

Progress for Indians Is a Film Fantasy Native Americans: The reality is a 45% poverty rate and 35% unemployment rate. U.S. policy undermines the potential.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The two principal agencies responsible for Indian matters-the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service-are severely underfunded despite their huge mandates. President Bush requested only \$12 million for 1992 for the construction of badly needed health and sanitation facilities-a cut of \$154 million from 1991. The budgeteers operated on the theory that all new health services for Indians would be covered by private health insurance, with the payments funneled to the Indian Health Service. The Administration estimated these payments to be \$129 million. But in 1990, only \$3.7 million was collected.

Under treaties and federal law, the United States promised to uphold the rights of Indian tribes and became the trustee of Indian land and resources. The United States vowed that Indian people would be housed, educated and provided with decent health care. Unfortunately, as the statistics show, the United States has failed on nearly every count. And virtually every treaty signed with an Indian tribe has been broken.

In California, with the second-largest Indian population in the country, the potential for change is enormous. Federal officials have acknowledged that many of the state's Indian citizens are being denied services they deserve because they lack federal tribal recognition. Efforts are now under way to expedite the unbearably slow and unresponsive tribal recognition process for dozens of long-established Indian tribes in California, continuing the move toward Indian self-determination.

FULL TEXT

Twenty years have passed since Marlon Brando used the Academy Awards as a platform to draw national attention to Hollywood's exploitation of American Indians in films. Last night, the Oscars drew attention to Indians again; this time with "Dances With Wolves," a powerful film about 19th-Century Indian life and 19th-Century U.S. Indian policy.

Unfortunately, the progress American Indians made in film this year is unmatched by improvement in the utter impoverishment of contemporary Indian life. Regrettably, government policy, while considerably more enlightened than in the 1870s, continues to undermine the potential of Native Americans.

Indians today are little better, and, in some cases, worse off than when they were fighting the cavalry or when Brando made his stand. According to the most recent data, the high school graduation rate among Indians is 43%, the poverty rate is 45% and the unemployment rate is 35% nationally and more than 80% on some reservations. While the United States gives nearly \$10 billion per year to help developing countries improve basic living conditions and promote economic modernization, more than 20% of American Indian homes lack toilets and more than 50% do not have telephones.

Federal agencies responsible for implementing Indian policy have attempted to respond to skyrocketing rates of alcoholism, youth suicide, tuberculosis and incarceration, but the efforts too often have been feeble and ineffective.

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Indians in the 1970s and '80s saw more and more decisions go against them—in religious freedom cases, taxation and zoning cases and cases involving criminal jurisdiction.

A positive development worth noting is in the area of self-governance. Congress enacted the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975 to give tribes the freedom to carry out additional federal responsibilities on their own. And though the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service for the most part retain great authority over the tribes, their grip was loosened when in 1990 seven tribes negotiated self-governance compacts directly with the Interior Department. This experimental program was aimed at circumventing the bureau, an agency within the department.

One thing we have learned is that the tribes themselves possess many of the answers to these pervasive problems.

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At a time in U.S. history when moral suasion counts for less than political muscle, Indians have a bumper crop of the former but are starved for the latter. Indians are too few and too scattered to have an impact on the political process. In only the rarest of cases do congressional hearings on Indian issues draw the media or the public. "Dances With Wolves" is a landmark artistic achievement. It has educated many Americans to the positive values of Indian culture. It would be a tragedy if we failed to act on this heightened awareness. Twenty years from now, let's not be looking back from the same sad reality we accept today.

Illustration

PHOTO: Ruth Benally, a Navajo, stands outside hogan on Hopi reservation in 1986 photo. / JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times

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