

Excerpt from *A Generation Removed*, written by Margaret Jacobs, pp. 5-8, 25-29, 31, 48, 52, 54.

The boarding schools failed miserably in their goal of ending the “Indian problem.” Instead the schools triggered many unforeseen consequences.... By the mid-twentieth century the BIA believed the boarding schools had become just one more aspect of the government’s largesse that sustained rather than ended Indian dependence.

The federal government readily sought to shed its responsibility for the care of Indian children ... by the early 1950s, and many states seized the chance to have greater control over the affairs of Indian people within their borders.

The question of who should care for Indian children, how they should do so, and more importantly, who should *pay* for this care, remained a murky and contested jurisdictional issue.

The BIA devised a solution in 1958 that appealed to both federal cost cutters and cash-strapped state agencies: the Indian Adoption Project. The project promoted the placement of Indian children in non-Indian adoptive families; it looked to the ultimate private sector to take over the expense of raising Indian children and assimilating them once and for all. Reducing the costs of care for Indian children served as their priority, but BIA and state bureaucrats justified the Indian Adoption Project as a caring program that would rescue supposedly forgotten Indian children and find them permanent homes.

Disturbingly, most bureaucrats by the late 1950s rarely imagined a solution to the care of Indian children that involved strengthening Indian families and keeping Indian children within their homes. Most government officials deemed Indian families inherently and irreparably unfit, and so they ignored the proposition of funding preventative and rehabilitative services to Indian families.... Policymakers now used new terms ... but the primary settler colonial goal of eliminating American Indian people remained unchanged. Indian children and Indian families suffered as a result.

By all socioeconomic indicators, Indians in the post-World War II era endured the most extreme hardship of any American minority. They had the highest rates of unemployment and suicide and the lowest incomes and life expectancies.... These dire economic conditions ... led many ... to depend on public assistance.... The “Indian problem,” as defined by non-Indian bureaucrats, was alive and well.

Many such government officials ...insisted that what was needed ... was an aggressive drive toward assimilation.... These legislators ... shaped a new federal policy that called for a termination of Indians’ unique tribal status.... The new orientation toward the care of Indian children emerged as both a consequence and a manifestation of these new government policies. (pp. 5-8)

In Indian communities it was common and desirable for extended family members, especially grandparents, to take in and raise their kin. (p. 25)

[IAP director Arnold] Lyslo and other social workers did not believe that extended family members should care for Indian children, so they promoted more adoption services for unmarried Indian mothers. (p. 26)

Lyslo targeted vulnerable tribes that he expected to provide increased numbers of children available for adoption. (p. 27)

Lyslo claimed that by 1968 the IAP had become more successful in convincing Indian unmarried mothers to give up their children for adoption.

In reality Lyslo and other social services workers had created and magnified a problem that scarcely existed before. Indian families did not stigmatize unmarried mothers and readily incorporated their children into extended kin networks.

The IAP may have stimulated the increased removal of older Indian children as well as newborns (p. 28)

Authorities made strenuous efforts to increase the supply of adoptable Indian children, but they expended little or no energy to prevent the breakup of or to reunite struggling Indian families, as they once had in the 1950s. The logic of bureaucratic care, honed over nearly a century of implementing federal Indian policy, came to focus on Indian child removal and the interests of adoptive families. (p. 29)

From an American Indian point of view it seemed inconceivable that the widespread removal of Indian children from a community could possibly “improve the general conditions among Indians.” Instead it looked like a well-coordinated effort to prevent Indian people from reproducing their families and communities and maintaining their traditions and cultures. Many Indian people felt like Lee Cook of Red Lake, Minnesota, who declared at the 1974 U.S. Senate subcommittee hearings on Indian child welfare, “I think that the BIA and the state welfare workers have been carrying on like at Auschwitz.” Cook and many other Indians believed that through promoting adoption, the BIA and state governments were following the settler colonial logic of elimination. The U.S. government had a long history of dispossessing Indian people of their land and undermining their sovereignty. The promotion of Indian adoption represented yet another assault on Native societies. (p. 31)

The IAP director Arnold Lyslo worked to cultivate demand for Indian adoptees by exploiting liberal Americans’ desires to reach across racial boundaries and undo legacies of colonial mistrust to form genuine relationships with American Indians.... Lyslo and his allies invoked longstanding images of the unfit Indian family as the basis of Indian poverty, and they promoted intervention in the Indian family and child removal as the means to resolve the chronic “Indian problem.” (p. 48)

The IAP and many social workers created a corollary to “the forgotten Indian child” in the figure of the “Indian unmarried mother,” whom authorities manufactured as an unfit parent. One IAP form listed “unmarried motherhood” as the top social problem—*above* alcoholism, gross neglect of family, criminal record, and mental illness—that social workers should be concerned with in possibly placing an Indian child for adoption. (p. 52)

Social welfare authorities created a composite of Indian life through the accretion of these stereotypical images of the forgotten Indian child, the unmarried Indian mother, the deadbeat Indian father, and the deviant Indian family. This composite then underwrote their support for Indian adoption. (p. 54)