Have We Failed with the Indian?

H. L. Dawes

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WHEN the public mind is directed to a discussion of the wisest and safest attitude toward other alien races whose future has been put in our keeping, our policy with the Indians becomes an object lesson worthy of careful and candid study. It is for this purpose that attention is here invited to what that policy has come to be, and what it has thus far accomplished. The treatment of the Indian has been the subject of much study and experiment that has proved fruitless. Only by the process of elimination after experiment have the multitude of ephemeral and ineffective methods given way to one which has at last come to hold undivided public support for a time long enough to test its efficacy.

The present Indian policy of the government is of comparatively recent date. It is hardly yet twenty−five years since the first step was taken. The beginning was small and tentative, but the policy has steadily grown in the public confidence and in the enlargement of effort, until, judged by results, it now stands justified. Before its adoption the attitude of the government toward the different tribes was in general that of kind, patient care. There were exceptional cases in this treatment, — instances of hardship, injustice, and wrong, — not to be defended; traceable, however, almost always to unfit stewards and unfaithful public servants, and not to the deliberate act of the government itself. The prevailing idea was that of guardianship of an uncivilized race among us, incapable of self−support or self−restraint, over which public safety as well as the dictates of humanity required the exercise of a constant, restraining care, until it should fade out of existence in the irresistible march of civilization. It very soon became apparent that under this treatment the race did not diminish, but, by reason of protection from the slaughter of one another in wars among themselves and from diseases inseparable from savage life, it increased in number. This increase in population calling for more room, we were confronted with another problem not before taken into account. Emigration was yearly swelling in numbers, and marching like an army with banners upon the public domain and over into Indian reservations. These conditions, impossible to change, forced upon the country a change in its Indian policy. This army of newcomers was invading and appropriating to the uses of civilization the reservations which the increasing number of the Indian race was making more and more necessary for its own support. There would soon be little unoccupied room for either race, and it was plain that the two could not live together, and that the one must speedily crowd out the other. What was to become of the untutored, defenseless Indian, when he found himself thus pushed out of the life and home of the reservation, and cut off from the hunting and fishing which furnished the only and scanty supply of his daily wants? It was plain that if he were left alone he must of necessity become a tramp and beggar with all the evil passions of a savage, a homeless and lawless poacher upon civilization, and a terror to the peaceful citizen.

It was this condition which forced on the nation its present Indian policy. It was born of sheer necessity. Inasmuch as the Indian refused to fade out, but multiplied under the sheltering care of reservation life, and the reservation itself was slipping away from him, there was but one alternative: either he must be endured as a lawless savage, a constant menace to civilized life, or he must be fitted to become a part of that life and be absorbed into it. To permit him to be a roving savage was unendurable, and therefore the task of fitting him for civilized life was undertaken.

This, then, is the present Indian policy of the nation, — to fit the Indian for civilization and to absorb him into it. It is a national work. It is less than twenty−five years since the government turned from the policy of keeping him on reservations, as quiet as possible, out of the way of civilization, waiting, with no excess of patience, for the

race to fade out of existence and to cease from troubling. It was in 1877 that the nation made the first appropriation from its own treasury to fit for its own citizenship this portion of the human race living under its own flag and constitution, but without legal status or constitutional immunities. They were sometimes called in political phraseology savages, and sometimes wards or dependents, but generally savages, because no other word came so near expressing their status and character. The first appropriation was a mere pittance of $20,000; it was given only after a hard struggle. But the first step met with encouragement, and the next year the sum was increased to $30,000, and then to $60,000, and in two years more it became $125,000. The policy has at last so grown in public confidence that, while there is still much discussion of the best methods of expenditure, not a word is heard among the lawgivers for its abandonment. It has in the meantime so broadened in its scope that the appropriations for this work have increased from year to year, till this year (1899) it has risen to $2,638,390.

This vast outlay would of itself justify an inquiry into results. But an inquiry is demanded for another reason, because the assumed "failure" of our Indian policy is quoted in discussions of the attitude of the nation toward other alien peoples and our treatment of them. An eminent preacher, on last Thanksgiving Day, declared to a large congregation, "I should rather be a Malay subject to Spain than an American Indian subject to the Indian Bureau." A leading religious weekly of the widest circulation, discussing the same subject, stated that "our treatment of the Indian has been a miserable failure." There appeared also in one of the oldest of our magazines an article, by one whose sincerity and ability no one has ever questioned, demanding a radical departure, an abandonment of our present Indian policy. Men of less note, thus encouraged, are turning great microscopic power upon the government's treatment of the Indian for the last twenty−five years, in search of support for these arguments. It does not seem out of place, then, again to call public attention to what has been done for the Indian, and to see whether our present policy is a failure.

The contrast between the small beginning and the last appropriation itself indicates a public confidence based on merit. Much more would the aggregate of the outlay, if we should count it up, make imperative the inquiry, What else than success could possibly have induced adherence to so costly an outlay? The aggregate of all sums appropriated for this purpose since the first $20,000 in 1877 amounts to $29,352,344. Previous Indian policies had been shifting and ephemeral enough to promise a dozen changes during the period that the present policy has continued. Before this hardly one had outlived the administration that originated it, and sometimes two or three would come and go in a single presidential term. But when, in 1877, the government made its first appropriation, of $20,000, to educate the Indian up to a self−supporting citizenship, the money was expended in conjunction with benevolent contributions, and with the interest on funds belonging to the Indians, in support of 48 small boarding schools and 102 day schools with 3598 pupils. These schools were opened at the different reservations most promising for such an experiment. The result of each year's work since this small beginning explains the constantly increasing public confidence and additional expenditure as well as the enlargement of the work. There are now 148 well−equipped boarding schools and 295 day schools, engaged in the education of 24,004 children, with an average attendance of 19,671. How near this comes to including the whole number of children of school age, in a total population of a quarter of a million of Indians, every inquirer can form a pretty close estimate for himself.

No one will deny that, at this rate of progress, the facilities for the education of Indian children will soon reach, if they have not already reached, those enjoyed by their white neighbors in the remote regions of the West. The results thus far are of a most encouraging character. A personal examination, by competent and reliable officials, of all these schools, and as far as possible of the life of every person who has gone out from them, shows that seventy−six per cent of them are proving themselves, in the language of the present wise and broad−minded commissioner who has this work in charge, "good average men and women, capable of dealing with the ordinary problems of life, and of taking their place in the great body politic of our country." This is an army of missionaries going forth among their own people, speaking the language, clothed with the equipment, and inspired with the hopes and ambitions of civilized life. Its value cannot be overestimated. It is to this ultimate end that these schools are conducted. Industrial education which will fit the pupil for independent manhood is the necessity which justifiesthe undertaking. Whatever else may await these youth, they must be able to meet the

demands of the life which will surround them, or they will fail. If they are to be farmers, as most of them must be, it is of vastly more importance to them, in the outset, to be taught the requirements of a successful farmer, — irrigation, grain− raising, grazing, herding, — than to be taught any amount of book− learning or culture. This dominating purpose of the Indian school is the test of its usefulness. The result of its work thus far has not failed to stand the test.

But the work does not stop with the rising generation of the race; it embraces also the adult Indian. The home, no less in savage than in civilized life, is the centre of the influences that shape and determine character. Neglect of it is neglect of the future. Soon after the beginning of appropriations for Indian schools, Congress, in what is called the Severalty Act, provided for every Indian capable of appreciating its value, and who chose to take it, a homestead of one hundred and sixty acres to heads of families, and a smaller number to other members, inalienable and untaxable for twenty−five years, to be selected by him on the reservation of his tribe. If he prefer to abandon his tribe and go elsewhere, he may take his allotment anywhere on the public domain, free of charge. No English baron has a safer title to his manor than has each Indian to his homestead. He cannot part with it for twenty−five years without the consent of Congress, nor can the United States, without his consent, be released from a covenant to defend his possession for the same period. This allotment carries with it also all the rights, privileges, and immunities of an American citizen; opens to these Indians, as to all other citizens, the doors of all the courts; and extends to them the protection of all the laws, national and state, which affect any other citizen. Any Indian, if he prefers not to be a farmer, incumbered with one of these homesteads, may become a citizen of the United States, and reside and prosecute any calling in any part of the United States, as securely under this law as any one else, by taking up his residence separate and apart from his tribe, and adopting the habits of civilized life. Thus every door of opportunity is thrown wide open to every adult Indian, as well as to those of the next generation.

This recognition of the home and family as a force in Indian civilization became a part of the present policy of dealing with the race only twelve years ago. These are some of its results: 55,467 individual Indians, including a few under former treaty stipulations, have taken their allotments, making an aggregate of 6,708,628 acres. Of these, 30,000 now hold complete patents to their homes, and the rest are awaiting the perfection and delivery of their title deeds. More than 15,000 are heads of families now holding permanent homes, — permanent for twenty−five years, at least. Around these are gathered the lesser allotments of the other members of each family. Every adult male landholder stands at the polls and in the courts in the full rights of American citizenship.

Not alone in these statistics are manifest the evidences of permanent advance of the race toward the goal of orderly, self− supporting citizenship. Bloody Indian wars have ceased. The slaughter of warring clans and the scalping of women and children fleeing from burning wigwams are no longer recorded. Geronimo himself has become a teacher of peace. The recent unfortunate difficulty with the Chippewas in Minnesota, caused more by lack of white than of red civilization, is no exception. We are at peace with the Indian all along the border, and the line between the Indian and the white settlements is fast fading out. The pioneer goes forth to trade and barter with the red man as safely as he does with his white neighbor, and returns at night to his defenseless home with less apprehension of peril to those within than when scouts and sentinels mounted guard over it. This change has come quite as much from causes at work among the Indians themselves as from the influence of those who have the shaping of our policy. During these twelve years, families and adult Indians without families, in all more than 30,000, have found homes of their own on Indian lands, and are maintaining themselves by farming, stock−raising, and other pursuits to which peace is essential, and have themselves become peacemakers. Results from this brief experiment cannot be put into figures, but statistics recently published by authority as substantially correct are a sufficient and unanswerable argument in its support. From them it appears that these new−born Indian farmers have already fenced for their own farms 1,066,368 acres, from which they have realized, beyond what they themselves consumed, of vegetables, grain, hay, stock, and other farm products, the sum of $1,220,517. It is needless to say that this is a peace establishment more effective to prevent outbreaks among these Indians than all the bayonets relied on in the past for that purpose. In the Carlisle industrial school, the earliest and most persistent in developing the industrial faculties of Indian pupils, the scholars have a savings bank of their own,

conducted by themselves, in which they deposit their earnings during the summer months. These deposits have aggregated as much as $15,000. From them they often, of their own motion, disburse, in various benevolent enterprises connected with the work, percentages of each deposit.

There is another side of this question yet to be considered. What has the church been able to do under this policy? Bishop Hare, who has devoted his life to the uplifting of the Indian in the diocese of the two Dakotas, tells of a dozen Indian clergymen, and more than fifty deacons and catechists, engaged in missionary work among the Sioux alone, and 1600 Indian communicants in the Episcopal church. The Indian women in his diocese contributed in one year $2000 for missionary purposes. There are 33,000 Sioux, and 8000 are members of various churches. The Presbyterians, working among the Indians in other parts of the country, report nearly 5000 church members and 4000 enrolled in their Sunday schools, who gave in one year for missions $2600, besides $3400 toward their own support. Equally encouraging are reports from other denominations in all parts of the field where the national policy of making self−supporting citizens has taken root. The aggregate of church communicants is 28,351.

Other features of the work are not less successful. Not the least is the manhood it has inspired and the hope it has awakened in the Indian. It is dawning upon him that he was made for something, and he is beginning to care for the morrow. Pride in his children, in his home and its surroundings, is prompting effort and stimulating desire to excel. He no longer doubts and distrusts, and is daily growing more and more sure that the hand held out to him is for guidance and help, and not for betrayal or spoliation.

Such is the purpose of the present Indian policy of the nation, and these are some of its results. It is not all it should be, and there is yet need of the ever mending hand of the legislator as well as the watchful eye of the administrator. But the work has passed beyond the stage of experiment, and has won a permanent place in the conduct of public affairs. Those whose hands and hearts are in the work no longer criticise, but labor to improve. When such results have been accomplished in the green tree, what may we not hope for in the dry?

But let it ever be kept in mind that, after all, the civilization of the Indian cannot be enacted. The function of the law in this work is little more than the clearing of the way, the removal of disabilities, the creation of opportunities, and the shelter and protection of agencies elsewhere vitalized. The one vitalizing force, without which all else will prove vain, is the Indian's own willingness to adopt civilized life. Until this is quickened into activity, everything else will wilt and perish like a plant without root. Every effort must recognize this cardinal principle. Much can be done to kindle in him a desire for a better life and to nurse its beginnings, building it up to an aggressive force; but until this exist, any attempt, through legislation or in any other way, to impose civilization upon the race will prove a failure. When that desire and hope for a better life shall begin to prevail over savage instincts, if the law shall then have made the way clear and the path plain, and, co−operating with outside efforts to strengthen and mature the new impulses, shall have made sure the rewards of civilization and the immunities of citizenship, it will have fulfilled its purpose. This is the endeavor of the Indian policy of to−day. Opening up so wide a field, and imposing an obligation for increased effort on every friend of the race, whatever may be his theory, it may calmly await the first stone from any of those who can claim Scriptural authority for casting it.