

Indian Reorganization Act (1934)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt

The 'Meriam Report' published in 1928 was a government study which described the poverty and poor living conditions on the reservations, terrible disease and death rates, grossly inadequate care of the Indian children in the boarding schools, and destructive effects of the erosion of Indian land caused by the General Allotment Act. The Great Depression began shortly after this report was issued, causing living conditions and employment opportunities to fall everywhere in the country. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' policies were designed as a response and focused on relief, recovery and reform. It was in this atmosphere that Congress passed the ***Indian Reorganization Act (IRA)*** in 1934, also known as the '*Wheeler-Howard Act*' or the '***Indian New Deal.***' The IRA began a new era of federal government and tribal relations.

The most important thing the IRA accomplished is said to be the promotion of the exercise of tribal self-governing powers. Whether tribes organized under the IRA or not, they were influenced by it to formalize their governmental authorities in new ways including adopting tribal constitutions. In a nutshell, the main things the Indian Reorganization Act accomplished include the following:

- Stopped the erosion of the tribal land base by ending the allotment of tribal land, extended the trust period for existing allotments, prohibited lands to be taken away from tribes without their consent, and authorized the Secretary of the Interior to accept additional tribal lands in trust and to proclaim new reservations on those lands
- Recognized tribal governments and sought to promote tribal self-government by encouraging tribes to adopt constitutions under Section 16 of the Act
- Established a revolving loan program for tribal development and set up specific tribal business charters under Section 17 of the Act
- Established a Native preference hire for jobs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs

The ***Indian Reorganization Act*** aimed at decreasing federal control of American Indian affairs and increasing Indian self-government and responsibility. In gratitude for the Indians' services to the country in World War I, Congress in 1924 authorized the Meriam Survey of the state of life on the reservations. The shocking conditions under the regimen established by the *Dawes Severalty Act* (1887) -- aka *Dawes General Allotment Act*, as detailed in the Meriam report of 1928, spurred demands for reform.

Many of the Meriam report's recommendations for reform were incorporated in the *Indian Reorganization Act*. The act curtailed the future allotment of tribal communal lands to individuals and provided for the return of surplus lands to the tribes rather than allowing them to be sold to homesteaders. It also encouraged written constitutions and charters giving Indians the power to manage their internal affairs. Finally, funds were authorized for the establishment of a revolving credit program for tribal land purchases, for educational assistance, and for aiding tribal organization.

About 160 tribes or villages adopted written constitutions under the act's provisions. Through the revolving credit fund, many Indians improved their economic position. With the funds for purchase of land, millions of additional acres were added to the reservations. Greatly improved staffs and services were provided in health and education, with more than half of all Indian children in public school by 1950. The act awakened a wider interest in civic affairs, and Indians began asking for the franchise, which they had been technically granted in 1924.

The *Reorganization Act* remains the basis of federal legislation concerning Indian affairs. The act's basic aims were reinforced in the 1960s and '70s by the further transfer of administrative responsibility for reservation services to the Indians themselves, who continued to depend on the federal government to finance those services.

A Sioux Attorney Criticizes the Indian Reorganization Act

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which became known as the Indian New Deal, dramatically changed the federal government's Indian policy. Although John Collier, commissioner of Indian affairs who was responsible for the new policy, may have viewed Indians with great sympathy, not all Native Americans viewed the Indian New Deal in equally positive terms. In this 1968 interview, Ramon Roubideaux, a Sioux attorney, denounced the Indian Reorganization Act as "a white man's idea" of how Indians should live and argued that it "set the Indian people aside from the mainstream of American life and made them a problem."

Ramon Roubideaux: Well, I might say as far as the Indian Reorganization Act is concerned, I think this is possibly one of the best intentioned but unfortunate happenings that could have possibly taken place as far as the Indian people are concerned. What I am speaking about is that although it did stop the alienation, the sale of Indian lands and did stop the allotment system, it created a socialistic society, and set the Indian people apart from the mainstream of American life and made them a problem. So what this has really done, it has substituted in place of the governing system that the Indians had prior to the Indian Reorganization Act, a white man's idea of how they should live, rather a paternalistic type of government which, had as its object the socializing of all the activities of the Indian people and while the framers of this act and the ones who are responsible for the idea of formulating it probably had the best intentions in the world, I cannot help but think that there was maybe not an overt conspiracy, but one in the back of the mind of these bureaucrats to really perpetuate their own existence.

Interviewer: The bureaucrats in the Bureau of Indian Affairs?

Roubideaux: Right! Now, now when I speak of bureaucrats, I not only include the actual officeholders, but the families and friends of all these officeholders who form the controlling and guiding memberships of these eastern Indian organizations. I want to elaborate a little on the effects of the Indian Reorganization Act insofar as it has deterred the development and the independent thinking of the Indian people. In the first place, it set the Indian aside as a problem. The Indian is, was told that he was a problem from the very day that he was born under this system and as he grew older, he was by the presence of these so-called experts in agriculture and ranching and other activities they were paying lip service to teaching the Indians, he was somehow made to feel that he was inferior, that he wasn't able to compete. So that the whole system emphasized the activities of the Indians as a whole for the benefit of the whole, rather than the individual uh, private enterprise system of our American system. He wasn't taught to be a capitalist, which he must be taught in order for him to survive in, in this country. Many of the programs had limitations on 'em, particularly, say the cattle program. They would allow an Indian to acquire some two hundred head of cattle and he couldn't get any more. I forget the exact figures, but there were limitations put on him so that, that any programs that were instituted were not aimed at benefitting the Indian but where some side effects did benefit him, it was probably an unfortunate occurrence because their main objective was to show what they've been doing to members of Congress on the Appropriations Committee to justify the millions of dollars they were spending, when actually, the Indian was getting little or no benefit from any of this. And I think the main thing that was wrong with the whole thing was that the setting of the Indian aside on a different place in the state, designating him as a problem, making him feel he was a problem, beating down rebels, beating down Indians who expressed any independent thinking, rewarding collaborators, rewarding them with positions of importance and completely stifling independent and creative thinking from the Indian people, having, different laws apply to him, setting up a different kind of government. In other words, he wasn't under the same kind of government that his white neighbors were. Rather, what this Indian Reorganization Act should have done, it should have set up a county system exactly like the neighboring counties, with county officials, with municipal officials, with Indians going about their daily political and economic activities in the same way that other people in the state are, so that they could benefit from the, the intercourse with their white neighbors and the meetings that we have, state-wide meetings of county officials, municipal officials, and in fact, becoming part of the mainstream of American life.