



Super-Essays
-Service.com

Final Research Paper



Abstract

American Indians faced various types of oppression including assimilation, which posed a major challenge to their issue of self-identity. They were victims of circumstances and suffered mistreatment from the whites. Firstly, this paper examines the identity politics of American Indians/Native Americans. Secondly, it examines the cultural, religious, and social implications of being an American Indian and the core cultural values they have. Finally, the paper critically examines how self-determination as an aspect of identity politics resulted in successful end of assimilation among American Indians.

Introduction

Identity politics can be described as the political points of view that focus primarily on self-concern and opinions of self-identified social interest groups. It also focuses on the way individual politics are formed on the basis of race, religion, class, gender, traditional dominance or sexual orientation. From another perspective, the politics of identity can be viewed as an effort to speak the lacuna of political representation without an outbreak of violence. For instance, it was the most dominant aspect of American Indian story when Indians were still subordinates to the whites. This paper categorically examines the identity politics among American Indians as the chosen group, the implications of being a member of this group.

American Indians are individuals who have their origin from the Northern and Southern parts of the US or those with significant tribal affiliations to these

tribes. According to the recent census done on the American Indian population, most of them have their origin from Inupiat, Navajo, Blackfeet, Yupik or South and Central American Indian groups. According to the census, American Indians have always been counted as a different race from the rest. Therefore, the aspect of identity politics can be evident initially in the fact that they are treated differently from the rest. The issue of considering them as a different race can imply that they have some distinct features, which are examined in this paper. An individual's identity has three dimensions that are interconnected and they are the social, personal, and human identity. According to the American Indian culture, they have the unique type of religion that differentiates them from the rest of religions in the world. It has been a difficult task to accept the identity of these tribes as much as their religious practices are concerned. William in his article argues that even though the Indian culture may sound unique, it has some sovereignty because the federal government has also recognized their existence.

The unique aspect evident in the American Indian religion is the smoking of pipe. Pipe smoking is one of the keystones of teaching spiritual things. Among the Lakota-based religions, the pipe plays a significant role in offering prayers to the Great Spirit. The American Indians usually smoke the pipe and the smoke emanating from it is viewed as a form of praying. Tobacco, according to them, is a sacrament, and it is mostly mixed with some special herbs and smoked. Another common practice mostly found among the American Indians is having long hair from birth to death. The uncut hair is a symbol of knowledge an individual acquires in his lifetime in matters of religion. The hair would only be cut when one lost a close relative to symbolize bereavement. Some critics have condemned this practice on the American Indian inmates and have even



challenged it in the court. They argue on grounds that as inmates maintain uncut hair, it would be an infringement to the policies of some correctional facilities on grooming. Some of these facilities ban long hair for the purpose of identity and hygiene. They also argue that having long hair can make one perceived as a gang member.

Another crucial aspect evident in American Indians is that they value the family unity. Among these individuals, success of a person is viewed in terms of how much he gives away. Kuiper in his book has pointed out that in the Native American culture people recognize significance of sharing family resources for survival. This aspect is crucial fostering unity in a community.

According to another argument, the implication of how one is connected to the Indian people has drawn much attention to the issue of identity politics. It was initiated by the forces of assimilation through the federal American Indian Policies that established an overall sense of political identity for survival. The first incidence was the aspiration of the federal government to displace American Indians from their land and use it for the white settlement. The second one is the perception that assimilating of American Indians would aid in the reduction of poverty that was dominant among the American Indians. Some of the Native Americans refused to sell their land and were resistance to the idea of assimilation. Their opposition made them lack enough financial resources for cultivation of their lands and purchasing of essential commodities. Some American Indians then lost their lands due to the inability to pay heavy tax imposed on them by white settlers. On the other hand, the federal policies like the idea of boarding schools, which failed in favor of American Indians who were against it.



It can also be argued that some groups always operate from an established ground of domination and they tend to influence other unestablished ethnic groups tremendously in an exploitative manner. They tend to involve themselves in the ethnic identity politics, so as to secure more power from their subordinates, which usually ends up in violence. For instance, the belief of the whites that American Indian tribal values and culture required some assimilation for typical whites directly resulted in a force. This fact indeed proves the Leach, Brown and Worden's (2008) point that identity politics can lead to violence when the group feeling dominant disregards their subjects' cultural values. The oppressive policies of assimilation of American Indians gave rise to activism.

Montgomery narrates that although assimilation resulted in a tremendous resistance, it empowered American Indians to form an influential political movement during 1960's. It was like a wake-up call for American Indians to understand that they could also 'move mountains'. Earlier the American government had a mentality that traditional leaders were to be treated like children until they could be knowledgeable about working under the societal customs based on the privilege and power of the whites.

After suffering from oppressive policies, a new group of tribal leaders from the American Indian side united and embraced the idea of 'self-determination'. This idea gained a backup from the President Lyndon Johnson in 1968. It can be argued that this idea gave the Native Americans their primary achievement then. One of the crucial results that was championed by the notion of self-determination was establishment of ethnic controlled colleges. These colleges were chartered by the tribes and were entirely governed by American

Indians (Montgomery, 2012). Arguing from a different school of thought, it can be clearly evident that the idea of self-determination, which formed part of the political identity of these people, made them achieve their objectives.

Later, in 1972, the Indian Education Act was passed by the government. The Act was bound to deliver sufficient and appropriate formal education to Native Americans. The Act gave the primary initiative to resolving the catastrophic effects from the period of mistreatment and abuse. The established tribal colleges acted as the first educational facilities to embrace and integrate American Indians' traditional values into their mission statements. In the new era, these colleges believed that it was their obligation to ensure that American Indian students learn their culture, study their dialectal and past issues. It also provided them a forum to practice their ceremonies with sense of purpose and pride.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that identity politics can be beneficial to the group of individuals if properly utilized. At times, it may turn to be disastrous, but if proper values are considered, it may lead to success in the long run. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the contemporary society to accept ethnic organizations of other groups and have a diversity of conscious mind. Just like Americans, Indians avoided the inferiority complex and worked to successful curbing of assimilation. The contemporary society is not different and it should put this mentality to right practice for there is nothing as vital as being culturally satisfied.

