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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY CHRONICLE • LXVII • NO. 2 • WINTER 2006

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VOLUME LXVII 2005–2006



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# The Association on American Indian Affairs and the Struggle for Native American Rights, 1948–1955

PAUL C. ROSIER

ON the eve of a “new frontier” in Indian-white relations under the administration of John F. Kennedy, Oliver La Farge (1901–1963), an anthropologist and the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Laughing Boy* (1929), reflected on the changes the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) had undergone during its first forty years, including the nearly thirty years he had devoted to it as president. Writing to AAIA Executive Director LaVerne Madigan in January 1961, he described three main stages in the history of the organization founded by whites to defend the rights and promote the welfare of Native Americans: “I would say that the period from 1922 to 1933 was the era of kindly paternalism and that the period from 1933 to the end of World War II was the era of transition leading to our present point of view.” The association emerged from its “cocoon” into the third stage after World War II, largely because Indian rights were once again under assault by politicians and reformers during the so-called termination era. “We had grown well away from the paternalistic approach and the lady-bountiful desire to do nice things for the dear Indians,” he told Madigan. “We also modified greatly our attitude towards the retention, protection, or encouragement of aboriginal Indian culture . . . taking the position that it should be up to the Indians to decide what elements of their culture to preserve and that only those elements would survive that proved rewarding to the Indians themselves under the changing conditions of the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> La Farge could have noted that he himself had been a prin-

I would like to acknowledge the generous research support provided by the Friends of the Princeton University Library and the Villanova University Department of History, and the expert editorial guidance of Gretchen Oberfranc.

<sup>1</sup> Oliver La Farge to LaVerne Madigan, January 17, 1961, Archives of the Association on American Indian Affairs, box 134, folder 18, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library



Logo of the Association on American Indian Affairs, from *The American Indian* (Spring 1946). Archives of the Association on American Indian Affairs, box 378, folder 6, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of the AAIA.

cipal barrier to the AAIA's adoption of an attitude more consonant with the ideas of cultural pluralism and new directions in American anthropology during the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>

Oliver La Farge has been the subject of several biographies and works of literary criticism.<sup>3</sup> Less well known is the story of the AAIA,

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(hereafter AAIA Archives). I have benefited from the excellent finding aid, which is available online.

<sup>2</sup>Sol Tax of the University of Chicago was perhaps the most public of the academics who believed anthropologists had an obligation to practice "action anthropology," that is, to help the groups they studied. Judith Daubenmier explores Tax's career in "The Meskwakis and Sol Tax: Reconsidering the Actors in Action Anthropology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2004). Commissioner John Collier helped establish the Applied Anthropology Unit in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1935, creating similar opportunities for anthropologists to work on contemporary social problems. On the Applied Anthropology Unit, see Lawrence Kelly, "Anthropology and Anthropologists in the Indian New Deal," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 16 (1980), 6–24; and D'Arcy McNickle, "Anthropology and the Indian Reorganization Act," in *The Uses of Anthropology*, ed. Walter Goldschmidt (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1979), 51–78. For an excellent volume on anthropology and Native Americans, see Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman, eds., *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria, Jr., and the Critique of Anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>On La Farge, see Everett A. Gillis, *Oliver La Farge*, Southwestern Writers Series, 9 (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Co., 1967); Robert A. Hecht, *Oliver La Farge and the American*



although historians have documented its various contributions to the protection of Native American rights.<sup>4</sup> My focus here is not on the AAIA's impact in the area of rights, but on the internal debates among its leaders over termination and assimilation. An intellectual history of the AAIA during its painful and contentious evolution into its critical third stage offers insights into the ways in which the termination crisis not only challenged Native Americans to defend their homelands and their identities but also forced the most prominent Indian rights organization in the United States to define and to defend its own identity, its "basic philosophy" toward the people who justified its existence. The story of how La Farge and other longtime AAIA directors adapted to and embraced new anthropological and legal conceptions of difference is told in Princeton University Library's holdings of the extensive archives of the association.

More than anything else, the termination crisis of the late 1940s and 1950s forced the AAIA to redefine itself and its mission. Federal officials intensified their efforts to dismantle the reservation system and relocate Native Americans within "mainstream" American society. The motivations ranged from criminal to well-meaning: stripping Native Americans of valuable tribal property in the West, furthering longstanding assimilation policies, eliminating expensive federal programs, ending guardianship restrictions on liquor and firearms purchases, and adjudicating hundreds of land claims. But the discourse of termination was that of the Cold War. For American cold warriors, the enslaved peoples of the world included the Indians of America, who were "confined" in "concentration camps" or "socialistic environments"; their "liberation" would "integrate" or

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*Indian: A Biography*, Native American Resources Series, no. 2 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991); D'Arcy McNickle, *Indian Man: A Life of Oliver La Farge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971); and T. M. Pearce, *Oliver La Farge*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, 191 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>Those contributions include helping the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) get organized in 1944 and fight against tribal termination bills in 1954, working on behalf of Pyramid Lake Paiutes, and furthering the claims of Alaska Natives in the 1960s. See in particular Thomas W. Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Donald Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); and Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933-1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

“incorporate” them into the main body of American citizens. The influential terminationist Senator Arthur Watkins (R-Utah) championed his so-called “Indian freedom program” with an emphatic call: “Following in the footsteps of the Emancipation Proclamation . . . I see the following words embellished in letters of fire above the heads of the Indians—THESE PEOPLE SHALL BE FREE.”<sup>5</sup> In August 1953, House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) 108 codified Congress’s intent to end “Federal supervision and control” of Indian affairs by making American Indians “subject to the same laws and entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities” as other American citizens. Federal officials subsequently attempted to “terminate” treaty-based federal Indian policies through legislation that unilaterally stripped individual tribes of their sovereignty without their consent.<sup>6</sup>

In 1948, as the pressure for termination began to mount, the AAIA was an organization headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York City, led by an anthropologist, La Farge, who lived in New Mexico, and governed by a board of white philanthropists and anthropologists who were, for the most part, detached from Native America culturally, politically, and geographically. By 1955, a Native American had joined the association’s board of directors, the leadership had revised significantly its views on assimilation, and William Zimmerman Jr., former Associate Commissioner of Indian Affairs, was directing its legislative programs from Washington, D.C. The AAIA had indeed emerged, slowly and painfully, from its cocoon after World War II

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Watkins, “Termination of Federal Supervision: The Removal of Restrictions over Indian Property and Person,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 311 (May 1957), 55. On Watkins’s role in the termination movement, see R. Warren Metcalf, *Termination’s Legacy: The Discarded Indians of Utah* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 21–48, 234–43.

<sup>6</sup> See House Concurrent Resolution 108, August 1, 1953, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 234. On termination, see in particular Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*; Philp, *Termination Revisited*; Larry J. Hasse, “Termination and Assimilation: Federal Indian Policy, 1943 to 1961” (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1974); and Larry W. Burt, *Tribalism in Crisis: Federal Indian Policy, 1953–1961* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982). In the end, roughly 13,000 Native Americans were “terminated,” and 1,365,801 acres of trust land were withdrawn from government supervision, representing about 3 percent of the Native American land base. For details, see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 348.

into a third stage marked by its embrace of Indian culture as a viable force in the twentieth century and beyond.

The critical transformation of this important Indian rights group took place in the context of international events as well as the domestic civil rights movement. As historians such as Mary Dudziak, Thomas Borstlemann, and Penny M. von Eschen have shown, it is difficult to discuss postwar civil rights without considering its international connections. American civil rights activists as well as white supporters became aware of the implications of domestic discrimination for U.S. foreign policy after World War II. During the termination era, Native American activists began to connect their crisis of sovereignty with that of other “colonized” peoples of the world. At this intersection of the Cold War decolonization and shifting race relations at home and abroad, the leadership of the AAIA wrestled with the very notion of Indianness and its place in the “changing conditions of the modern world.” In the process, AAIA leaders enlarged their conception of Indian rights to one of universal civil rights.



In 1937, the National Association on Indian Affairs, led by La Farge, merged with the American Indian Defense Association, whose president, John Collier, had resigned in 1933 to become Commissioner of Indian Affairs. It was a somewhat contentious wedding, given La Farge’s wariness of Collier, whom he later called a “dictator,” but an important one as it allowed members of the two organizations to remain active at a critical time in Indian-white relations. Both groups were financially weakened in the Depression years, in part because they derived funding from similar circles of supporters.<sup>7</sup> The groups had had disagreements, most importantly over the Defense Association’s more aggressive pursuit of bureaucratic reform versus the National Association’s focus on health, education, and arts and crafts. La Farge supported the merger not only for financial reasons, but also because the disagreements had softened after Collier joined the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and because he thought the unification would preclude new conflicts after Collier left public office. As La Farge saw

<sup>7</sup> Oliver La Farge to Alexander Lesser, April 29, 1949, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives. The Eastern Association on Indian Affairs changed its name to the National Association on Indian Affairs in 1933, the same year in which La Farge became its president.

it, the merger represented “an absorption by the National Association of the Indian Defense Association.”<sup>8</sup> The new organization’s name reflected this dynamic in dropping the active word “defense” for the more neutral American Association on Indian Affairs. In 1946, the organization became the Association on American Indian Affairs because, as La Farge put it, “people began coming around to the office with problems bearing upon Hindus.”<sup>9</sup>

When La Farge reassumed the presidency of the AAIA in 1948 after spending the war years as the official historian of the Air Transport Command, the association had expanded organizationally by adding two key positions and personalities to fill them: an executive director, the anthropologist Alexander Lesser of Columbia University, and a general counsel, Felix S. Cohen, who had just resigned from the Interior Department after fifteen years in the Office of the Solicitor, where he served as head of the Indian Law Survey and wrote the *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* (1941). As the termination movement evolved in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the AAIA offered a mixed response that reflected its hybrid mission resulting from the 1937 merger. The student of Indian culture La Farge and his passive stance occupied one position; the New Dealer Cohen and his passion for action represented the other. Both men would compete for Lesser’s loyalty and support while pursuing strategies to counter termination.

La Farge was hardly a critic of termination, at least the ideas that defined it in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and was a cautious supporter of tribal self-determination. His “Proposed Program” for the AAIA in 1948 defined as “the broad purpose of the Association, which also underlies our national Indian policy: to bring about the mutually beneficial assimilation of the Indians into our general population.”<sup>10</sup> Though still new to the AAIA, Cohen immediately contested this guiding philosophy. In no uncertain terms, he told Lesser that La Farge’s phrase, “assimilation of the Indians into our general

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Hecht, *Oliver La Farge*, 117; see chap. 5 for the merger. Collier would later serve, briefly, on the AAIA board of directors after his resignation from the BIA in 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver La Farge to LaVerne Madigan, January 17, 1961, box 134, folder 18, AAIA Archives.

<sup>10</sup> “Proposed Program of the Association on American Indian Affairs for Use of the American Indian Fund,” May 3, 1948, box 4, folder 31, AAIA Archives.



Oliver La Farge, n.d. Archives of the Association on American Indian Affairs, box 415, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of the AAIA.



Felix S. Cohen, 1953. Courtesy Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

population,” meant the “wiping out of all distinctive Indian traits of character or culture, in line with the ‘melting pot’ idea of wiping out all non-Anglo-Saxon traits in immigrants.” As a “Jew of Russian descent,” he found the idea unpalatable and “un-American.” If someone suggested that he assimilate into the Anglo-Saxon mainstream, he added, he would “punch my would-be reformer in the nose.” More important, Cohen explained, the embrace of assimilation by a prominent Indian rights organization would give fuel to “enemies of the Indian seeking to wipe out Indian reservations” by giving them cause to ask: “why should Indians be ‘set apart’ by receiving ... special benefits?” The emphasis on assimilation would also “alienate Indians ... who have any pride in their own heritage and personality” as well as anti-assimilationist friends of the Indian. Cohen was especially concerned with the question of Native Americans’ participation in the debates about their fate: “perhaps it comes down to a question of whether the Indian is mentioned as an object of a process or as a prime mover in a process.”<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, were two different visions of the AAIA’s role in advancing Native American political and social life at a moment of crisis in Indian-white relations. Although it would be unfair to argue that La Farge supported the complete elimination of Indianness, he had no faith that Native Americans could retain their culture and believed that its disappearance was inevitable. He and Cohen differed in their willingness to defend Indianness against the increasingly aggressive assimilationists in Congress and the BIA. Cohen contended that once the concept of assimilation became legitimized, especially by Indian rights supporters like those of the AAIA, then it would be especially difficult to fight against legislative manifestations of it. Cohen situated the source of Indianness on Native Americans’ land base and regarded termination as a battle over the sacred space of the Indian reservation, which nourished and sustained Indian cultural identity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Felix Cohen to Alexander Lesser, May 18, 1948, box 36, folder 5, AAIA Archives. He suggested changing La Farge’s opening statement to read: “aid the Indians to make their greatest contributions to American life and to enjoy its opportunities without discrimination.” For a comprehensive collection of Cohen’s writings, see Lucy Kramer Cohen, ed., *The Legal Conscience: Selected Papers of Felix S. Cohen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the reservation as a site of Cold War conflict during the termination era, see Paul C. Rosier, “‘They Are Ancestral Homelands’: Race, Place,



During the following year Cohen expanded on his early warning about the government's incipient terminationist agenda. In his often cited article "Indian Self-Government," he pointed to the attenuation of the advancements in Native American sovereignty that had emerged during the Indian New Deal. Cohen had played an important role in constructing constitutions and charters of incorporation for the Interior Department under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 before serving as a tribal attorney for the Blackfeet, Sioux, and other Indian nations in the late 1940s. After spending fifteen years fighting for Native Americans' right to practice self-government, Cohen felt the chilly winds of political change flowing from Congress and the post-Collier BIA. Cohen described federal intervention in Native American political affairs as "infringements upon their constitutional and corporate powers," and concluded that "many of the gains of the Roosevelt era are being chipped away." Not only Native Americans' rights, but all American civil liberties were in jeopardy. In an oft-quoted phrase, Cohen maintained that "the Indian tribe is the miners' canary and when it flutters and droops we know that the poison gasses of intolerance threaten all other minorities in our land. And who of us is not a member of some minority?"<sup>13</sup> Influenced by the events of the Holocaust and by his work with Jewish and black organizations, Cohen was no doubt also aware of the rising intolerance of anti-Communism that would find vicious expression in the speeches of Senator Joseph McCarthy the following year.

Cohen's warning about federal anti-sovereignty activity was presented as a lecture at an AAIA-sponsored conference on Indian self-government in April 1949 and subsequently published in the association's journal, *The American Indian*. La Farge could hardly avoid the message. Moreover, he already understood what was brewing in Washington. As early as 1947, Alice Henderson Rossin, an AAIA director, had reported to the association's board that she saw on the horizon plans for abolishing the BIA and forcibly removing Indians from reservations. In his 1948 "Proposed Program," La Farge himself had referred to the "competence" of Indian groups, noting that

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and Politics in Cold War Native America, 1945-1961," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006).

<sup>13</sup>Felix S. Cohen, "Indian Self-Government," *The American Indian* (September 1949), reprinted in Cohen, *Legal Conscience*, 305-14, quotations at 313-14.



the Klamath and others were ready to “take up the responsibilities which all other communities carry,” but he expressed concern about the “cases in which non-Indians are seeking to force an end of wardship for groups which are not ready.”<sup>14</sup>

In February 1950, in a “Restatement of Program and Policy in Indian Affairs,” La Farge addressed the growing debate over federal supervision, influenced no doubt by Cohen’s article and by the conference proceedings of the April 1949 Institute on American Indian Self-Government, which featured presentations by John Collier, BIA chief counsel Theodore Haas, and Yale anthropologist John Embree. La Farge intended to articulate the AAIA’s position on the behavior of the BIA, the agency through which the association channeled its calls for reform. He criticized the BIA for its “ineffectual paternalism which holds the Indians back without assisting them,” and cautioned officials against meddling in tribal affairs, planning policy without Indian input, and restricting the tribes’ ability to use their own attorneys. In the end, he recommended that the AAIA should support “a positive active program of handing authority and responsibility to the tribes as fast as they can take it, and of similarly removing all special statuses.” He sanctioned the termination of federal control of Native communities in California and New York and of the Klamath of Oregon. As he did in 1948, La Farge asked for more fieldwork, for more observations of reservation conditions on the ground. If the evidence warranted, he declared, “we shall not hesitate to attack the Indian Bureau for failures due to inertia, mental laziness, dishonest thinking, incompetence, or corruption.”<sup>15</sup>

There was ambivalence, on La Farge’s part, about the state of Indian affairs and a concern about the AAIA’s ability to understand them, given its decentralized organizational structure. La Farge and other association directors knew the Southwest well, mostly from their anthropological fieldwork, but other areas of the country remained outside of the AAIA’s purview. La Farge himself noted on several occasions that he felt out of the loop in New Mexico, and that his inability to attend important meetings in New York troubled his

<sup>14</sup>La Farge, “Proposed Program of the Association on American Indian Affairs,” May 3, 1948, box 4, folder 31, AAIA Archives.

<sup>15</sup>Oliver La Farge, “Association on American Indian Affairs Restatement of Program and Policy in Indian Affairs,” February 8, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

conscience.<sup>16</sup> As the crisis over federal withdrawal intensified, it became increasingly difficult for La Farge to remain isolated from organizational debates, and he was forced to articulate his views on assimilation and termination.

For the moment, however, the AAIA's defense of Native Americans focused on the government agency charged with their welfare, the BIA. La Farge was not convinced that the association needed to present an antagonistic attitude. And he remained opposed to creating a lobbying presence in Washington, partly for tax reasons but mainly because he did not want the organization to be perceived as confrontational. Just as important, La Farge's February 1950 "Restatement" made clear his stubborn position on assimilation:

Our basic over-all theory or policy is that Indians must become absorbed into the general population. In being thus absorbed, they may or may not be able to retain enriching elements of their own culture. We do know, as an inescapable fact, that no minority of 400,000 can survive among 150,000,000 of another culture, and retain its identity forever. Our problem is to guide and protect the process of amalgamation, that it will be carried through with benefit to both groups, with justice, and with humanity.<sup>17</sup>

La Farge's views were representative of those of other AAIA directors, in particular its anthropologists. Influential cultural anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, an expert on the Navajo, supported La Farge's position, telling Lesser in February 1950: "I tend to agree with Oliver that the eventual aim must be slanted toward absorption of Indians into the general population and certainly into the mainstream of economic and social life."<sup>18</sup> For the core association leadership, then, termination of federal supervision represented a natural and inevitable evolution of Indian affairs toward a state of cultural, economic, and social assimilation. The question for AAIA leaders like La Farge and Kluckhohn was how this process would work and the extent to which Native Americans would be injured by it.

<sup>16</sup> La Farge told Alexander Lesser that when he "accepted the presidency again, I did so as a figurehead." La Farge to Lesser, April 29, 1949, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>17</sup> La Farge, "Restatement of Program and Policy in Indian Affairs," February 8, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn to Alexander Lesser, February 24, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

La Farge's statements, and thus the AAIA's official positions on termination, elicited two principal responses that fractured the organization philosophically. In the middle was La Farge with his gradual assimilation. On the fringes were Cohen, the defender of Native American identity and sovereignty, and Barry M. Goldwater, the future U.S. senator from Arizona, whose aggressive support of termination helped to sharpen the organization's position on the issue. Goldwater, then a member of an advisory committee to the BIA as well as an AAIA board member, responded to La Farge's "Restatement" with an "Amen." In letters to Lesser and La Farge, he agreed with La Farge's views on assimilation, writing in support of "any program aimed at the rehabilitation—or should I say the assimilation—of Indians." But he also championed a policy that would allow "the States [immediately to take] over the operation of their Indian reservations."<sup>19</sup>

Cohen responded by calling the transfer of administration of Indian affairs to the states a "step backward." States simply wanted to spend federal money, he claimed, and the "greater prejudice" at that governmental level would exacerbate existing unhappy Indian-white relations. He thought Goldwater's position untenable, largely because his own inquiries had found that the proposed transfer profoundly disturbed Arizona Indians, who "have a much clearer idea than Mr. Goldwater has of the raids on their property rights, hospital facilities, school facilities and economic enterprises that would follow if the Federal Government withdrew its protection [from them]." But he argued against state control principally because it was one more barrier to Native American control, one more delay in the transfer of authority to tribal governments, the theoretical aim of the BIA. In that respect, Cohen found BIA practices problematic; he saw little desire within the bureaucracy "to terminate itself and [transfer authority] to the Indians as rapidly as they are willing to assume it. My own opinion is that the gap between promise and performance is larger today than it has been for years."<sup>20</sup>

Cohen was diplomatic in his letter to Lesser and restrained in his criticism of federal stewardship. But he was clearly opposed to

<sup>19</sup>Barry M. Goldwater to Alexander Lesser, February 21, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>20</sup>Felix Cohen to Alexander Lesser, March 1, 1950, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives.

Goldwater's and La Farge's positions. Contrary to La Farge's contention that "no minority of 400,000 can . . . retain its identity forever," Cohen predicted that "it will be easier to find an Indian community fifty years from now that is relatively indistinguishable from what it is today than it will be to find a great city of which the same might be said." Here again, he placed the Native American voice above that of white politicians or social scientists, a theme of his tenure at the AAIA. "[M]y political views," he noted, "are closer to those of the Indians."<sup>21</sup>

Cohen's views, supported by Lesser, influenced La Farge's positions on the twin themes of termination and assimilation, and thus helped to redirect the AAIA's energies and policies. In February 1950, La Farge had described Goldwater's position as "extreme," though giving him some credit: "as a reaction to observations on the ground it is understandable." But a month later he told Lesser that he now agreed with Cohen and expressed skepticism about Goldwater's motives.<sup>22</sup> Lesser himself had contested La Farge's views on assimilation, telling him in response to his February 8 "Restatement" that "[t]here is no need to state the Association goal in terms of Indians being 'absorbed into the general population.' That may be the probable ultimate destiny of our Indian people. On the other hand, it could happen that some Indian communities survive and maintain at least their basic tradition for many generations to come."<sup>23</sup> La Farge qualified his statement on assimilation several months later in his "Proposal for a Study of Fundamentals of the Indian Problem." In a parenthetical remark, he wrote: "I use . . . 'adaptation' [to 'our culture and society'], explicitly not meaning 'merger' or 'full acculturation,' since it clearly is possible, and should be a matter of free choice, for Indian groups to retain their own patterns of life, to the extent that these give greater satisfaction than ours, while making a successful adaptation to our patterns insofar as ability to compete, to assert and maintain

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> La Farge, "Restatement of Program and Policy in Indian Affairs," February 8, 1950, and La Farge to Alexander Lesser, March 11, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Lesser to Oliver La Farge, February 14, 1950, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives. Lesser added: "The Association need not plead for assimilation nor against it. It should rather plead that the American Indian people have the right and must have the chance to make such value judgments for themselves."

their rights, and to mingle personally is concerned.”<sup>24</sup> La Farge’s use of “free choice” is important, as Native American consent, Cohen’s mantra, became a much-debated issue of the early and mid-1950s.

If in February 1950 La Farge had called for more “observations on the ground,”<sup>25</sup> he did not take kindly to Cohen’s June 1950 report of his travels to Indian Country, particularly the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. “Colonial Administration in the Indian Country” is a withering critique of the BIA. Cohen and members of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, which he began advising in 1949, frequently employed words like “Gestapo” and “dictatorship” to describe the federal agency. Cohen likened the local corruption to “the corruption of prisons, insane asylums, concentration camps, fascist and communist states, and other places where men cannot ‘talk back’ to officials.”<sup>26</sup> In particular, he highlighted Area Director Paul Fickinger’s distribution of letters critical of tribal officials on the eve of two important Blackfeet elections, one of which was a referendum that would have allowed the business council to terminate the secretary of the Interior’s control of lending, leasing, and income distribution programs on the reservation. Voters rejected most of the incumbent council members and their agenda.<sup>27</sup> Cohen had helped the Blackfeet Nation write its constitution and charter in the mid-1930s and thereafter defended the tribe’s right to use these instruments to further self-government. His work with the Blackfeet and his general efforts to foster Native American democracy made him acutely sensitive to BIA intervention in constitutionally protected political processes. In his view, self-termination through constitutional measures was the only policy that would enable Native Americans to retain both sovereignty and cultural identity.

In “Colonial Administration in the Indian Country,” Cohen argued that the AAIA should “bring before the American conscience” the details of the BIA’s corrupt colonialism, and he expected the AAIA

<sup>24</sup> Oliver La Farge, “Proposal for a Study of Fundamentals of the Indian Problem” (First Discussion Draft), July 21, 1950, p. 1, box 402, folder 13, AAIA Archives.

<sup>25</sup> La Farge, “Restatement of Program and Policy in Indian Affairs,” February 8, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Felix Cohen, “Colonial Administration in the Indian Country,” p. 12, n.d., box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives.

<sup>27</sup> For details of this election and its consequences, see Paul C. Rosier, *Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation, 1912–1954* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), chap. 6.

to publish his essay in its house organ, *The American Indian*, where his "Indian Self-Government" first appeared.<sup>28</sup> The article gained some support among AAIA board members. Secretary Alden Stevens wanted Cohen to write a follow-up piece outlining his program for addressing the problems. But he also called the article "a declaration of war on the Bureau" and asked Lesser, "At this particular time do we want to declare war?" Dillon Myer had just assumed the office of Indian Commissioner, and several AAIA directors supported him, including La Farge and Philleo Nash, an anthropologist who was then a special assistant to President Harry S. Truman. Stevens suggested that Cohen give Myer a chance to respond before publication.<sup>29</sup>

The article "shocked" La Farge, who called it "an ill-tempered, inaccurate, and misleading assault upon the Bureau of Indian Affairs." He was not unaware of events on the Blackfeet Reservation. At Lesser's urging, he had written to Secretary of the Interior Oscar Chapman shortly after the June 1950 election to protest Fickinger's interference and ask if it represented a new departmental policy. Cohen provided the answer in his essay, but La Farge rejected it and refused to attack the BIA publicly. He objected to Cohen's analogies to Soviet Russia and his use of the word "liquidate" to describe BIA activities. In the end, La Farge wrote, the article "makes me regret that he [Cohen] was ever elected to the Board."<sup>30</sup> He did not sign off on publishing the article.

Cohen defended his right as a member of the board of directors to voice his opinions, refused to give Myer a chance to respond, rejected suggestions to soften his tone, and threatened to resign from the AAIA board under protest as he had from the Interior Department in 1948. The angry article had an additional purpose, he told Lesser: "The AAIA has a wide but undeserved reputation among Indians and Congressmen as being a rubber stamp for the Indian office. This paper

<sup>28</sup> Felix Cohen, "Colonial Administration in the Indian Country," p. 13, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Alden Stevens to Alexander Lesser, July 31, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives. For good overviews of Myer's regime, see Felix Cohen, "The Erosion of Indian Rights, 1950–1953: A Case Study in Bureaucracy," *Yale Law Journal* 62 (February 1953), 348–90, and Richard Drinnon, *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 163–248.

<sup>30</sup> Oliver La Farge to Alexander Lesser, August 8, 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

would help to counteract that impression. But giving Myer the last word in such a controversy would only strengthen that impression.”<sup>31</sup> Cohen wanted the AAIA to be more aggressive and more public in its defense of Indian sovereignty, and he did not want to be silenced along with Native American politicians. For Cohen, Indian-white relations in the early 1950s amounted to a “war,” one that would determine the future of Indian sovereignty and Indianness itself.

Up to this point, under La Farge’s directives, the AAIA had preached cooperation with the BIA and with the Interior Department, preferring to keep criticisms private and “not before the public,” as La Farge put it to Myer’s predecessor as Commissioner of Indian Affairs.<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Lesser, La Farge questioned Cohen’s eagerness to foster conflict rather than cooperation and intimated that his lack of “emotional balance” might prove “too embarrassing to tolerate.”<sup>33</sup> Cohen, more engaged with the issues of sovereignty than La Farge because of his legal work, believed the New Deal spirit of self-government had ended and that a creeping paternalism, a cult of the expert, had taken over. Unlike La Farge, he suspected Myer, the wartime director of the agency responsible for incarcerating Japanese Americans, of being a dangerous influence. He told the chairman of the Omaha Tribal Council that Myer was likely an “expert administrator.” In Washington, Cohen explained, “a would-be dictator is always called an ‘expert administrator’ by people who admire the capacity of dictators to ‘make trains run on time’—even if the trains carry men, women, and children to concentration camps.”<sup>34</sup> Cohen’s recent experience with the Blackfeet, as well as two subsequent incidents, provided him with all the evidence he needed of where conditions in the field stood.

A very public dispute with Commissioner Myer reinforced Cohen’s views on the BIA and on the AAIA’s obligation to contest its policies. In May 1952 he protested the BIA’s decision to manage a referendum

<sup>31</sup> Felix Cohen to Alexander Lesser, August 2, 1950, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives. Cohen’s article appeared as “Colonialism: U.S. Style,” *The Progressive* 15, no. 2 (February 1951), 16–18.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver La Farge to John Nichols, draft, January 1950, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives. He did warn Nichols that AAIA members were starting to become disturbed by policies about which “the public is more aggressively dissatisfied.”

<sup>33</sup> Oliver La Farge to Alexander Lesser, May 29, 1951, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>34</sup> Felix Cohen to Amos Lamson, May 12, 1950, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives.



that, in violation of the Blackfeet Nation's constitution, proposed to reduce sharply the business council's authority. He called the BIA's actions "a terribly serious attack on not only the rights of Indians as citizens, but on the integrity of our democratic process."<sup>35</sup> Although the referendum did not carry, the general crisis of Blackfeet democracy represented a "miner's canary" of the post-New Deal period. Cohen had an unshakeable faith in democracy's capacity to empower Native Americans, but he also understood that termination would succeed only if it was inspired by Native Americans themselves in the form of organic self-determination.

La Farge emerged late in 1951 to defend Cohen publicly against Myer's charges that the AAIA general counsel profited from his attorney contracts with various Native American communities. Myer "seems to be determined to force us into fighting him tooth and nail," he concluded in December.<sup>36</sup> La Farge and AAIA President Lesser also became involved in the Blackfeet crisis. La Farge called on President Truman to intervene in the May 1952 referendum dispute, declaring that "[t]his controlled election is against every American principle."<sup>37</sup> Lesser, concerned about the Blackfeet after reading Cohen's article, toured the reservation himself and wrote a series of letters in support of Blackfeet sovereignty. The Blackfeet case forced Lesser and La Farge to confront the nature of BIA activities by seeing for themselves the troublesome "conditions on the ground."

Myer's aggressive pursuit of termination helped to unify the AAIA while forcing the organization to redefine its mission once again. The question, as Cohen had framed it in 1950, remained: To what extent do Indians matter in the process? In September 1952 La Farge circulated an eight-page memorandum, "Policy in Regard to Withdrawal of Federal Jurisdiction over Indians," to elicit board members' comments in advance of a November meeting. On the eve of that meeting, which he could not attend, La Farge expressed his concern by letter that "various of us are drifting apart, and this drift might in time

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Interior Department Appropriations for 1953: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, 82nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 854.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver La Farge to Alexander Lesser, December 11, 1951, box 44, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Oliver La Farge to Harry S. Truman (telegram), May 8, 1952, box 250, folder 9, AAIA Archives.





Alexander Lesser, Oliver La Farge, and Undersecretary of the Interior Richard D. Searles at the Institute on American Indian Assimilation, sponsored by the Association on American Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C., May 1952. Archives of the Association on American Indian Affairs, box 414, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of the AAIA.

result in a serious split.” He asked the board of directors to clarify the AAIA’s “basic philosophy” before proceeding with policy recommendations.<sup>38</sup>

What remained unresolved in November 1952 was the AAIA’s position on federal withdrawal without Native Americans’ consent. La Farge’s ambivalence came through clearly when he noted that his position on termination had changed: “We defend wardship, in agreement with the Indians themselves, on the only grounds on which it can be defended—that the Indians are not yet ready to be turned completely loose in our society.” The principal question for La Farge

<sup>38</sup> Oliver La Farge, “Basic Policy,” November 11, 1952, box 4, folder 36, AAIA Archives. For his September memorandum, “Policy in Regard to Withdrawal of Federal Jurisdiction over Indians,” see box 4, folder 36, AAIA Archives.

came down to which constituency had the right to determine when Native Americans are ready to be turned loose. Resting his argument on treaty rights, he concluded: "Perhaps consent is the only way in which that can be done." He thus reversed the position expressed in his September memorandum, where he assigned the right of termination to "the trustee," although he repeated his fear that the result could be the "creation of a 'hereditary class of privileged citizens.'" <sup>39</sup>

The response of AAIA board member Elizabeth "Betty" Rosenthal to the September memorandum clearly informed La Farge's position on consent. Trained as a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard and the author of AAIA reports on Indian education, Rosenthal became particularly active during the termination crisis, in one sense serving as the conscience of the organization. She admonished La Farge for maintaining a "doing what is best for the Indians" position, and affirmed in no uncertain terms the AAIA's duty to protect Native Americans' rights, both those based on treaties and the fundamental human right of self-determination. Putting consent another way, Rosenthal told La Farge that she hoped the association would develop "a clear policy derived from a conviction that local participation is the basic principle for which we stand whatever the issue at hand—not sentimentally because the people are 'Indians,' but because they are people."<sup>40</sup> Like Cohen, Rosenthal tried to enlarge the context in which the AAIA viewed Native American rights.

The discussion of La Farge's November 11 memorandum dominated the November 14 board meeting. René d'Harnoncourt, director of the Museum of Modern Art and a former administrator of the Interior Department's Indian Arts and Crafts Board, argued that federal withdrawal was "inevitable," and thus the association could "best serve Indian interests by using its influence to promote step-by-step rather than precipitate withdrawal, and by helping Indians understand that although withdrawal is inevitable, it involves trading privileges for rights." Philleo Nash suggested that the association not oppose withdrawal until further study was available.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>La Farge, "Basic Policy," November 11, 1952, box 4, folder 36, AAIA Archives.

<sup>40</sup>Elizabeth Rosenthal to Oliver La Farge, October 30, 1952, box 402, folder 11, AAIA Archives.

<sup>41</sup>AAIA Special Board Meeting, November 14, 1952, box 4, folder 36, AAIA Archives.

In the end, the board's resolution deemed withdrawal "inevitable." The association's role would be to help make the termination process "gradual" and to ensure that Native Americans had "an opportunity to consent to changes made." Thus, the AAIA leadership embraced consent, Rosenthal's and Cohen's position, while maintaining its traditional support of withdrawal, La Farge's and d'Harnoncourt's position, a reflection of the association's division over assimilation and its impact on Native American rights.<sup>42</sup>

The AAIA could not maintain this contradictory position the following year, when termination became a policy of coercion rather than consent with the adoption of HCR 108 on August 1.<sup>43</sup> Facing Myer's BIA and a newly elected Republican Congress hostile to Indian sovereignty, La Farge and other AAIA members began to see their role in Indian affairs in increasingly stark terms—for Indian consent or for federal withdrawal of trusteeship.

The AAIA would wage this new battle without Felix Cohen, who died of lung cancer in October 1953. His death was a particular blow to Lesser, who continually defended Cohen and his ideas. He noted to La Farge that, in anticipation of his death, Cohen had trained a team of young attorneys to take over his legislative work and to continue to serve his Native American clients.<sup>44</sup> La Farge had also come to Cohen's defense on several occasions, growing to appreciate the general counsel's philosophy even as he objected to his personality, and he supported the retention of Cohen's firm and his team of lawyers. Cohen had helped push the AAIA to adopt a strategy of providing the services of "fact-finding and legal analysis" to congressional representatives. He and his team had analyzed proposed legislation and represented the AAIA's position by presenting legal information on statutes to congressional subcommittees on Indian affairs. He helped to transform the AAIA from a passive organization conducting academic institutes and making subdued calls for BIA reform into an advocacy group opposing federal legislation on legal grounds as

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> For coverage of HCR 108, see Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 91–102; Philp, *Termination Revisited*, 168–75; and Burt, *Tribalism in Crisis*, 19–47.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Lesser to Oliver La Farge, October 23, 1953, box 36, folder 6, AAIA Archives. The previous year, Lesser told La Farge that Cohen had been a "tower of strength to us and to the Indian people in recent years." See Lesser to La Farge, March 10, 1952, box 402, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

well as philosophical and moral ones. Cohen's perspective as an ex-Washington insider and as a lawyer active in reservation communities, especially those outside the Southwest where La Farge operated, broadened the association's understanding of conditions in the field, the varieties of the Native American experience, and its own potential for defense of Native American rights in Washington.

Acknowledging Cohen's call to offer free legal aid to Native Americans, the AAIA provided support to the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the nation's largest pan-tribal organization, in its efforts to halt congressional attempts to legislate termination. In February 1954, during the NCAI's "Emergency Conference" in Washington, D.C., Cohen-trained attorneys Arthur Lazarus and Richard Schifter in particular played a valuable role, representing the AAIA in congressional hearings as well as supplying AAIA and NCAI witnesses with detailed information for testimony. The Emergency Conference helped to galvanize opposition to congressional termination legislation.<sup>45</sup>

This escalation of termination pressures in early 1954 forced the AAIA to work more closely with the NCAI. In February 1954, La Farge proposed the formation of a liaison committee to bridge the two groups, because "close relations with the NCAI at the moment are of the greatest importance."<sup>46</sup> He may have looked upon cooperation as a means of closer contact with Indian concerns. In support of the committee, La Farge reiterated his worry that the AAIA was removed from the people it was attempting to serve: "We are lopsided in our lack of a balancing contact with the Indians themselves [and lack] personal contact with the large potential membership in most Western states [and] direct contact with the tribes."<sup>47</sup>

The positive press coverage at the Emergency Conference encouraged the NCAI to expand its resources by reaching out to AAIA supporters through a former association fund-raiser. The proposed campaign generated a crisis for AAIA members that led to new debates about their place in protecting Native Americans' rights. La Farge

<sup>45</sup> For the NCAI, see Cowger, *National Congress of American Indians*; for his coverage of the Emergency Conference, see 114–16.

<sup>46</sup> Oliver La Farge to Mrs. Joseph Lindon Smith (a member of the AAIA executive committee), February 2, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>47</sup> Oliver La Farge, "Confidential," February 19, 1954, box 13, folder 16, AAIA Archives.

took the challenge seriously and initiated discussions about possible alternatives, including organizational integration. The competition could be injurious: "as both organizations would be competing for public reputation, both would be forced to grab credit" to sustain fund-raising efforts.<sup>48</sup> Lesser noted to La Farge and other members of the executive committee that an NCAI chapter had just formed in New York City, necessitating a close relationship, lest some AAIA members and the NCAI itself charge "that we are not 'cooperating' with the Indians." According to Lesser, a number of AAIA directors felt that "we must commit suicide steadily by helping and building this organization of Indians, no matter what, at the cost of our own survival."<sup>49</sup>

La Farge and other board members felt strongly about the AAIA's continuing prominence in protecting the welfare of Native Americans and in helping the NCAI fight a public battle in Congress. "At the present time the NCAI is heavily dependent upon us," La Farge contended in May 1954. "What was done in Washington in the matter of the termination bills could not possibly have been done without our guidance at every point, and not only our guidance but our very active help. It is going to be quite a long time before the NCAI will be able to function effectively without us."<sup>50</sup> Lesser agreed, arguing that the NCAI was "virtually dependent on our attorneys." And like La Farge, he resented the NCAI for not giving the association more credit for its support, especially at the Emergency Conference.<sup>51</sup> When the NCAI backed away from its proposed fund-raising cam-

<sup>48</sup> Oliver La Farge, "Effect of Relations with the NCAI on Association Finances," sent to Mrs. Joseph Lindon Smith et al., May 11, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Lesser to Oliver La Farge, May 19, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>50</sup> La Farge, "Effect of Relations with the NCAI," May 11, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Lesser to Oliver La Farge, May 19, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives. Lesser's anger at the NCAI became an issue for La Farge and other members of the board, including Betty Rosenthal, who complained of his increasingly unstable behavior. La Farge told Philleo Nash and Alden Stevens that Lesser was "pretty close to psychotic.... I am more and more convinced that we are going to have to ditch the man before he destroys us." See La Farge to Nash and Alden, May 25, 1954, box 402, folder 1, AAIA Archives. Lesser left the AAIA in the face of mounting opposition from La Farge, Rosenthal, and others.

paign, tensions eased and La Farge could tell Rosenthal that the two organizations would continue to work on developing “a relationship and ensuring that we don’t cut each other’s throats.”<sup>52</sup>

Betty Rosenthal, more than any other AAIA board member, maintained that the association’s position was at risk in the changing social climate. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, issued the week of the AAIA’s debate on cooperating with the NCAI, convinced her, she told La Farge, that “while the growth of NCAI is exciting, the time is coming when we need to seek a larger solution to racial issues.” The NCAI was segregationist; the AAIA need not be. She urged the AAIA to do whatever it could, including lowering membership fees, to encourage Native Americans to join the organization’s governing board, whether or not they belonged to NCAI. “Unless we do,” she warned La Farge, “we grow daily more vulnerable to the criticism of thoughtful people as well as ‘sentimentalists.’ If we are to continue to have a leading place in Indian affairs, we need a new philosophical push in the right direction.”<sup>53</sup>

La Farge had never been keen on including Native Americans on AAIA boards. Moreover, he distrusted the NCAI leadership, complaining in response to Rosenthal that “its membership includes a considerable number of the most undesirable kind of Indian politician, many of whom are extremely hostile to us.” But he understood the importance of her position. “I would like to see a good Indian or so on our Board,” he told her, preferably not one “special in their interests, partisan in some internal, Indian matter.”<sup>54</sup> No one wanted

<sup>52</sup> Oliver La Farge to Elizabeth Rosenthal, October 26, 1954, box 204, folder 4, AAIA Archives. The NCAI decided against running a broad fund-raising campaign, in part because Will Rogers Jr., an active NCAI supporter (and former AAIA board member), changed his mind and elected not to give the campaign his imprimatur. Rogers concluded that the AAIA “is already in the field. We would face a strong and entrenched competitor. A general fund raising appeal would unquestionably conflict with the Association and further exacerbate our relations. . . . We may not only do less good for ourselves but we might destroy much of the faith and confidence La Farge has built up.” See Will Rogers Jr. to Harold Oram et al., September 24, 1954, Records of the National Congress of American Indians, box 68, folder: Will Rogers, Jr., National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Suitland, Maryland.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Rosenthal to Oliver La Farge, May 21, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>54</sup> Oliver La Farge to Elizabeth Rosenthal, May 25, 1954, box 402, folder 1, AAIA Archives.

a “token Indian.” But La Farge remained ambivalent, feeling compelled to elect a Native American because of changing conditions, whereas Rosenthal welcomed it as a way to improve Native American affairs. In 1955, Edward P. Dozier (Santa Clara Pueblo), professor of anthropology at Northwestern University, joined the AAIA’s board of directors, marking the association’s recognition of the need to incorporate Native Americans’ viewpoints and heralding the beginning of the association’s changing ethnic composition from all-white to predominantly Native American.

The change did not occur without a struggle. And there was no wholesale change of attitude among AAIA leaders. Discussion of the integration of the NCAI and the AAIA had continued into October 1954. AAIA members opposed it on several grounds. According to the association’s treasurer, the NCAI’s fiscal situation was “virtually desperate.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Lesser and La Farge resented the NCAI’s failure to mention AAIA contributions to beating back the wave of termination legislation in its press releases and fund-raising appeals. Finally, Betty Rosenthal thought it wise to keep the organizations distinct and productive; with the NCAI’s political advocacy machinery strengthened, the AAIA could focus on long-term planning to “work at the level of policy and principle.”<sup>56</sup>

The crises of 1954 also precipitated a reorganization in the form of new AAIA committees that reflected Rosenthal’s “philosophical push” toward policy work. The Committee on Reorganization concluded in April 1954 that in order to “assert a commanding role in the formulation of national policy on Indian affairs” and look “constructively toward the future,” the association needed to “take [its] place among those groups which make common cause in matters of civil rights and civil liberties; which assert the right of minorities to cultural freedom and self-determination; and which accept the Federal government as a protector against exploitation and deprivation. . . . We must assert a commanding role in the formulation of national policy on Indian affairs. . . . We no longer have the time for leisurely public education.” To accomplish this new mission, AAIA officials acknowledged, they could no longer wage their fight “by remote control” from New York

<sup>55</sup>Rufus Poole to Oliver La Farge, October 26, 1954, box 402, folder 4, AAIA Archives.

<sup>56</sup>Elizabeth Rosenthal to Oliver La Farge, May 21, 1954, box 402, folder 1, AAIA Archives.



but needed to move operations to Washington, the “battleground where the Indians’ possessions are being fought over.”<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the most important new creation was the Government Relations Committee, directed by veteran New Dealer William Zimmerman. He initiated a policy agenda and supplied the kind of Washington-based lobbying effort that Cohen and Rosenthal had called for and La Farge had resisted. In 1955, Zimmerman issued a ten-point legislative program, supported by Cohen’s legal team, to offer a proactive rather than reactive defense of Native American sovereignty. Zimmerman believed that the NCAI did not represent all Indians and that the AAIA still had “a place no matter what the NCAI does.”<sup>58</sup>

Indeed it did. As Daniel Cobb illustrates in his contribution to this issue, the AAIA remained an important partner with the NCAI in both resisting further termination advances and looking “constructively toward the future” with a vision of stabilizing reservation economies through a domestic Point IV program. Although the AAIA had helped the NCAI blunt Congress’s termination legislation in February 1954, the termination agenda persisted, both legislatively and philosophically, in the form of an expanded Voluntary Relocation Program that sought to move Native Americans from Indian reservations to American cities. The AAIA’s influence would begin to wane as the NCAI’s began to rise. A mostly white organization representing the interests of “people of color” in an age of decolonization became difficult to sustain in the 1960s and beyond. Although the AAIA did not merge with the NCAI, its interests did. Slowly, its board of directors came to be dominated by Native American leaders rather than white ones. At the same time, it remained true to the redefined mission that emerged through the crucible of termination, a mission that championed the protection of “Indianness” on Native Americans’ terms.

<sup>57</sup> “Report of the Committee on Reorganization to the Executive Committee of The Association on American Indian Affairs,” April 28, 1954, box 13, folder 17, AAIA Archives.

<sup>58</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee, December 20, 1954, box 13, folder 21, AAIA Archives.