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AIO: PROBLEM AND RESPONSE

The American Indian was granted U.S. citizenship in his own land in 1924, four years after women received the right to vote. The Bill of Rights was extended to the Native American in 1968.

The 1970 Census showed American Indians to be the poorest minority in the U.S. Today. The contemporary Indian faces these problems:

- .Nearly 40 percent of the entire population are unemployed; the average income of the Native American family on the reservation hovers around \$1,500. For Indians in cities, it is not much higher.
- .The infant mortality rate is three times the national norm; average age at death is 44.
- .Approximately half the population is functionally illiterate; 80 percent of men have less than five years of formal education. The school drop-out rate is twice the national average.
- .Alcoholism far exceeds the national median and an appalling number of these victims are teenagers.
- .Tests reveal an American Indian student in the twelfth grade has a lower self-image than his

counterpart in any other minority.

.The suicide rate among teenagers alone
is five times the national average.

Since the burgeoning industrialism of the 1880's, land belonging to the American Indian has dwindled from 138 million acres to 55 million acres. The federal and state governments, in essentially a quid pro quo exchange for the land, pledged to provide, indefinitely, services of a unique nature to all American Indians. That pledge remains in effect, but as yet, remains to be completely and effectively fulfilled. Of the 1.2 to 2 million Native Americans in the U.S. today, at least half is "unrecognized" by the Bureau of Indian Affairs because they live off reservation, many as a direct result of the relocation policy once embraced by the Bureau itself.

Statistics evidence the myriad difficulties facing the Native American today. These are easily understood. Not so apparent to the non-Indian, however, are two special American Indian concerns: 1) the right to survive and prosper as an Indian; that is, to maintain his cultural identity or become assimilated on his own terms, rather than through a government fiat; and 2) his right to expect government protection of his land and its natural resources and his tribal and civil rights.

This desire to maintain cultural identity may at first appear to contradict a traditional American imperative: assimilation. Only now is there a grudging acceptance and

conscious recognition of what has always been a source of America's strength: ethnic pride in heritage and culture, based on respect for the individual.

According to Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. of American Heritage and author of several books on Indian Affairs, including a special report on the Bureau of Indian Affairs written for President Nixon:

"The true motive behind the drive to force Indian assimilation has been -- and continues to be -- the acquisitive greed for Indian lands and resources. Many non-Indians undoubtedly believe that the era when the Indians were defrauded and cheated of their lands is over. But the facts are the opposite...Today the assault is more massive and threatening to them than at any time during the recent past."

Government, of course, can do much to remedy the situation. The private sector, especially the business community, can -- and must -- do more in understanding and helping the American Indian.

Where, however, does an individual or a business begin? The many obvious difficulties notwithstanding, it is essential for the non-Indian to recognize that when he uses the term "American Indian," he speaks of over 350 different tribes with diverse cultures and languages, unified only in white history

and, presently, in their poverty and desperation. There is no prototypal tribe; indeed, between some tribes there is even an historical and contemporary rivalry.

Generally, non-Indians are unaware of fundamental problems. By the late 1960's, it became evident that what was sorely needed was an organization to act as a communicator and catalyst in Indian affairs, serving as both a "meeting ground" of American Indians and the non-Indian community, and as an agent working for reasonable change.

With this challenge Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) was founded in 1970. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., AIO is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization which undertakes a unique role in the context of other Indian organizations; its board of directors, while composed mainly of Native Americans, includes representatives of American industry, labor and education. Its members have a common objective transcending the bounds of racial and cultural differences: to create an understanding of the Indian's role, past and present, in shaping American history and culture, and to initiate strategies and programs to expand the life-options open to the American Indian.

AIO's objectives and purposes are:

- .to provide technical assistance to any Indian tribe or organization striving to improve conditions in their communities; assistance includes referral to funding agencies, critique

and development of proposals, and initial contacts with government officials.

- .to act as a program and/or grievance advocate for Indian people on a national level and with the federal government.
- .to educate and advise non-Indian organizations and institutions on Indian issues, the role of the Native American in shaping American history and culture, and on the responsibilities of the private sector to the Indian community.
- .to develop opportunities for Native Americans to participate in the larger non-Indian society, and to meet their responsibilities to that society while maintaining their own heritage.
- .to develop model or experimental programs in response to the needs of the Indian community, attempting to make such programs exemplary and hence, applicable on a national basis.

AIO often can respond to a problem in which others lacked the experience or organization to confront. Ultimately, AIO seeks to establish, with unified effort as well as the necessary faith, a new era in Indian/non-Indian relations.

For example, AIO has undertaken a model program to explore the possibilities for united action by Indians on a regional basis. The project has two basic objectives: to unite Indians

living on and off reservations to work for common goals, and to develop local resources which could be tapped to the benefit of Indian people.

To promote equal justice for Native Americans, AIO organized a national conference called "Justice" and Native Americans. By examining the administration of law enforcement in areas inhabited by large numbers of Indians police-Indian tensions were moderated. This resulted in an AIO-produced, 30-minute television documentary, "Now Is the Time: Justice and Native Americans," as well as a "community options guide," containing recommendations from the conference and which was distributed to tribes and law enforcement agencies.

Another useful effort has been AIO's institution of regular meetings of Indian people in Washington who are actively involved in Indian affairs. This has eliminated confusion and needless duplication of efforts, and has resulted in a growing sense of community which is helpful in the development of cooperative programs.

AIO has also become involved in efforts:

- .to correct discrimination against Indian children which has existed for many years.
- .to explore the possibilities of international cooperative among Native Peoples of various countries. (AIO helped convene the first international conference of Native Peoples of the North American continent.)

.to monitor closely federal regulations
implementing laws applicable to Indians.

Our Brother's Keeper: The Indian in White America,

edited by Edgar S. Cahn under the auspices of the Citizens' Advocate Center, a non-profit organization designed to monitor government programs. There is a conclusion that "the American Indian is ... a stranger in his homeland."

Although extremely proud of our history, when we trace it, we tend to revert to Europe. Yet we, as Americans, are heirs to another culture, older and as rich as Europe's -- that of the American Indians.

That unique individual called "The American" is a result of a magical confrontation between two very different cultures, the European and the American Indian. The essence of America is still the lingering image of the frontiersman. Early and later settlers learned much from the Indians. It was the Indian who taught them how to cultivate the land, hunt, fish, and ultimately survive in a "new world." That two centuries after this nation's founding, the American Indian is indeed "a stranger in his homeland" is an irony which should be unsettling and provoking to all who share this land.