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From the Taos Battle for Blue Lake to Self-Determination

From the beginnings of the country, citizens of the United States have had many different views of Native Americans. At first it was a popular belief that assimilation or the practice of indoctrinating, that is, actively forcing Native Americans to partake in American society, was the best policy. In the early twentieth century, views shifted to one that supported a termination policy in which the United States sought to actively terminate any standing recognition of not only the rights of natives, but also to limit the parameters of the federal government’s dealings with the native tribes. During the 1970s the focus officially shifted from that of termination to self-determination under the presidency of Richard Nixon. Prior to Nixon’s presidency there was a legal battle already taking place that set the stage for this policy change. The Taos Pueblo of New Mexico had been in dispute with the United States government for the return of the Taos Blue Lake watershed. Without the Taos case, the North American Indian tribes located within the United States would most likely not have rallied behind President Nixon’s policy change. This paper is organized around four main sections, starting with the historical background of the lands. Part two explains the religious significance that the land held to the Taos. Part three traces the legal battle for the Taos Blue Lake. The last section focuses on the Indian Self Determination Bills: Senate Bill (S.) 3157 and S. 1573.

Historical Background

The Taos Pueblo have been located in the present state of New Mexico since at least the fourteenth century, where they occupied an estimated 300,000 acres of land prior to the Spanish colonization. Over time, as Spanish colonization claimed more
The Taos lost a significant portion of the land they had inhabited for centuries. By 1900 it is estimated that only about 67,000 acres, including Pueblo itself and the Blue Lake watershed, were under Taos control/ownership. This rapid recession in territory was not a new phenomenon for Native Americans in North American regions. As the expansion of the United States continued to encroach on Native lands, in 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt dealt a very heavy blow to the Taos. He ordered the seizure of some 50,000 acres of land, including the town of Taos, and the watershed itself. This was to be done without giving any compensation to the Taos Pueblo Indians. Thereafter the Blue Lake lands became part of the Carson National Forest, under the "care" and "jurisdiction" of the National Forest Service. The Taos were to act as caretakers of the land, ensuring that it would not be desecrated or despoiled. However, the Taos were already acting as the caretakers, and allowing an outside entity to have jurisdiction over lands they were already tending was seen by the Taos as paternalistic. Another issue with the Forest Service taking over jurisdiction pertains to the commercial logging practices that took place in the decades to come.

After the seizure of the lands, the Taos leaders began a political battle that would last for sixty-five years. In 1926 the Taos agreed to not make a claim to the property in the Town of Taos, which was appraised at a value then of more than 300,000 dollars; instead, the Taos wanted 50,000 acres returned to them. The U.S. agreed to this. However, the federal government never fulfilled their promise to return the lands. In place of ownership, the Taos were "permitted" the "free use" of the lands. Then in 1928 the Forest Service constructed facilities on the land, which included a corral, outhouse, and cabin.

There are many problems with not only the seizure of the lands, but also the rhetoric used, or "permissions" given by the United States government to the Taos. The first issue is with how the land was seized, though no compensation was given. Another problem had to do with the livelihood of the Taos who lived off the land and still resided in the region. The second issue was the "permit" and how it provided the Taos access to the land, though
the Forest Service only allowed such for certain religious activities that were deemed acceptable. This left the Taos vulnerable to having their religious practices and way of life controlled by the Forest Service and United States government.

After the creation of the Carson National Park, there was an increase in outside traffic by non-Indians into the area. With increased traffic there came a desire by the Forest Service for the building of new facilities. This was at least the justification given by the Forest Service for the creation of the cabin and outhouse. These acts were seemingly benign in their intent because the cabin and the outhouse were built in order to provide shelter to the rangers. However, the outhouse was located on the edge of the Blue Lake, the most sacred area of the region for the Taos. This could be interpreted by the Taos as open hostility, which mirrored the United States policy at the time. Non-Indian persons on the Blue Lake lands also reminded the tribe of negative treatment when dealing with Franciscan missionaries seeking to suppress their rituals. The effects of Franciscan intrusion would cause the Taos to be incredibly secretive, as the rituals were thought to lose power with outside interference or witnesses. With the Forest Service and the visiting of United States citizens to the "National Forest," the intrusion occurring was considered an egregious affront to their beliefs. The Taos did appeal to the Forest Service, asking for a requirement of a permit that non-Indian persons would have to receive prior to visiting the land, which would have to be agreed to and approved by a Taos representative. However, the Forest Service sought to keep the lands "recreational" in use, not adhering to the wishes of the tribe.

Another important issue connected with the ownership of the land was the exploitation of its resources. Whether for fishing, hunting, or lumbering, without ownership or direct control of the land itself, the Taos were left at the whims of a bureaucratic entity that represented the interests of the United States government. Knowing about the interplay between the Forest Service and the Taos before the 1970s is important in order to understand one part of the discussion that would take place later on, during
Congressional hearings. The other important part of the debate concerns the significance of the lands to the Taos.

**Religious Significance**

Understanding and establishing the religious significance of the Blue Lake watershed is essential within the context of the transition from termination to self-determination, especially in this case. As will be discussed in the next section, the spiritual significance of the land became the main reason for the United States to consider Blue Lake's return. In order to appreciate the religious significance of the land, it is important to detail how and for what purposes the Blue Lake was used by the Taos. Although, as previously stated, the Taos are secretive about their rituals and the meanings behind them, that does not mean there were no accounts of the rituals available to United States decision makers. There were a few books published detailing the elusive and secretive rituals at Blue Lake. Three specific examples are given by anthropologist John Bodine. They include Blanche Grant's *Taos Indians* in 1925, John Collier's *On the Gleaming Way* in 1926, and Elsie Parson's *Taos Pueblo* in 1936. The problem with these accounts, according to Bodine, is that they are varied in the details described, which denotes that the secretive ways of the Taos proved difficult to bypass. However, there is one account that would stand the test of authenticity to Bodine, being discovered in 1965. Ironically, the ritual described in that most reliable account actually occurred in 1906, when the watershed and Taos lands were seized. Matilda Cox Stevenson, an ethnologist hired by the Bureau of Ethnology to record Indians, presented the most reliable account available. Stevenson's account detailed what others could not, arguably because the principal informant, who was a Taos, helped Stevenson to interpret the rituals, assisting her in providing clear understanding in her account. Where other accounts did not even see the ritual at Blue Lake, Stevenson did.

The Taos Blue Lake ritual is performed by ten different societies known as *Kivas* within the region. Stevenson's account
detailed the Feather Kiva. There is a period of preliminary “training” that each society gives its initiates, which ranges from six to eighteen months, during which initiates may have no outside contact with their family, friends, or village until the ritual at Blue Lake. Ages of the initiates vary between eight and ten. At the end of their initial training, the initiates begin their pilgrimage to Blue Lake. Blue Lake’s significance in the ritual is described to be the place “into which the dead descend into the nether worlds,” acting as a spiritual gateway for the Taos. Prior to the pilgrimage initiates must purify their bodies, first by drinking water from a creek. It should be noted that all of the waterways are interconnected within the watershed, thus making all of the water flowing down from Blue Lake sacred in accordance with Taos views.

After camping, singing, and dancing for the night, the initiates are then instructed to put on finer clothing, comprised of vibrant colors. Boys wear traditional leggings, girls wear silk dresses, and both wear moccasins. There is a separation between the groups moving to make the pilgrimage; it seems that the initiates are kept separate from those that have already transcended into the tribe formally. Their journey eventually leads them to a spring where the women grind cornmeal to be carried to the lake, making an offering to the gods. Both women from the initiation party and the main party will make offerings, though the main party women will offer more, seeming to denote their status as members of the kiva. During this time the men also pray to the “women grinders” to ask the gods for a good hunt, which in turn will affect their offerings at the lake.

Upon reaching the Lake itself, the whole kiva group bathes in the lake, with men wearing only breeches and women wearing a white camisa (gown). Every person drinks from the lake using his or her hands. The whole beginning ritual can be seen as an entirely spiritual affair, where affirmation of oneness with the land happens with those already initiated and the spiritual purity of new initiates to be tested. There are also portions of the ritual that have to do with hair tying, with the females fixing the hair of the males, which symbolizes communal caretaking. Another ritual
takes place where flowers are distributed to the men from the female initiates, ending with ritual dancing, song, prayers, and a sunrise vigil.\(^\text{19}\)

Upon returning to the village, a ritualistic feast takes place, where the newly initiated males are kept separate, being required to eat native food. Everyone who made the pilgrimage has to travel to another location, approximately two miles up into a canyon, where they perform a ritual sacrifice by plucking out all of their facial hair, digging a hole, placing a traditional native meal in the hole, covering it with the hair, and then covering the hole with a stone and prayer. The kiva then feasts on native food, and more specifically they must have deer meat. The concluding rituals take place over the next couple of days at the leader of the Feather People's house, where he gives them medicine, they eat more native food, and, finally, feast individually at each initiate’s house.\(^\text{20,21}\)

Stevenson's account of the Taos rituals gave very clear insight into why the land itself is so significant to the rituals. Beginning with the “purification” rituals, drinking from both the land and the lake, it is evident why the Forest Service as well as increased traffic from outsiders could disrupt the rituals by soiling the lake and the water throughout the whole watershed. The same could be said for the “native food” mentioned in Stevenson’s account; food comes from the land itself. The food, the land, and the lake had all been essential for generations upon generations. The account also gave credence to the grievance that the Taos had with buildings being built upon the land, especially near the lake itself. When they have to not only drink, but also conduct their spiritual rituals in view of an outhouse and cabin built by outsiders, it compromised the secrecy as well as tainted the ritual by potentially making the scene impure. No longer was the location just that of the Taos; their sacred ground was not wholly theirs. Similarly, with the requirement of deer meat, if the land was owned or managed by the Forest Service, then it would be subjected to the game and fishing laws of the federal government, which further disrupted the Taos ways. Overall it can be reasonably asserted that the land itself held deep symbolism for
the Taos: it was them and they were it. Desecrating Taos land by allowing others onto it is akin to having someone vandalize a church to a Christian.22

John Bodine was the one who brought this account to relevancy by seeking to verify its authenticity, which he did on three separate occasions. The first was in 1965 after he discovered Stevenson's account, then again in 1975 and 1981. He did this by seeking out members of the Feather Kiva, who largely agreed with the authenticity of Stevenson’s narrative. Some details were possibly embellished, but that doesn't detract from the overall proof of spiritual significance to the Taos. It was this significance that provided Congress with the justification to return the lands to the Taos.

**Legal Battle**

Ever since their lands were seized, the Taos had sought its return. For sixty-five years they attempted to safeguard their way of life by appealing to the United States federal government. Although the Taos used the method of legal appeals, the true pathway lay in rallying public support, which would root itself after the publication of Frank Water's *The Man Who Killed The Deer* in 1942. However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the book picked up momentum, spreading knowledge of the Taos in a favorable light. Water's book, according to Gordon-McCutchan, “made people aware that the whole natural landscape, the entire fifty thousand acres, contained innumerable shrines where the Indians would go to pray and hold ceremonies.”23 By establishing that the land was religiously significant to the Taos, this eventually led to wider support, which would come to manifest itself in different newspaper and journal accounts across the country.24

A major victory for the Taos came from the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) in 1965. At that time, after reviewing the Taos claim to Blue Lake, the ICC found that the Taos had rights to some 130,000 acres of land and that the land had been seized without compensation.25 The committee reported that, because of the
religiously significant rituals that are a part of the Taos spiritual base, the Taos had a legitimate claim by way of religious freedom. Since the land was essential to the Taos, it would be considered unjust to seize them, especially without compensation. Unfortunately the ICC was limited to giving only monetary compensation, and only an act of Congress could actually return the lands to the Taos. The Taos, however, had never sought monetary recompense; their only goal was the return of the lands.

ICC’s finding, coupled with growing public support, brought the political support needed to bring the issue to Congress for resolution. By 1968 the House of Representatives had passed the Blue Lake Bill unanimously with the support of New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Florida Congressman James Haley, and Interior Secretary Stewart Udall. Despite getting the initial bill passed by the House of Representatives, the Senate was an entirely different matter. Clinton Anderson from New Mexico was the largest opponent and was also a powerful member of the Senate. His stance was against the return and any sort of legislation that would take away the lands from the Forest Service.

Anderson’s blockage of the Blue Lake bill caused the tribe to launch a national campaign pushing for the ability to exercise its religious freedom. They were supported, most notably, by the National Council of Churches (NCC), an organization comprised of thirty-two different Christian denominations. Its advocacy in support of the Taos consisted of, according to Gordon-McCutchan, “duplicating, mailing, public relations, provision of access to religious and general press outlets, contacts with people in Washington, receiving of mail and calls in New York, and in fund raising.” With this powerful organization acting as a sort of loudspeaker, they were able to reach out to its considerable base of member organizations. Those organizations would reach individual members of their congregations and, in turn, they would pass the word even farther. The methodology used in spreading knowledge regarding the Taos struggle was powerful mainly because of how it could force political change. Politicians
were bound by their constituents, and when the constituents supported an issue upon which the majority of Americans agreed, that of religious freedom, it not only benefited the Taos but also benefited the politicians who got involved.

There was one member of the NCC who acted as a voice for the Taos, Rev. Dean M. Kelley who was the director of the Commission on Religious Liberties. He assisted in interpreting for the public and for Congress, the meaning of the Blue Lake to the Taos. After he went to the Taos and explained how he wanted to help them, he wrote an article for the *Journal of Church and State*, which summarized the Taos perspective:

The members of the tribe feel an ancient identity, not only with Blue Lake—the headwaters of their life-sustaining stream—but with the entire watershed, its plants and animals. Anything which mutilates the valley hurts the tribe. If the trees are cut, the tribe bleeds. If the springs or lakes or streams are polluted, the life stream of the tribe is infected. The mining of ore would inflict wounds upon the land and upon the people who revere it. ... The spiritual kinship which the tribe feels for the sources of their life and livelihood clearly cannot be localized in any one spot or a few, but extends to the whole region. The aura of sanctity, which has its source in the water-courses where the Creators' life-sustaining water flows out to the inhabitants of semi-arid land, is indivisible from the related lands and the living things they produce.

During the period in which momentum was building between the Taos and the American people, they garnered more political support in Congress against Senator Anderson. Even the Governor of New Mexico, David Cargo, threw his support behind the Taos. There were multiple hearings on the Blue Lake bill, though the most substantial of them came after the support of
President Richard Nixon on July 8, 1970. He wrote a letter to Congress explicitly stating his support for the Native Americans, identifying the historical wrongs that had been done to them first by European settlers and then by the United States government. With his letter Nixon addressed his personal change from supporting the termination policy to supporting self-determination for the Indians. His reasoning for the change was that it was “morally wrong” to continue the old policy because the promises made by the federal government had never been actualized in favor of Indians; he argued that the agreements the government and tribes entered into were always one-sided—never mutual nor completed on the part of the United States. Termination, according to Nixon, removed even that small safeguard of wardship the Indians had in relation to the federal government. He went on to detail how termination as a policy often made Indians more reliant on the federal government by taking away their ability to survive autonomously. Another point Nixon made was that, along with that policy, the people in charge of the reservations or tribal affairs were often not even the tribes themselves, but bureaucratic agencies. He did not specifically name the agency, but it seemed to be the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Forest Service to which he referred. Nixon also gave nine specific areas he wanted to address during his term: rejecting termination, the right to control and operate federal programs, restoring the sacred lands near Blue Lake, Indian education, economic development of legislation, more money for Indian health, helping urban Indians, an Indian Trust Counsel Authority, and an Assistant Secretary for Indian and Territorial Affairs. It was in his letter that Nixon specifically stated his support not only for the Taos, but also for H.R. 471, the bill that would return Blue Lake (which, at that time, was being held up in the Senate by Anderson).

Nixon's support for the Taos stemmed not only from the pressure of public support during the campaign by the Taos and the NCC, but also from his personal experience. During his time at Whittier College, Nixon had an Indian football coach by the name of “Chief Wallace Newman” whom he respected. This admiration
would foster a positive image of Indians for Nixon, making this a matter that was both political and personal for him.\textsuperscript{35}

In the Senate hearings after Nixon's support became known, specifically for H.R. 471, there followed a sort of last stand by Senator Anderson, who defended his position against the return of the land. Within the Senate committee hearings on the matter there was a discussion between Secretary of Interior Walter Hickel and Senator Anderson pertaining to the differences between H.R. 471 and Anderson's S. 750 counterproposal. The differences between the two were blatant, with Hickel supporting the Taos under the religious grounds that had been established, documented, and affirmed, whereas Anderson argued that the United States was justified in its claim to the land on the basis of the Spanish Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty of 1848. Anderson stated that his position derived from the idea that the Taos had been largely unhindered even after the land was taken by the United States.\textsuperscript{36} To further his point, he asked Hickel whether the land was indeed “stolen” and “by whom.” Throughout the discussion Anderson's disposition might have been described as crude in that he clearly did not want the return to happen. He also stated in a letter to the committee that there were multiple attempts to reconcile or pay monetary damages to the Taos for the land itself, even though, technically, the tribe did not have “aboriginal title” claims due to the 1848 treaty. To Anderson, it was unjust for the United States to compensate the Taos while, at the same time, turning over the land. Anderson was also concerned about setting a precedent of land return to Indian tribes throughout the United States, citing approximately 1,373,810,150 acres of land being claimed through the ICC.\textsuperscript{37} His concern lay in both the broader context and for the state of New Mexico. It can be asserted that his bias toward the Forest Service derived from the possibility of exploiting the land for profit through the lumber industry. Any intrusion upon the jurisdiction of the Forest Service undermined the authority of the government on land that was rightfully the property of United States.

He was countered, not only by Secretary Hickel but also by many representatives of the Taos, including Paul Bernal, Querino
Romero, William Schaab, and David Cargo. These individuals were important for their respective places in the Taos community. Paul Bernal was the leading spiritual guide, Querino Romero was the Governor of the Taos, William Schaab was their leading special counsel, and David Cargo was the Governor of New Mexico. All of them stated their support for H.R. 471, and reaffirmed their positions of spiritual justification for the return of the Blue Lake to Indian trust and title.\(^{38}\) Though it was Secretary Hickel who aptly defended the Taos perspective best; as he stated in contradiction to Anderson's view, the lands were not compensated for, and the Taos had been denied compensation since the battle began. It was not about monetary value, which set it apart from the other claims in the ICC, Hickel argued; he concluded that “it is a very difficult thing to try to settle a religious thing with money.”\(^ {39}\) Another major participant in the debate was Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who was considered an expert on Indian Affairs. He weighed in against Anderson's point of view, throwing his support to the Taos.

Anderson's point of view is linear in concept, drawing on the previous notion that the only way for the United States to right the wrong was by payment, not by land return. Yet the only form of repayment available in the eyes of the Taos was the land return. Senator Anderson's S. 750 would put the land back under the control of the Forest Service, and even then, as detailed by the “Taos Indian Delegation,” it would essentially split up the land in a combination of Forest Service areas and Taos run lands, which was counter to keeping the entire watershed sufficiently intact for religious purposes.\(^ {40}\) The significance behind the Taos Pueblo case in comparison to the other cases in the ICC was due to the cultural aspects that separated it from other claims.

Ultimately, amidst strong public, political, and presidential support, Senator Anderson lost his battle for S. 750 on December 2, 1970 with a six-to-one vote, and on December 15, 1970, less than two years after the campaign gained attention and less than six months after Nixon's support, H.R. 471 was signed into law. It returned the Blue Lake lands, totaling 48,000 acres, to the Taos Pueblo Indians of New Mexico in order to protect their religious
rights and way of life. During the signing ceremony President Nixon expressed his gratitude to the bi-partisan effort that made the bill happen, as well as restating his desire for a change in United States policy toward Native Americans. The ceremony concluded with Romero, the spiritual leader of the Taos giving thanks to President Nixon for the return of the lands and offering a prayer.

**Indian Self-determination**

What followed the 1970 signing was the drafting of legislation for general Indian self-determination. There were two different bills that were introduced during the process, S. 1573 and S. 3157. The goal of the Nixon administration was to give Indians as much power over federal programs as possible, allowing them to set up what they saw fit, though allowing them the ability to let the federal government maintain programs should the Indians want them. This was supposed to allow for autonomy of sorts from the United States government, providing them with the safety of support while still being able to manage or control tribal destiny.

Similar to the Blue Lake's H.R. 471 and S. 750, there were two fundamental differences between S. 1573 and S. 3157. The latter bill contained paternalistic language that conflicted with what Nixon wanted; while it allowed for tribes to contract programs through the government, the government would ultimately have authority to take control of the programs should it see a “violent” or “negligent” situation happening. If it had passed, there would have been nothing to stop the United States government from exerting its authority over the tribes, with little explanation or description of what might constitute violent or negligent acts. S. 1573 provided a timeline upon which the Secretary of Interior had to turn over programs to Indians, once created.

There were concerns on both sides of each bill for the Indians. William Youpee, the President of the National Tribal Chairman’s Association, had reservations about S. 1573 because it
sounded too much like termination. He also stated his hesitancy toward proposed United States policy change because of how Indians have been treated earlier. This view was blunted by the signing and return of the Taos Blue Lake, which showed the government intent to right the wrongs that were previously commonplace. The bulk of legislators were in support of S. 1573 because it was more inclusive of the Indian populace and because S. 3157 treated Indians as if they were no more than a contracting party. These fundamental differences in policy would create unified support for the passage of S. 1573, creating the authority for the Indians to determine their own destinies. On January 4, 1975, the Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act was signed into law, effectively changing the way the United States government interacted with Indian tribes.

**Legacy**

In the aftermath of the adoption of self-determination as the new policy, some Indians were hesitant to exercise their power for fear of termination. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) had to adopt its own more forceful stance and actually push Indian groups to create their own programs. Once this began, and Indians saw the usefulness of the programs, there was a surge of use. This did have some lasting effects, specifically in terms of budgeting. With the growth in use, the funding had to be distributed in a more specific manner. Ultimately tribes in “critical need” were given priority over others. Allen C. Quetone, a veteran of the BIA, asserts a mixed result in the implementation of self-determination. He states that, in order for the programs to be effectively introduced to the Indian community that created them, there should be proper government setup within the tribe. There is also a seeming gap between the actual interpretation of the law and the personnel in the BIA who exercise either not enough or too much control over programs.

It appears that Quetone’s stance on the subject is mostly positive in light of the past government policy objectives. With the right intentions on behalf of the BIA and the right infrastructure in
tribal politics, Indian self-determination can be useful. It does have its pitfalls. However, it is still a relatively new policy that is undergoing its own changes after implementation.

Throughout the history of the United States, no policy toward the Native populations of North America has been so starkly in contrast to the past than that of Indian self-determination. The promotion of Indian inclusion and autonomy through the wanted assistance of programs that are specifically designed by and for Indians meets the objectives outlined by President Richard Nixon and have been made possible through the struggle of the Taos for their religious freedom. The Taos case allowed for the United States government to actually implement a change in policy, raised public awareness, and garnered the support needed to shift from termination to self-determination.

Notes

5 Ibid., 33-34.
6 Kelley, 161-62.
7 Gordon-McCutchan, 2.
9 Ibid., 31-33.
10 Ibid., 33-36.
11 Gordon-McCutchan, 2.
12 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 94.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 95-96.
18 Ibid., 96.
19 Ibid., 97.
20 Ibid., 97-98.
21 Ibid., 98-100.
23 Gordon-McCutchan, 2.
24 Ibid., 2-4.
25 Kelley, 161.
28 Ibid.
30 Gordon-McCutchan, 4.
31 Ibid.
32 Kelley, 163.
33 Gordon-McCutchan, 5.
35 Gordon-McCutchan, 6.
37 Ibid., 48.
38 Ibid., 105-15.
39 Ibid., 32.
40 Ibid., 116.