, to “make sure that no one was mean to me.”<sup>98</sup>

Many liberals saw anti-poverty programs as a way to advance gradual assimilation. OIO sought to “improve opportunities” for Indians and “draw them more fully into the Oklahoma economy and culture.”<sup>99</sup> Albert endorsed the “lofty, but realistic” goal of moving Indians out of reservations and “into the mainstream of American life.”<sup>100</sup> Democratic senators sounded similar themes. Montana’s Lee Metcalf, chair of the subcommittee on Indian affairs, supported termination only after reservation income, education, housing, and health care showed “considerable improvement.”<sup>101</sup> Senator George S. McGovern of South Dakota, who succeeded Metcalf as the Indian subcommittee’s chair in 1966, favored continuing federal supervision until the Indian “is educated, trained, and has the opportunity for a job.” McGovern praised OEO programs and longed for the day when “the Indian should work as hard and as long for the benefits of our modern life as our other people do.”<sup>102</sup> In a 1966 speech, Fred Harris offered fresh proposals to further the perennial objective of “helping the American Indian become a full-fledged citizen, able to move with ease into the mainstream.”<sup>103</sup>

But, unlike Albert, these senators were young and openly empathetic toward Native American concerns. They had entered the Senate during the

1950s and 1960s, when the African-American civil rights struggle had gathered momentum, and they saw Indian policy as a national, rather than local, issue. Perhaps the leftist spirit of the 1960s had rekindled their memories of the Indian New Deal, with its veneration of the collectivist values of Native American communities. Nevertheless, other liberals, like Albert, were more comfortable promoting equal opportunity and addressing economic, rather than racial, inequities. Differences between Albert and youthful liberals, especially Fred Harris, over Indian policy would widen during the Nixon years.

While lawmakers discussed and debated, Native Americans resisted assimilation. By the 1960s, many Indians, the National Congress of American Indians asserted, refused to “swim in a mainstream they largely regarded as polluted.”<sup>104</sup> They longed for “self-determination,” an elastic term that suggested many things. Tribal-based groups, such as NCAI, urged the federal government to disavow termination and give tribes greater control over BIA programs, from which they benefited.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile young urban Indians, inspired by the “rights-conscious” spirit that had imbued African Americans, attacked “the system” by espousing Red Power and founded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968.<sup>106</sup> Some urban radicals favored such extreme remedies as abolishing the BIA, a hated symbol of wardship. Others built urban centers to showcase Indian culture or employed civil disobedience, even violence, to draw attention to Anglo injustices.<sup>107</sup> Whatever their differences, Indians largely rejected the integrationist goals of the African-American civil rights movement.<sup>108</sup>

As the Community Action Program encouraged grassroots activism, Albert distanced himself from it.<sup>109</sup> NCAI director John Belindo wrote the congressman that “OEO programs have restored self-respect and strengthened self-determination among the Indian people.”<sup>110</sup> Such a trend challenged established authority. Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, for example, launched a Rural Development Program that included a pig feeder cooperative and controversial “buying clubs” to compete with tribal businesses. The chiefs of the Five Civilized Tribes, appointed by the president and having a stake in the status quo, accused OIO of fomenting “militancy” among Indian youth.<sup>111</sup> Belvin, believing that OIO had sown “hard feelings” among the Choctaws, called for a probe of the organization.<sup>112</sup> Albert, ever willing to help a constituent, forwarded Belvin’s complaint to OEO.<sup>113</sup> But an independent study in 1971 found that OIO’s rural development program enjoyed a “positive image” among most Indians, allowing OEO to continue funding it.<sup>114</sup>

Oklahoma’s congressional delegation, save for Senator Harris, dissociated themselves from OIO, which critics called “LaDonna Harris’s pet project.”<sup>115</sup> “While members of Congress like Ed Edmondson and Carl Albert had good reputations,” LaDonna Harris remembered, “they let [the BIA] call the shots and were just keeping the Indians quiet.”<sup>116</sup> Given Albert’s leadership position, respect for existing authority, and preference for working within “the system,” such an attitude was to be expected. Belvin once applauded Albert’s work ethic and “conscientious attention to all segments of one’s constituency.”<sup>117</sup> The higher Albert rose in the Washington establishment, the greater his need to defend it, even when federal policy, in the case of Indians, lacked a clear purpose and provoked demands for reform.

The Johnson Administration provided few answers on Native American policy. In 1968 Johnson sent Congress a special message which promised to end the “old debate” about termination and inaugurate an era of “self-help, self-development, and self-determination.” The president tied self-determination and economic development together; by making reservations self-sufficient, he asserted, the Indians who chose to remain there could do so. But this paper did not renounce assimilation since it promised Indians “full participation in the life of modern America, with a full share of economic opportunity and justice.”<sup>118</sup> The slogan “self-determination without termination” would not come into fashion until the next administration.

Johnson’s Indian policy was neither fish nor fowl. With termination nearly dead and self-determination on the horizon, many liberals remained committed to assimilation, and they only belatedly promoted economic development as a way to advance self-determination. Members of Congress, such as Albert, who represented districts with large Indian populations, offered little leadership in clarifying Native American policy. That task fell to the Nixon Administration.

#### THE 1970S: “SELF-DETERMINATION WITHOUT TERMINATION”

By the 1970s, Albert’s career and federal Indian policy were moving in different directions. During most of the decade, Albert served as Speaker of the House and became preoccupied with cementing a fractious Democratic Party. Meanwhile, Republicans, in charge of the executive branch, seized the initiative and vigorously endorsed “self-determination” for Indian tribes. Never a bold reformer, Albert mostly watched as termination and gradual assimilation became policies of the past.

Following McCormack’s retirement, Albert became Speaker of the House, a position he held from 1971 to 1977. It was not a happy time for Albert; Democrats, shaken by Nixon’s election in 1968, argued about procedure and policy.<sup>119</sup> Older leaders, who had risen through the existing seniority system, backed the US war effort in Vietnam and remained conservative on race, opposing busing as a way to integrate schools. Younger Democrats wanted to diminish the power of committee chairs and open the House to new voices. They were skeptical of ongoing involvement in Vietnam and liberal on civil rights. Albert, a product of the established House hierarchy, a hawk on Vietnam, and a proponent of busing, chose to unite his party by stressing economics. But emphasis on such New Deal-like programs as expanded public works and a higher minimum wage underscored Albert’s own seniority and lack of fresh ideas. Then came Watergate. During the scandal, the United States was on two occasions without a vice president, making Albert first in line to become president. Although the Speaker had the power to influence federal policy, his interest in Indian affairs remained local, allowing others to fill the void.<sup>120</sup>

The Nixon team used firm leadership to expand choices for Indians. A correspondent for the American Indian Press Association reflected in 1974 that the Nixon Administration “has been in the eyes of even the most critical observers one of the most active in Indian affairs since that of . . . Franklin D.

Roosevelt.”<sup>121</sup> In his “famed” Indian message of July 1970, Nixon outlined his belief in “self-determination without termination.” The administration settled land claims with the Taos Pueblo and Yakima tribes and followed up with the Alaskan Native Claims Act (1971) and Indian Self-Determination Act (1975), which enabled Native Americans to form businesses and administer many federal services themselves. The Nixon Administration spent freely on Native American programs, hiking the budget of the BIA, and it established new federal offices to protect Indian land and water rights.<sup>122</sup> The Navajo leader Peter MacDonald, a Republican, even hailed Nixon as “the Abraham Lincoln of the Indian people.”<sup>123</sup> Nixon’s White House, in fact, moved to help a range of minority-run institutions, including businesses, black colleges, and Native American tribes. To some extent, the administration, which enhanced powers for cities and states under its “New Federalism,” considered Indian tribes another form of local government.<sup>124</sup>

Native American protest also encouraged Nixon and his aides to support self-determination. The United States experienced forty-five occupations of federal property by Indian activists between 1969 and 1974, with the best known incidents taking place at Alcatraz Island in 1969, the BIA’s headquarters in 1972, and Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973.<sup>125</sup> Regarding Native American policy, the Nixon Administration differed from its Democratic predecessors in terms of outlook, by exalting local over federal authority, and circumstance, since Nixonians had to counteract Indian militancy.

Nixon’s policy of self-determination helped the Choctaws preserve their tribal status. After Congress postponed the date of termination until 25 August 1970, average Choctaws began debating their future. At a meeting in 1969, one speaker warned that, following termination, each Choctaw would lose all federal benefits in areas of health and education. Another replied that termination would ensure the per capita distribution of tribal assets, giving each eligible Choctaw \$50, a paltry sum. Nearly 90 percent of the Choctaws present petitioned Congress to rescind termination.<sup>126</sup> Belvin thereupon changed course. The one-time advocate of termination now insisted that the BIA had misread the 1959 act to mean withdrawal of all federal benefits, something he was “totally against.”<sup>127</sup> Belvin’s attempt to blame others for termination was not credible, since the bureau had long followed his wishes on Choctaw affairs. Nevertheless, in 1970, Belvin urged Oklahoma’s congressional delegation to secure repeal of the Choctaw Termination Act.

Albert and Harris introduced legislation to cancel the 1959 act but their arguments on behalf of the bill differed.<sup>128</sup> Albert urged repeal for narrow reasons, because the “tribal leaders and individual Choctaws no longer wish to be terminated.”<sup>129</sup> Promising to make Indians “self-supporting, self-sufficient and self-reliant” was as close as Albert would come to voicing the ideal of self-determination.<sup>130</sup> Harris, in contrast, took a macro perspective by asking Congress to reexamine Indian policy and grant all Native American tribes “a greater degree of self-determination.”<sup>131</sup> In 1970 Harris told the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs that any withdrawal of federal assistance would destroy Indian communities and the Indian’s “sense of dignity.”<sup>132</sup> Echoing Nixon, he later denied that America was a “melting pot,”

adding, "What we ought to be doing is not tolerating the difference, but encouraging it."<sup>133</sup> This split between older liberals, such as Albert, and their younger counterparts, such as Harris, became more apparent as Congress debated Nixon's Indian legislation.

Repealing the Choctaw act won widespread support, as Harris had hoped. Virgil Harrington, head of the BIA's Oklahoma office; Governor Overton James of the Chickasaw Nation, a leader of the Five Civilized Tribes; and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce, a Mohawk and a Nixon appointee, all opposed terminating the Choctaws.<sup>134</sup> Bruce, in fact, denounced the 1959 law as "an administrative nightmare."<sup>135</sup> In June 1970, the House unanimously rescinded the act, and the Senate followed suit.<sup>136</sup> Belvin then thanked Albert for his "unsurpassed" assistance, and the congressman replied that he was "delighted" with the repeal.<sup>137</sup> Once again, the two allies had collaborated to achieve a common aim, canceling a measure that they had earlier championed.

The repeal bill benefited from good timing. In July 1970, as the Senate considered the Choctaw matter, Nixon issued a lengthy message on Indian affairs which renounced termination as "unacceptable." He averred that "self-determination among the Indian people can and must be encouraged without the threat of eventual termination."<sup>138</sup> The president asked Congress to disavow termination and pass eight bills to strengthen tribal autonomy. Within this setting, the Choctaw Termination Act seemed passé. The *Oklahoma City Times* favored the law's repeal to test "whether Indian policy really has changed in Washington."<sup>139</sup> By rescinding the Choctaw act, Congress suggested that it had.

During the era of self-determination, the practice of appointing chiefs, such as Belvin, also became outmoded. With Belvin's office set to expire with the Choctaws' status, the BIA saw no reason to recruit a new chief during the 1960s.<sup>140</sup> But Belvin's regime had aroused grassroots resistance.<sup>141</sup> Accordingly, Congress in 1970 repealed the 1906 act and allowed members of the Five Civilized Tribes to elect their own chiefs.<sup>142</sup> In 1971 David Gardner, a local director of Upward Bound, the Great Society's program to assist university students, ran for Choctaw chief.<sup>143</sup> The thirty-one-year-old Gardner advocated industrial development and educational opportunities, as well as open, democratic practices for the Choctaw Nation.<sup>144</sup> Belvin, determined to retain his office, regarded Gardner, like OIO, as an upstart. "These arrogant," he warned Indian commissioner Bruce, "are going to learn something about Indian politics."<sup>145</sup>

Belvin remained true to his word. He portrayed Gardner's supporters as fist-clenched, Red Power militants, which they were not, and drafted rules setting thirty-five as the minimum age for a principal chief.<sup>146</sup> That requirement, which prohibited Gardner from challenging Belvin, angered many Choctaws. In the end, the Interior Department and federal courts upheld the thirty-five-year-old stipulation, suggesting that national policy, in sustaining the wishes of established tribal leaders, had not changed completely.<sup>147</sup> Although Gardner had to withdraw from the race, Belvin had won a Pyrrhic victory. In a field of six candidates, he received 47 percent of the vote in 1971, winning reelection

without majority support. Four years later, Belvin retired as principal chief, and the Choctaws elected Gardner, now thirty-five, as their leader.<sup>148</sup>

The Choctaw election highlighted change and continuity in Native American policy. Great Society programs both trained and inspired younger leaders, such as Gardner, while Nixon's policy gave them greater opportunities to exercise "self-determination." Older leaders, such as Belvin, and their allies, such as Albert, remained in office but appeared out of touch. While Albert backed the popular election of the Choctaw chief, Fred Harris had been its more vocal advocate. In 1971, after a group of Choctaws had protested the thirty-five-year-old age limit, Albert admitted to having "no control" over the rule and deferred to Interior.<sup>149</sup> When one Choctaw called him the "biggest single factor preventing" a fair canvass, Albert replied that the age requirement lay before a federal court and declined to comment.<sup>150</sup> The Speaker was not exactly an unbiased observer. In 1971 he congratulated Belvin on the chief's reelection, adding, "I truly appreciate your support throughout my years of public life."<sup>151</sup> Both men remained bound together while Indian policy shifted beneath their feet.

Unlike Albert, younger liberals welcomed the change. The fact that LaDonna Harris sat on the National Council on Indian Opportunity, an office chaired by Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, no doubt spurred Fred Harris's bipartisanship. In 1970 the White House, backed by Republican and Democratic senators, including Harris and McGovern, secured legislation to return the area around Blue Lake, in New Mexico, to the Taos Pueblo tribe.<sup>152</sup> A year later, Senators Harris and McGovern, along with fellow Democrats Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, Phillip Hart of Michigan, Walter Mondale of Minnesota, and Alan Cranston and John Tunney of California, joined Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, in sponsoring the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.<sup>153</sup> The final version, signed by Nixon, transferred a record 40 million acres of land to Alaska's Native peoples. Youthful liberals, backed by a Republican White House, played a key part in passing legislation to redress Native American grievances.

Albert, in contrast, had a small role in passing another Nixon-era reform, the Menominee Restoration Act of 1973. The law returned the Wisconsin tribe to federal trust status and all but repudiated termination. In 1972 the Speaker, at the request of Fred and LaDonna Harris, conferred with a group of Menominees and then urged Representative James A. Haley, Democrat of Florida and chair of the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, to follow suit.<sup>154</sup> In so doing, Albert began building congressional support for the Menominee bill. The Speaker, with his micro perspective on Indian rights, no doubt saw the act, which the entire Wisconsin delegation favored, as another example of congressmen assisting their constituents.<sup>155</sup> In communicating with Albert's office, Harris's staff stressed a "connection with Oklahoma" since the Menominees, like the Choctaws, were facing "the same threat of being cut off from [federal] benefits."<sup>156</sup> Without a local link, Albert's interest in Indian rights was uncertain.

Albert, in fact, fought Nixon's program to reorganize the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The president, upset with BIA's "routine bureaucratic mental-



ity," had ordered aides to recruit some fresh personnel.<sup>157</sup> In 1970 Indian Commissioner Bruce began streamlining his bureaucracy and reassigning BIA officials who personified "the out-of-date-philosophy" of paternalism.<sup>158</sup> But the leaders of Oklahoma's eastern tribes opposed the plan. "We feel we are making the desired progress for the Indian people," Belvin affirmed, defending the status quo.<sup>159</sup> Agreeing, Albert tried to retain Harrington as head of the BIA office in Oklahoma. "Congressman Edmondson and I are doing everything we can to get the Commissioner to back up on some of his announced policy changes," he assured one constituent.<sup>160</sup> In so doing, he helped conservatives at BIA, including Wilma Victor and John O. Crow, frustrate Bruce's reorganization effort.<sup>161</sup> Albert once again sided with local officials and established Indian leaders in his district against the wishes of would-be reformers.

Albert had even less use for Red Power activists. Late in 1972 AIM leaders Dennis J. Banks, a Chippewa, and Russell Means, an Oglala Sioux, led the "Trail of Broken Treaties" caravan to Washington, D.C., to highlight past injustices. Their protest turned violent when the group occupied and trashed the BIA headquarters, causing \$700,000 in damage.<sup>162</sup> Albert correctly grasped that young Indians were challenging established tribal leaders through acts of civil disobedience.<sup>163</sup> In this struggle, his preference was plain: "I am a friend and supporter of all the elected leaders in our Indian Nations."<sup>164</sup> Although the Speaker found the occupation of the BIA "deplorable," he urged Americans to learn from it by reaffirming their faith in the "democratic process."<sup>165</sup> Albert once again defended the existing political order, in which he held an important place.

Although armed confrontations united policymakers against Indian militants, they also encouraged Congress to act on Native American concerns. Between 1973 and 1975 Congress passed a spate of landmark legislation including the Menominee Restoration Act and the Indian Self-Determination Act, both of which the Speaker, in his low-key manner, supported.<sup>166</sup> Albert once again was more follower than leader on tribal self-determination.

Albert did little to advance the president's other Indian legislation. He took no stand on Nixon's proposal to name an assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian affairs. The measure passed both houses in 1974, then died in a House-Senate conference committee; not until Jimmy Carter's administration would such an office be formed.<sup>167</sup> Albert remained aloof while Representative Lloyd Meeds, Democrat of Washington and member of the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, fought to advance Nixon's recommendation for a resolution repealing H.C.R. 108.<sup>168</sup> Meeds's effort never gathered momentum and such a resolution only passed during Ronald Reagan's presidency.<sup>169</sup> Although by 1973 Watergate-related matters were consuming Albert's attention, stronger leadership by the Speaker would have hastened the enactment of Nixon's Native American agenda.

Albert never took a prominent role in formulating Native American policy. Throughout his first two decades in the House, he took his cues from tribal leaders in his district, who were establishment-oriented and favored assimilation, and from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, whose

Indian policies were murky. During the 1970s, Albert's support for Nixon's program of tribal self-determination proved lukewarm at best.

Albert made greater contributions in defending Indian rights during the 1950s and 1960s, when federal policy proved muddled, than during the 1970s, when the administration firmly endorsed tribal self-determination. Despite the makeup of his district, he did not advocate self-determination for Indians across the United States. Instead Albert, wedded to the House as an institution and to the tribal leaders he represented, sought to enhance the economic station of all Americans, including Native Americans. That integrationist outlook inhibited his seeing the virtues of separate minority institutions, such as Indian tribes, and strengthening them under a program of self-determination. Nixon's moderate Republicanism, which exalted local authority, proved more hospitable to demands for self-determination than Albert's brand of New Deal/Great Society liberalism.

Albert was also trapped by his generational perspective. Like his successor, Speaker Tip O'Neill, Albert believed that all politics were local and that an active state, promoting equal opportunity, could enhance the station of all Americans, whether northern or southern, white or black, Anglo or Indian. Such an outlook seemed valid during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, when the middle class expanded and the federal government began protecting the rights of African Americans. But following the riots of the 1960s, a Republican White House and younger liberals in Congress grasped that racial harmony required something beyond equal rights. Accordingly, federal officials began addressing the concerns of particular ethnic, gender, and racial groups, including Native Americans. There is little evidence that Albert understood this policy shift.

The story of Carl Albert and the Choctaws illustrates how the forces of localism and liberalism acted to delay a program of tribal self-determination. By opposing Bruce's effort to reform the BIA, for example, Albert aligned himself with that agency's established leadership, anathema to change-oriented activists whether Anglo or Indian. In his memoir *Little Giant* (1990), the Oklahoman took pride in his rural roots and his support for both the New Deal and the Great Society. But an inability to look beyond the demands of his political allies, combined with a firm commitment to expanded opportunities for all citizens, blinded Albert to the unique aspirations of Native Americans.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research for this article was made possible by grants from the Fulton School of Liberal Arts, Salisbury University, the Harry S. Truman Library Institute in Independence, Missouri, and the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma, Norman. The author thanks the staff of both institutions, especially Todd Kosmerick and Carolyn Hanneman of the Albert Center, for their friendly assistance. For their helpful comments on this article, he thanks this journal's anonymous reviewers, as well as Dean J. Fafoutis, Katherine Jellison, Ricky Newport, Elizabeth Ragan, and Polly Stewart.

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