9. Indians and Empire

To speak of "Filling in the Far West" is of course to view history and process from the standpoint of White American settlers and developers. After all, the whole area had been filled with Indians following their own patterns of life for many centuries. From this other side, filling in meant closing out, marking the end of Indian freedom and the completion of their conquest, confinement, and systematic subordination within the American empire.
Such a dual contradictory process was apparent at the time to anyone who thought seriously about the matter. As Francis A. Walker (of the Walker Atlas, who served a brief interim as commissioner of Indian Affairs) observed in 1872: "The freedom which expansion gives us to of incalculable value [is] to the Indian . . . of incalculable cost. Every year's advance of our frontier takes in a territory as large as some of the kingdoms of Europe. We are richer by hundreds of millions; the Indian is poorer by a large part of the little he has. This growth is bringing imperial greatness to the nation; to the Indian it brings wretchedness, destitution, beggary." "Surely," Walker went on to say, "there is obligation found in considerations like these," and it was in fact a time of major reassessment of basic understandings and policies related to "the Indian problem."

A report prepared for the great Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 concluded that "the usual theory" of decline and eventual disappearance of the Indian "must be greatly modified." The latest enumeration totaled about 300,000 (excluding newly acquired Alaska). That was surely a marked reduction from the early days of the Republic, but more recent trends were much less certain. Although a generation later the census reported only about 265,000, problems of definition beclouded all such enumerations, and by then there was even more reason to accept the 1870s proposition that "in all probability" the Indians were "destined to form a permanent factor, an enduring element of our population."

They were also, therefore, in all probability an enduring element on the map of the United States (fig. 31). By the opening of the new century the national pattern of Indian reservations appeared to be generally fixed, even though many local issues remained to be resolved by Congress or the courts and many details of the pattern would be modified in the years to come. That simple geopolitical pattern was a profound display of imperial history and policies. (We shall here confine our attention to the western half of the nation.)

The initial, compelling impression is one of brokenness, a shattering, a scattering of fragments and huge areas swept clean—a late stage in the relentless advance of a conquering population. Such a view gives appropriate stress to the pressures applied but can mislead as to the results obtained. For the wholeness that was shattered was a unit only in the general sense of "Indian Land"—a perception peculiar to the Whites—whereas that area was in fact composed of hundreds of tribal areas, greatly varying in size and shape, often imprecise in definition, unstable in location. Many of what may seem to be fragments were more precisely remnants, tribal territories still anchored on traditional ground, a persistence rather than a scattering, even though much reduced in scope. Indeed many such reductions were more drastic than any general map can convey for some peoples were left with only a few hundred acres; yet that attests that in some cases even bands of a few people tenaciously clung to some bit of ground and won formal
31. Indian Reservations, 1900.

Portion of Plate 36A, Paullin and Wright, Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States, 1932 (Courtesy The Carnegie Institution of Washington)
recognition from the imperial power. Furthermore, such a map cannot show various other concessions, such as the right of taking fish or of hunting and gathering on designated waters and grounds.

And yet, there were indeed many fragments in this overall pattern, more than the simple outline of areas reveals, for a good many reservations now contained several different sets of Indians and many of these represented dislodgments and sometimes drastic relocations by imperial decree. The idea of creating a few large reserves to accommodate further mass removals remained alive long after the first great Indian Territory had been partially dissolved. The reduction of that entity to its original southern half (modern Oklahoma) led to the logic of creating a similar area north of the central transcontinental trafficway, where the Sioux still occupied a large area. Another one or two might be located somewhere in the Far West (the Yakima in the Northwest and somewhere in the Southwest were suggested). It is not clear that successive proponents of such a policy envisioned a complete removal of all Western Indians into a few collection areas. What is clear is their main concern with imperial efficiency and convenience. Such concentrations, they argued, would be far easier to protect and police ("the sale of liquors and arms could be more effectually prevented; bad white men could more easily be kept out of the Indian country"); shorter, well-defined boundaries would allow fewer possibilities for White contact and encroachment ("the danger of violence, bloodshed, and mutual wrong materially lessened"); many agencies "could be abolished"; and logistic costs would be greatly lessened ("many are so remote and difficult of access"). Most important, of course, was the fact that "large bodies of land would be thrown open to settlement"—entire states and territories could be freed of this nagging, miserable complication to their growth and prosperity.

But increasingly removal on such a scale had a bad reputation. The tragic history of the Cherokees on their Trail of Tears was becoming better known, the costly failure of the forced relocation of the Navahos to Bosque Redondo was fresh in the minds of pertinent administrators, and in the late 1870s new cases of similar tragedy and injustice (the Northern Cheyennes and the Poncas) received national publicity. Eastern sympathizers rallied to the cause of Indians in general; Westerners were alert to oppose any attempt to use their state or territory as a dumping ground for more Indians. A few prominent punitive removals were carried out, such as exiling recalcitrant Modocs, Chiricahua Apaches, and Chief Joseph and his band of Nez Perces to Oklahoma (these last were later released), but the concept of concentrating all Western Indians in a few large territories was never enacted. It would, of course, have been an immensely complicated, costly, and controversial program—but one backed by a powerful American precedent.

The ruling policy, more by default than by desire, remained one of many small reservations, ad hoc creations arising out of local circumstances. Ideally each
reserve should be assigned as (in the words of an 1850s commissioner) "a permanent home, a country adapted to agriculture, of limited extent and well-defined boundaries; within which all, with occasional exceptions, should be compelled constantly to remain until such time as their general improvement and good conduct may supersede the necessity of such restrictions." In fact, such ethnic enclaves tended to be located on marginal lands least desired by Whites. Officials responsible for the management of such enclosures usually recognized the imperative corollary that these be made inviolable, free from the trespass of Whites, but Indian reservations in effect were protectorates without protection, for the imperial government never had the will to marshal the means and enforce its treaty obligations. As an investigative board concluded in 1869: "the arm which should have been raised to protect them has ever been ready to sustain the aggressor."

Policy makers always regarded Indian reservations as more than just holding pens for a marginalized people; each was to be a school for "civilization." Most Indian treaties included provisions for farmers, artisans, and teachers to reshape Indians into successful participants in American society. Proponents often envisioned large composite Indian territories as states in embryo, evolving into full (or perhaps special) members of the federal union. In such projections, tribalism would naturally have become subdued and tribal areas would become simply the constituent counties within the incipient state. Yet "tribalism"—the basic sociopolitical integrity of each traditional Indian group, whatever it might be called—was the one thing that virtually every Indian leader insisted on maintaining. That resolute stand proved anathema to a wide spectrum of Americans, including most of the self-defined "friends of the Indian." As one commissioner put it, to permit Indians to organize a local "government of their own" simply "to gratify this sentimentality about a separate nationality" would create a "political paradox"; it was an "un-American and absurd idea." And indeed by the time he was writing (1886), the practice of contracting treaties with Indian groups, no matter how large or small, as if each was "an independent nation, tribe, or power" had been abruptly ended by Congress fifteen years earlier. Such a change had been strongly advocated by many imperial agents, especially the military, which thought it absurd even to define each Indian society as a "domestic dependent nation" (long the official legal term) when they were in fact or in prospect simply helpless wards of the federal government.

As the work of conquest neared completion the next stage in the national program, to transform Indians into productive American citizens, received ever-greater attention. The reservation system, initiated long ago when much of "the Indian race was outside the limits of the organized States and Territories and beyond the immediate reach and operation of civilization," needed to be reassessed, for civilization now "surrounds these people at every point." Reservations,
which had been initiated as a device for protecting Indians through separation, must now be adapted to foster integration.

There was by this time a broad consensus on what needed to be done. First of all, Indians had to be "de-tribalized." Their "excessive attachment to Indian tradition and nationality" had been "one of the most serious hindrances to the advancement of the Indian toward civilization," and thus "their tribal cohesion" must be dissolved so that they can "merge" into "the body politic as independent and self-relying men." Second, they must leave their old nomadic, shiftless ways and become anchored on the land as self-reliant farmers. Third, "the Indian will never be reclaimed until he ceases to be a communist": they must become individual owners of land and learn to manage private property. Fourth, Indians must forsake their traditional communal-consensual concepts and modes of law and authority ("a 'chief' in white terms was always a white invention") and embrace the American system of formal laws, rights, and procedures as well as hierarchical structures of power. Finally, Indians must become imbued with American patriotism. They must be compelled "to come out of isolation, into the civilized way . . . —into citizenship— . . . into the path of national duty." Native tongues must give way to English, native names translated into "decent and reasonable" names, native religious ceremonies replaced by standard Christian pieties; Indian youth should be instructed "in the elements of American history" and "the elementary principles of the Government," and schools should feature "the American flag," "patriotic songs," and "national holidays."

Individualism, self-reliance, private property, laws, courts, and leadership, patriotism, and Christian piety: in short, preparation for the fullest participation in "Anglo-Saxon civilization." There was little dissent among White leaders from the general intent of this program (their wards were not invited to contribute). Some members of the emerging field of scientific anthropology warned that whole societies could not be changed so readily, but even they—evolutionists all—accepted the concept that private ownership of property was the "principal instrument" of social advancement in the "natural order of progress . . . from a nomadic to an agricultural state." John Wesley Powell, famous expert on the American West and first director of the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution, though warning of difficulties, strongly endorsed the necessity of some such initiative. It seemed at the time the only hope. As a commissioner bluntly put it in 1889: "This civilization may not be the best possible, but it is the best the Indian can get. They can not escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it."

In the 1880s a rapidly expanding, ever-more centralized and standardized Bureau of Indian Affairs launched "what amounted to a wholesale assault on Indian culture and community organization," banning religious ceremonies and objects, altering marriage practices, sending children to off-reservation boarding schools
(much the most famous, and far afield, was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania). But the really decisive move was the General Allotment, or Dawes, Act of 1887. Its central feature was severality: the allocation of individual parcels of land to tribal members (160 acres to each household, half that to orphans and single adults). The title deed to such lands was to be held in trust by the secretary of the interior for twenty-five years, so as to preclude quick sale or lease to Whites and to await further progress toward civilization. The remaining "surplus" reservation lands were to be auctioned to White claimants and revenue from such sales applied to expansion of Indian schools and other aids. Upon finally receiving title to the land, each Indian was to become a citizen and subject to the laws of the state where he resided. As Frederick E. Hoxie concluded, the Dawes Act "stands as a pure product of the reformer mind of the age—hostile to every vestige of tribalism, coercive, well-meaning, certain that the Great Father knew what was best for his red children."

At the outset, officials emphasized the need to proceed gradually and carefully to carry out this radical transformation of Indian tenure and status. Each reservation was to be opened only at the discretion of the president and with the consent of the tribe. But local and national pressures quickly compromised every provision of this idealistic scheme. Empowered by new Supreme Court rulings, Congress proceeded to divest the Indians of their lands as quickly as possible. Necessity of Indian approval to begin the allotment process was abrogated, the right to lease lands approved, and shortly thereafter the right to sell; revenues were used to develop irrigation systems and other facilities to enhance development—virtually all for the benefit of Whites. Such a precipitous transfer of lands was often rationalized as the most effective means of "civilizing" Indians: by forcing them to labor on their own small plots and to follow the example of their White neighbors. (A Western senator had vigorously argued for including in the Dawes Act a provision allowing Indians to select only alternate quarter-sections, so as to create a checkerboard pattern of comprehensive contact with White settlers—the extreme opposite of years of support for the ideal of ethnic segregation.) The Indian school system was rapidly expanded but also increasingly altered in objective from education for citizenship to "industrial training" in manual skills. And the very concept of citizenship was modified in the Indian case to allow continued imperial management of unequal peoples.

The Five Civilized Tribes were excluded from the original Dawes Act (as were the Pueblo Indians, who were ostensibly secured in their lands and citizenship by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo). Because these peoples had "ignored their allegiance to the United States" during the Civil War parts of their original spacious reservations had been taken from them and used to accommodate the relocation of other tribes, but they lived relatively comfortably on the remainders, with herds of
cattle on fine pastures, farms, orchards, and an array of modern institutions: tribal capitol and elected governments, courthouses, schools, churches, and seminaries, hospitals and asylums, newspapers, and much else. But they had been forced to allow railroads to cross their lands, the territory was studded with new towns, and there were already more Whites than Indians in residence. A national program for Indian allotments inevitably intensified agitations to break open tribal hold upon “this inviting tract of country, larger than all New England,” and the creation of Oklahoma Territory in 1890 and sequence of large land openings therein generated explosive pressures from local “boomers” and government officials alike. The councils of the Five Civilized Tribes firmly resisted the concept of severalty, whereupon, in 1898, Congress forced it upon them, decreed the end of tribal courts, and set a deadline (1906) for the termination of tribal government.

In 1870 a bill to create a “Territory of Ok-la-ho-ma” had brought memorials from Indian leaders denouncing any such transformation as a violation of treaties and a White scheme to steal their lands, and had spurred the General Council of the Five Civilized Tribes to assess means of preserving local tribal control. Subsequent subdivision of their special territory, the actual creation of an Oklahoma, and insurge of White settlers propelled strong movements locally and in Congress for single statehood for “the Twin Territories.” However, the wording of an 1889 agreement between a federal commission and the Cherokees seemed to recognize the real possibility of separate statehood for the residual Indian Territory, and within a few years Indians (and various interested Whites) had held a convention, drawn up a constitution, had their proposed State of Sequoyah (with the capital initially at Fort Gibson) endorsed by referendum by a huge margin (although the Creeks and Chickasaws were not supportive), and petitioned Congress for admission (cf. fig. 30). But the senator in charge of the Committee on Territories had already forthrightly declared that “no bill making Indian Territory a state has the slightest chance of passage,” and such was the case. Nationally the issue of Oklahoma and Sequoyah became entangled with that of Arizona and New Mexico, with little congressional support for four new states and eight more senators from sparsely populated regions (and no administration support for a Sequoyah that it assumed would always vote Democratic). The alternative was “jointure” in both cases and was passed in 1907. However, whereas a combined Arizona-New Mexico required the approval of voters in each of those territories, no such dual endorsement was appended to the Oklahoma case and single statehood was ratified by 70 percent of the 255,000 voters. In the end most Whites and some Indians in Indian Territory gave their approval rather than continue as an increasingly undependable federal dependency. A few years later the superintendent of the Union Agency now administering the Five Civilized Tribes (Congress had relented on the schedule for terminating all tribal authority) reported that the work of allotment to
the 101,216 enrolled members (including 23,381 "Freedmen"—former Black slaves or their descendants) was nearing completion.

Advocates of this national policy could point to reassuring signs in the new century that "the Indian problem" was heading toward a solution. The era of open warfare and bloody clashes seemed at last to be past; large numbers of Indians had been reduced to dependence on government rations for physical survival—for food, clothing, medicines; and an imperial management system was supervising a comprehensive program of culture change. In his first annual message to Congress, Theodore Roosevelt spoke with satisfaction of the allotment program as "a mighty pulverizing machine to break up the tribal mass." Anthropologists were avidly at their work of "salvage," to gather from the oldest living tribal members what Indian culture was like before it was distorted by the irresistible forces of contact and set on the path of disintegration and disappearance. Within a few years the first volumes of the ultimately twenty-volume work on The North American Indian by the famous photographer Edward S. Curtis ("a modern George Catlin") would appear, with its haunting opening shot of a band of Navaho fading into the desert haze, conveying, as the caption stated, that "the Indians, as a race, already shorn of their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future." And indeed, the ultimate objective of the government's program was to make the Indian invisible: to vanish as a special category of people; to make American Indians into individual Indian Americans. It was inevitable, because one could not halt progress; it was appropriate because Indian societies were not worth saving—why preserve primitive "islands" in the midst of civilization?

Yet one did not have to look far to see that such assumptions and expectations were quite unreal. Severalty, the key instrument for change, was proving to be far more complicated and far less effective than expected. The process of defining those eligible, surveying the land, and assigning individual parcels was expensive and tedious and peaceably resisted by most Indians for as long as possible. Furthermore, the whole concept was simply inappropriate to many cases. Allotments were supposed to turn Indians into farmers or stock raisers, but large portions of reservation lands were desert, mountain, canyonlands, badlands, timberlands, or mere fishing stations. And so, although the program was put into effect in the fertile lands of the Great Plains and a few other arable areas (such as the Camas Prairie of the Nez Perces), after twenty years of effort less than half of all Indian lands had been allotted and less than 2 percent of that was actually cultivated by Indians. By then it was becoming clear that the "campaign for equality and total assimilation had become a campaign to integrate native resources into the American economy"—that is, to get these lands into the hands of Whites as soon as possible. In 1913 the commissioner of Indian Affairs admitted that, abetted by the Oklahoma legislature, the Indians there had been "subject to an orgy of looting." Furthermore, as Frederick
Hoxie summarized in his careful study of the topic, by that time "assimilation was no longer an optimistic enterprise born of idealism or faith in human progress; the term now referred to the process by which 'primitive' people were brought into regular contact with an 'advanced' society. When this process produced exploitation and suffering, it seemed logical to believe that it was teaching Native Americans the virtues of self-reliance and the evils of backwardness."

Most important, despite earlier expectations and still some wishful thinking, Indians were not vanishing. They were indeed "a permanent factor, an enduring element of our population." American policy makers had always considered "Indian Country" anomalous and temporary, yet there it was: nearly 200 "islands," forming several regional archipelagoes on the geopolitical map of twentieth-century America. However fragmented, reduced, marginalized, and compromised these scattered remains might appear, they represented the tenacious hold of Indian peoples on their own identities. However penetrated and subverted these territories might be, ostensible Indian reserves wherein White intruders, settlers, and leasees controlled most of the land and imperial agents asserted authoritarian rule over many dimensions of Indian life, these were more than hollow frameworks: they represented fundamental legal and psychological realities in basic geographic form. Furthermore, these were not just "Indian" lands but many kinds of lands containing distinct Indian societies greatly varied in numbers, character, and economy, in location, experience, and types of relationships with White America. Imperial agents in the field might be acutely aware of such deeply grounded variety, but national policies were always shaped by the general assumption that "Indians" constituted a single category of people who must all be changed in the same manner by similar processes. Such crude tools were bound to fail in a task so varied and difficult. On the other side, the failure to create an Indian state as a member of the federal union was less important than the success—despite a bitter, desolating history of assault—of hanging on to these many bits and pieces. For although the former might have become a powerful symbol of an "Indian" presence and participation in federal affairs, these dozens of enclaves scattered across half the national territory attested to a long roll call of captive peoples who continued as a real presence—as Pawnee, Papago, Paiute; as Apache, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Chinook; as Modoc, Makah, Mohave, and two hundred others. In the long run, these bits of territory—turf—matter.