

UNSUNG HEROES: Forrest Gerard...

Modern Indian history has seen, to use the words of Dickens, “the best of times and the worst of times.” Arguably, the best of times was the decade of the 1970s, which was the most prolific era of positive national Indian policy and programs in the history of U.S./Indian Relations in the 20th Century, notwithstanding the Indian New Deal of the 1930s.

The 1970s saw the enactment of the Indian Financing Act, the Indian Self-determination and Educational Assistance Act, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Indian Religious Freedom Act, the Alaska Native Land Claims Act. The 1970s also saw unprecedented return of land to the tribes, including the sacred lands surrounding and including Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo, Mount Adams to the Yakima Nation, and the long-awaited fulfillment of the Submarginal Lands Act. In addition, there were many program improvements and policy changes in the Administration, including the establishment of the office of Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs in the Interior Department.

Just as a dozen Washington insiders of that era have laid claim to sole authorship of the famous Nixon Indian Message to Congress that presaged the deluge of legislation, so too do many people and organizations make claim to responsibility for the positive policy of that era.

But from what I have seen, as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians through much of the 1970s, without unsung heroes like Forrest Gerard in key positions on Capitol Hill, much of that would not have come about in the fashion that it did. Gerard did great work – subtly, without fanfare, and too often without recognition or even thanks. His approach was honesty and directness in dealing with Indian Country, and he never wavered in his loyalty to the Tribes. In the 1976 NCAI convention in Salt Lake City, his excellent appraisal of growing anti-Indian opinion, and prediction of the great white backlash, helped NCAI and all Indian country prepare for it. These things are recorded in NCAI historical documents and in the files of many offices, but need to be given some daylight for the sake of modern Indian history and, importantly, out of pure gratitude.

Forrest Gerard is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe of Montana. His service to the country began early, with the U.S. Air Corps in WWII, where he flew 35 combat missions as a member of a bomber crew over Nazi-occupied Europe. Later he attended the University of Montana, graduating in 1949 with a B.A. in Business Administration. Over a long, productive tenure in government service, he worked for the state of Montana, the newly-formed Indian Health Service in 1957, the BIA as Congressional and Legislative Affairs officer, and the Health Education and Welfare as director of one of the first “Indian desks.”

In 1971 he was appointed as a staff member to the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, which handled legislative and oversight responsibilities on Indian affairs. He left the committee in 1976 to establish his own lobbying business. In 1977 he was appointed by President Carter to the position of Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs in the Interior Department, the first person to serve in that newly-created position.

With all his federal service, Forrest never became a “bureaucrat,” putting the interests or

convenience of the federal government ahead of that of the Indian tribes. In 1976, along with another unsung hero, Franklin Ducheneaux, he was honored by the National Congress of American Indians. In the official honoring statement, this was said about him: "Mr Gerard is always available to meet with Indian tribal delegates and Indian organizations to explain legislation affecting them, and to advise on the legislative processes. His efforts have resulted in the Indian people's ability to fully participate in the Governmental process."

Hat's off to Forrest Gerard, a real hero for Indian country.

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