

Trimble: NCAI: Remembrances of a so-called ‘paper tiger’

By Charles E. Trimble

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I recently read with fond remembrance that the National Congress of American Indians passed a record number of resolutions in their 65th annual convention a few weeks ago in Phoenix.

It brought back to mind the days in the 1970s that leaders of the American Indian Movement and other militant groups would often refer to NCAI as the “paper tiger,” because of the great number of resolutions we passed in convention. Having been around for some 30 years before AIM was spawned, and confident in its history, leaders of NCAI learned to live with those colorful epithets and characterizations.

I had the honor of serving as NCAI executive director through much of the 1970s, and I hold the organization in highest esteem, and in fond memory. In my testimony before Congressional committees, administration officials, and others, it always gave me great confidence to inform them that the position I represented was the consensus of Indian tribes in convention assembled, presented, debated and passed by them in resolution form. No other organization could say that, although other entities giving valuable testimony represented important Indian professional and political constituencies of their own.

Not only do the resolutions represent intertribal consensus on important issues, many are requested by tribes to commemorate a leader, or a special event. Some are requested to show support for a special project for which they may be seeking federal funding. These are secondary to the ones on major issues, but important to the tribes that request them.

Tribal consensus is a powerful thing, not the stuff of paper tigers. As I think history has shown in the positive legislation, policy, and programs for which NCAI pressed, that the organization was very successful in representing the tribes and their interests.

I am not taking anything away from AIM and other militant movements; they were serious in their causes, and their militancy showed the American people and especially the national leadership in Washington the extent of the anger and impatience of Indian people waiting for rights protection, justice and self-determination. Their militant actions served to highlight NCAI’s reasonable and well-thought-out solutions to many of the tribes’ problems, including appropriations.

As I write this column, my thoughts take me back to the era in which I had served, from 1972 to 1978, when I stepped down to take the directorship of the United Effort Trust to fight against the so-called White Backlash.

My tenure in NCAI was truly the highpoint of my life – the greatest honor. And I was fortunate to have served through the decade most prolific in the enactment of legislation for new policy, programs, and resources, as well as executive actions favorable to Indian tribes and off-reservation Indian communities. These included the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, the Indian Financing Act, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act and unprecedented return of significant lands to tribes.

Having worked under the tutelage of Helen Peterson in the Denver Mayor’s Commission on Community Relations, I was well prepared to assume the role of NCAI Director. I consider Helen the best Executive Director in the history of the organization, carrying it through some of the most dangerous history of federal-tribal relations, with little budget or other resources. She mentored many young people to leadership, and I am proud to be numbered in the ranks of her political progeny.

The greatest lesson I learned from her was that the executive director is not sent to Washington, D.C. to be the star

of Indian country, but to serve as facilitator for the real stars, which are the leaders representing the tribes. The principal purposes of the director are to keep the tribes informed on all developments that might affect them and their members, to secure and hold tribal consensus on issues of importance to them, and to present that consensus to the Congress, the executive, and in some instances, to the judiciary.

NCAI was a part of my family, although I had never dreamed of being its executive director. We were blessed in that my sister, Leona, was married to Joseph R. Garry, chief of the Coeur d'Alene tribe for many years, and long-time President of the NCAI through its fight during the dreaded Termination era in the 1960s. My mother had faithfully paid her annual membership dues for many years, and collected their bulletins sent out periodically; but she could never afford to attend a convention.

Although the NCAI is in every sense of the term an "Indian organization," its formation was not at first a tribal initiative. The formation of a national organization was strongly encouraged by John Collier in the waning days of his tenure in the BIA. Collier could see the end of the era of the Indian New Deal, which was already in decline at the start of World War II. He may have foreseen as well a new onslaught on Indian lands and resources in a new era of growth and expansion in post-war America. For whatever reason, he authorized BIA support for a team of Indian men to travel around the country from tribe to tribe to promote the need for a national Indian political organization. From this effort the NCAI was formed on Nov. 15, 1944.

D'Arcy McNickle, a member of the Flathead tribes and one of the founders of NCAI, had been heard to relate that on the evening before that first convention, he and his Indian colleagues sat anxiously on the mezzanine in the Cosmopolitan Hotel where the convention was to be held. They wondered if ten Indian delegates, or 100 or 1,000 would come to the constitutional convention. ... or none at all. As the first obviously-Indian delegate, a Paiute, entered the hotel, the planners rushed to the door to fall on the first man to make the dream come true.

Their dream lives on in the spirit and the reality of the organization. May the Great Spirit bless you, NCAI, far into the future.

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