Mother Earth, Father Sky, and Economic Development: Navajo Resources and Their Use, Philip Reno

Fred L. Ragsdale

Recommended Citation
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MOTHER EARTH, FATHER SKY,
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:
NAVAJO RESOURCES AND THEIR USE.

By PHILIP RENO

Dr. Reno's short study of Navajo economic development unfortu-
nately fails to be of much use to any of the entities touted on the
dust jacket: Navajo educators, students, tribal policymakers, thinkers,
and leaders, because it fails to address the fundamental paradox in
Indian economic development—tribal self-government and the federal
trusteeship. He has documented facts that are well known, the poor
rate of return on mineral leases, the history of Navajo sheep, and the
traditional weaknesses of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. However,
these facts are not used to suggest a solution to the basic paradox.

Too often, the facts of the economic rape of the Navajo are raised
as examples of the exploitation of Indians without asking who should
bear the burden of guilt for the underlying agreements. The book
assumes that the federal government, particularly the Bureau of Indian
Affairs, is the culprit. In one sense, this is correct because the Bureau
should not have approved some of the contracts extant but rather
ought to have acted against the wishes of the tribe and simply said
"no," despite tribal ownership of resources and right of exercise of
self-government.

Dr. Reno fails to take into account the responsibility of the tribal
leadership to negotiate contracts that would guarantee a fair rate of
return. The Navajo-Exxon joint venture agreement is an excellent ex-
ample of this. He quotes a "mineral consultant" who "... never
could understand why a tribe cannot consider obtaining equity shares
without cash payment ..." (p. 139), and leaves this hanging as part
of the general criticism of the joint venture, but never answers the
question. A tribe can consider and in fact get the equity shares; the
real question is not why they cannot consider it, but why the tribal
leadership and the tribal attorneys did not negotiate that type of
agreement.

The most unfortunate aspect of Dr. Reno's book is that it gives the
impression of addressing the very serious issue of Indian economic
development but does not. The history of Indian policy has often
been the case of the appearance of solution, without solution. A ser-
ious book on Indian economic development needs to be written, one
which will provide explicit guidelines for development rather than re-
hashing past mistakes. This, as yet unwritten, book should examine the issue from the perspective of the unique position of the Indian tribes, and not turn to the often used but seldom useful analogy of the Third World.

FRED L. RAGSDALE, JR., J.D.
Member, Chemehuevi Tribe
Havasu Lake, California