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## **The Society of American Indians and the “Indian question,” 1911–1923**

Since the creation of the American republic the question of what to do with the Indians has remained a recurring theme in U.S. history. The so-called “Indian question” emerged in the late eighteenth century as one of the major problems the federal government attempted to deal with, however, with varying degrees of success. During the nineteenth century, various presidential administrations endeavored to implement a wide range of approaches including separation, removal, concentration, and assimilation to solve this problem. Nonetheless, all these strategies failed to find a final answer to the “Indian question.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Native Americans would encounter different kinds of problems. Some of them, born in the tribal world, but raised and educated in white man’s schools and colleges which embraced the path of cultural assimilation into the dominant society, were aware that the character of the unsolved “Indian question” had changed and new circumstances required an innovative approach to solving it, both on the side of the federal government and the Indians. From this elite came the founders of the Society of American Indians, the first pan-Indian organization established to “develop race leaders, to give hope, to inspire, to lead outward and upward, the Indian American as a genuine factor in his own country.”<sup>1</sup>

This article will examine how the leaders of the Society of American Indians approached the so-called “Indians question” that occupied a central place in their socio-political thought. The author argues that SAI activists, believing in the full equality of the races were ardent champions of Indian assimilation into American society. Condemning the reservation system for hindering Indian development, they advocated Native American loyalty to the American government, promoted the model of white man’s education among Indians, and lobbied for Indian citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> *Editorial Comment: A Nation-Wide All-American Organization*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1913, vol. 1, p. 3.

Native American leaders who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, emerged on the national scene to approach the so-called “Indian problem” may be perceived as the founders of the modern pan-Indian movement. They were not, however, the first ones to advocate unity among the American Indians to stand against the white man, since modern pan-Indianism<sup>2</sup> has a long tradition that reaches back to the seventeenth century. Such Indian leaders as Metacombet (King Phillip), the Ottawa chief Pontiac, Thayendanega (Joseph Brant), the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, and Wovoka, the Paiute messiah, were all very charismatic figures who led intertribal Native American movements against the white oppressors. Those most significant pan-Indian responses were, as historian Hazel Hertzberg indicates, “sometimes military, sometimes political, sometimes religious.”<sup>3</sup> Because they were resistance movements, they managed to unify various Indian tribes and bands by stressing Indian brotherhood and elevating pan-Indian identity above tribal affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the federal government began a policy of assimilation and cultural annihilation toward Native Americans, a new form of pan-Indian identity occurred, especially among young Indian students. Paradoxically, Indian youth from different tribes who, according to a federal Indian education policy named “civilization by immersion”<sup>5</sup> were forced to attend boarding schools outside their reservations, found themselves in contact with each other. Although they came from different tribal and language backgrounds, they were all united by the use of the English language they were compelled to learn. Struggling to survive in a new and hostile world, those students were aware of their distinctiveness from the white man, and realized they belonged to the same race, the Indian race. Thus, Washington officials unconsciously began to promote the idea of pan-Indianism among Indians students, since boarding schools designed to instill the idea of civilization into Indian children “provided Indian students their first opportunity to interact with members of other tribes and to identify common experiences and interests.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Robert Thomas the term “pan-Indianism” refers to a certain type of social, political and religious movement that may be perceived “as the expression of a new identity and the institutions and symbols which are both an expression of that identity and a fostering of it.” R. K. Thomas, *Pan-Indianism*, “Mid-Continent American Studies Journal” 1965, vol. 6, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> H. W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements*, Syracuse 1971, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> On the pan-Indian movements prior to the twentieth century see R. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>5</sup> The creation of this program was ascribed to Richard Pratt, army officer and founder of the famous Indian boarding school, Carlisle Indian Industrial School. See: C. G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, Boston 1999, p. 351.

<sup>6</sup> J. Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*, New York 1996, p. 116.

From such backgrounds came the new Indian elite who, having acquired a new sense of modern pan-Indian identity, began to promote Indian nationalism among Native Americans and decided to approach the "Indian question" from different angles during the Progressive Era. Their representatives realized that depending on tribalism was not enough in the fight for Indian rights. They also understood that Indians had to abandon old forms of resistance and turn to new ones, such as political activism and intertribal collaboration. These new Indian leaders embraced what today historians and sociologists call "supratribal identity" that extended beyond tribal affiliations and created a sense of belonging to one Indian nation.<sup>7</sup>

The efforts of the Indian educated elite to found a pan-Indian organization to uplift the Indian race in America were materialized in 1911 when the Society of American Indians was established. The Society of American Indians, first called the American Indian Association, was founded in Columbus, Ohio, by six prominent Native Americans: Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai-Apache), Charles Eastman (Santee-Sioux), Charles Daganett (Peoria), Thomas Sloan (Omaha), Henry Standing Bear (Lakota-Sioux), and Laura Cornelius (Iroquois-Oneida), all highly educated Indians trained as physicians, lawyers, officials and even anthropologists. A few days later the organization extended itself by co-opting more members including Arthur C. Parker (Iroquois-Seneca), Henry Roe Cloud (Winnebago), and Sherman Coolidge (Arapaho). From the beginning SAI had a pan-Indian character since its members came from almost every tribe inhabiting the United States including the largest Indian nations such as the Sioux and small ones like the Omahas and Peorias.<sup>8</sup>

The SAI, as the first organization devoted to the development of the Indian race founded by Indians, announced, at its first conference in Columbus, major points of its program that concerned the future of Native Americans. SAI's activists obliged themselves *to promote and co-operate with all efforts looking to the advancement of the Indian in enlightenment which leave him free as a man to develop according to the natural laws of social evolution, to provide through our open conferences the means for a free discussion on all subjects bearing on the welfare of the race, to present in a just light the true history of the race, to preserve its records and emulate its distinguishing virtues, to promote citizenship and to obtain the rights thereof, to establish a legal department to investigate Indian problems and to suggest and to obtain remedies, to exercise the right to oppose any movement that may be detrimental to the race, to provide a bureau of information, including publicity and statistics.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The term conveys the same meaning as "pan-Indianism." See S. Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence*, New York 1988, pp. 106–115.

<sup>8</sup> L. Maddox, *Citizen Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race and Reform*, Ithaca 2005, p. 9.

SAI members considered themselves “Red Progressives” who intended to reform federal Indian policy in the spirit of the era they lived in. They believed in reform and realized that, thanks to their education and through their professional experience gained in American society, they could influence white policy-makers in Washington. Besides that, they were also determined to change the stereotypical images of native people in the American national imagination, as they endeavored to reach a white audience.<sup>10</sup> They put their faith in social evolution and were convinced that certain racial groups regardless of their backwardness could enter the path of progress and find their way to civilization understood in terms of Western development; not tainted, however, by sheer materialism.<sup>11</sup>

The SAI was similar to various progressive white organizations that functioned at the turn of the twentieth century. It was run by an Executive Council consisting of a president, three vice presidents and a secretary, and a General Committee that included the most prominent members. The Society published its own journal called the “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians,” that mirrored the views of the SAI leaders on contemporary Indian issues. In 1913, when the organization reached the peak of its activity, it had two hundred active members and more than four hundred associate members coming from all over the country. Active membership was limited to people who could identify themselves as Indians and had more than one-sixteenth Indian blood. Associate members, in turn, were “persons not on any tribal roll and having less than one-sixteenth Indian blood.”<sup>12</sup>

The first problem SAI’s leaders were concerned about and which was strictly associated with the so-called “Indian question” was what would happen to the Indian people in the near as well as the further future. To answer this question they needed to find the answers to others; “who is an Indian?”, “what should he do to survive?” and “what is his role in a new society?”

First of all, reflecting upon the future of the Indian, the members of the Society attempted to establish a definition of the “Indian race.” They realized that to be recognized as an equal partner in the national debate on their own future, Native Americans needed to work on changing the unfavorable image of the “red man”, the one that had existed in the American national consciousness for

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<sup>9</sup> Report of the Executive Council on the Proceedings of the First Annual Conference of the Society of American Indians, Washington 1912, p. 192, S. Coolidge, *The Function of the Society of American Indians*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> M. W. Patterson, *Real Indian Songs: The Society of American Indians and the Use of Native American Culture as a Means of Reform*, “The American Indian Quarterly” 2002, vol. 26, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> C. A. Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian*, Boston 1916, p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> H.W. Hertzberg, op. cit., pp. 73, 81.

centuries.<sup>13</sup> To characterize the “red race,” the SAI activists strove to present the Native in a new light, liberating him from myths and romanticized legends. For them the savage Indian was not only a relic of the past, but mostly the product of the white man’s luxuriant imagination.<sup>14</sup> That Native Americans had been forced to defend themselves and their land against the American invaders, since they had no other choice, was obvious to SAI members. Such behavior did not make the Indian people savages or barbarians, for as Sherman Coolidge pointed out, “the Indian is human” and “he is God’s handiwork,”<sup>15</sup> not different from the white man. The SAI officers considered the Indian race to be equal to white people and in their analysis of race relations they followed the Boasian theory of racial equality, dismissing the argument of white superiority. They rejected the notion of Indian inferiority; however, they recognized the social differences between the white and “red” races.<sup>16</sup>

In their attempts to construct a definition of the “red man,” the SAI activists not only characterized the Indian in opposition to the white man, but they also focused on the question of racial mixture. Tracing the origins of human evolution they agreed that all races were subject to mixing of blood, the process of which was in constant change. According to SAI’s leaders, even within the European Caucasian race, generally recognized as the superior one, there were significant racial divisions since the Northern Europeans differed from their southern neighbors and from other representatives of the white race in Africa and Asia. They understood that in an era of rapid technological advancement the world had become a place where “the blood of the traveler or the invader mingles with the blood of the native dweller.”<sup>17</sup> Thus a real Indian was not only one who belonged to a certain tribe but also a mixed-blood, the offspring of white and Native American ancestry. Although SAI members were not specific on how to measure “Indianness,” they claimed that “it is not a question of the degree of blood but the question of individual competence that should count in determining the civic or social status.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J. Porter, *To be Indian: The Life of Iroquois – Seneca Arthur Caswell Parker*, Norman 2001, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> *The Editor’s Viewpoint: The Persistence of Barbarism in Civilized Society*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1915, vol. 3, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> S. Coolidge, *The Indian American: His Duty to His Race and to His Country*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1913, vol. 1, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> *The Editor’s Viewpoint. Inferior or Only Different?*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 268.

<sup>17</sup> *The Editor’s Viewpoint: Blood Mixture among Races*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 263. In the organization, the person responsible for writing on racial issues was Arthur C. Parker, anthropologist working at the New York State Museum. See H. W. Hertzberg, *Nationality, Anthropology, and Pan-Indianism in the Life of Arthur C. Parker (Seneca)*, “Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society” 1979, vol. 123, pp. 47–72.

Having established that the Indian is not a savage but a real human being fully equal to his brother the white man, SAI leaders began to ponder his chances of survival in the dominant society and tried to find an answer to the question “what can the Indians do for themselves?” Their answer seemed to be that the only solution for Native Americans to adapt to the new circumstances was assimilation. For them, assimilation meant independence and the opportunity to embrace the benefits of white civilization.<sup>19</sup> This cultural process, however, could not start without Indians’ making certain sacrifices, Indians who needed to be well-prepared to enter a new course. According to Charles Kealear (Yankton-Sioux), one of the members of the Society, the first thing the native people should do was to cease thinking about the past and begin to look into the future bravely: *Now we know our situation very well – our conditions in the past and as they exist at present. In order to overcome these conditions of the present time and get away from the conditions of the past, we will have to look forward, not backward [...] What can the Indian do for himself is the question. It is a very important question with us as a race that is just stepping from the past into the life of the great nation. We are making that one long step. In the past we have made steps a little at a time – very slow progress.*<sup>20</sup>

Yet forgetting the past was not enough for Indians to embrace the path of assimilation. The SAI officers believed that by abandoning certain elements of their cultural heritage including nomadism, warfare, Indian religious ceremonies and rituals, the red man could easily commit itself to the “idea of absorption, or better, union with the civic life of America.”<sup>21</sup> After doing this, the Indian could settle down in cities and towns following the example of his white brother. Taking

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<sup>18</sup> *Current Comment: The Heart of the Full Blood*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 4. Though the Society’s officers were unable to define “Indianness” in terms of blood category, they were very strict in determining the “blood” requirements for the SAI membership. See pages 5, 6.

<sup>19</sup> H. W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Identity...*, pp. 156–65.

<sup>20</sup> C. H. Kealear, *What the Indian Can Do for Himself*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> O. Lamere, *The Indian Culture of the Future*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1913, vol. 1, p. 361. Since they were all Christians, most of SAI’s leaders had no scruples about blaming Indian religions for hampering the development of the Indian people. See D. Martinez, *Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought*, St. Paul 2009, p. 111. There were, however, exceptions to this. Charles Eastman, for example, who adopted Christianity, never disrespected Native American beliefs. In one of his books, he emphasized that all religions should be treated on equal terms since “the God of the lettered and the unlettered, of the Greek and the barbarian, is after all the same God.” C. A. Eastman, *The Soul of the Indian*, Boston 1911, p. xvi. There were also radicals like Getrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa, Yankton-Sioux), who did not conceal the fact she had rejected Christianity and become a pagan. See Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, ed. C. N. Davidson, A. Norris, New York 2003, pp. xviii–xix.

life into their own hands to become independent from the federal government testified, according to the SAI leaders, to the maturity of the Indian people.<sup>22</sup>

Although most members of the Society perceived the assimilation process in a very simple manner, there were activists like Arthur Parker who presented a more sophisticated view of this cultural phenomenon. In his article, "Problems of Race Assimilation in America," Parker demonstrated how three categories of people coming from different ethnic and racial groups including European immigrants, African-Americans, and American Indians, struggled to find their place in American society. The SAI anthropologist came to the conclusion that the process of cultural assimilation occurred unequally among the people of those groups, not only because white America treated diverse races and ethnic minorities in a dissimilar way, but also because "men of different races by reason of their ethnic and cultural development are not equally able to grasp the meaning of civilization."<sup>23</sup> Parker argued that while the European immigrant had been familiar with civilizational advancement, and the African-American had been forced to embrace the white man's way of living, the American Indian found himself in a peculiar situation. He, as Parker contends, did not seek civilization, however, "civilization came to the Indian; the Indian was not forced into it and he did not take it upon himself en masse, by choice."<sup>24</sup>

The members of the Society of American Indians were not only ardent adherents of cultural assimilation of Native Americans but they also attempted to promote social and political responsibilities among the Indians as future citizens of the United States. They realized that the Indian-American or American Indian as a new man, the product of a cultural transformation absorbed into a dominant society, should be loyal to America. SAI activists believed that the Indian was capable of exhibiting such values as patriotic feelings and loyalty toward his new country since, as Getrude Bonnin stressed, "the sterling quality of his devotion to America is his most inspiring gift to the world."<sup>25</sup>

The Society of American Indians considered the existence of the reservation system to be the second major element constituting the so-called "Indian

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<sup>22</sup> S. Coolidge, *The American Indian of Today*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1914, vol. 2, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> A. C. Parker, *Problems of Race Assimilation in America*, "American Indian Magazine" 1916, vol. 4, p. 286.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 294.

<sup>25</sup> G. Bonnin, *Indian Gifts to Civilized Man*, "American Indian Magazine" 1918, vol. 6, p. 116. Nearly all the Society's leaders indicated certain Indian cultural traits that could be transplanted into American society. According to them, such Native American traditional values as bravery, honor, family devotion, an appreciation of truth, and love of freedom were desirable in every socio-political system. See also C. A. Eastman, *The Indian's Gifts to the Nation*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1915, vol. 3, pp. 17–23.

question.” Although in their debate over the future of the “red man” SAI members condemned the federal government for isolating and segregating Indians on reservations, which they regarded as a major obstacle to civilization, their rhetoric rather aimed at “methods and systems, not the man himself.”<sup>26</sup>

Dealing with the Indian reservation system, SAI’s activists began with a critique of federal treaty making. They underscored the fact that the U.S. government had signed 370 treaties with indigenous tribes; most of them had been violated and, as Charles Eastman mentioned bitterly, “reduced to simple agreements, which, however, must in ethics be considered fully as binding.”<sup>27</sup> Because SAI’s members came from different native communities, they were all well-acquainted with the histories of their tribes and the atrocities committed against them by the U.S. government. They were aware that the reservation system established for the Indian tribes was the result of a failed federal policy toward American Indians during the previous century based on treaty making. It was the treaties that sanctioned the creation of the Indian reservations.<sup>28</sup>

The most ferocious opponent of the reservation system among SAI’s leaders was Carlos Montezuma, who blamed its existence for preserving cultural backwardness among Native Americans and for being an obstacle to civilization.<sup>29</sup> He deplored that reservations contributed mostly to solidifying tribalism and tribal collectivism instead of focusing more on promoting the concept of individualism among Native Americans by providing them an opportunity for personal growth and development. In his article, “The Indian Reservation System” he declared: *The very name “Reservation” contradicts the purpose for which it was instituted. Reservation is from reserve. Reserve in this connection is to set apart, and to set apart means to separate from; and to separate from means to deprive the separated from all relations to that from which it is to be kept. Therefore, the purpose being to civilize the Indians, the way to do it is to keep him disconnected from civilization. And this is what the reservation, even if not so designed, has been so highly successful in accomplishing.*<sup>30</sup>

SAI’s activists not only condemned the reservation system for retarding Indian cultural progress but they also focused on its structure and the way it was

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<sup>26</sup> C. Montezuma, *The Reservation is Fatal to the Development of Good Citizenship*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> C. A. Eastman, *The Indian To-day: The Past and Future of the First American*, Garden City 1915, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> A. C. Parker, *Certain Important Elements of the Indian Problem*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1915, vol. 2, pp. 36–37.

<sup>29</sup> P. Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians*, Albuquerque 1982, pp. 8, 9, 93–119.

<sup>30</sup> C. Montezuma, *The Indian Reservation System*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1913, vol. 1, p. 359.



managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) belonging to the Department of the Interior. The main object of their critique was an Indian agent who was about to facilitate for the Indian a smooth transition from nomadic life to a more settled existence.<sup>31</sup> Examining the role of the reservation agent, SAI members indicated that, although accountable to the BIA, he had total control over the Indians inhabiting a certain reservation. They stated that the agent, responsible for every aspect of reservation life including land transactions, arranging for buying and selling livestock, providing the Indians with proper agricultural implements and instructions how to cultivate land, very often neglected his duties. They lamented that: *The agent is accused frequently of denying Indians their rights, when such denial is upon the arbitrary action of some clerk in the office of the Secretary of the Interior, who desires to arouse the tribe against their agent. It lends itself readily to intrigue and scheming for political purposes. It is a machine highly calculated to keep the races apart, and through separation exploit both the Indians and the government.*<sup>32</sup>

That SAI's activists sharply critiqued the reservation system does not mean they opposed the idea of assimilation promoted by federal government. They only condemned the methods Washington officials implemented to bring civilization to the Indian tribes. According to the members of the organization, the very existence of the reservations contributed not only to Indian isolation from the dominant society but also to their exclusion from active participation in American social and political life.<sup>33</sup>

One important aspect of federal reservation policy, however, appeared to be in accordance with SAI's assimilationist vision, the so-called allotment system that aimed at detribalization of the Natives. The origins of this policy reached back to 1887 when Congress passed the Dawes Act, known as the General Allotment Act, whose main goal was to divide reservation land into small parcels and give them to Indian individuals. SAI's officers understood well that such a federal approach to Indian reservations was "directed toward getting every tribesman into his own house, on his own land, and at work for himself."<sup>34</sup> They were aware, however, that allotment policy promoting individualism meant a new course for the Indians, since most of them were not yet acquainted with the idea

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<sup>31</sup> L. C. Kellogg, *Our Democracy and the American Indian*, Kansas City 1920, pp. 41–42.

<sup>32</sup> D. Wheelock, *Not an Indian Problem but a Problem of Race Separation*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1913, vol. 1, pp. 367–8. Not all reservation agents were irresponsible and corrupt. Gertrude Bonnin, during her service work among the Ute Indians, spoke well of their agent. See Zitkala-Sa, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> D. Wheelock, op. cit., pp. 368–371.

<sup>34</sup> J. M. Oskison, *Making an Individual of the Indian*, [in] *Tales of the Old Indian Territory and Essays on the Indian Condition*, ed. L. Larre, Lincoln 2012, p. 381.

of private property. They also believed that implementing such reform had been an inevitable step to diminishing the gap between “red” and white races.<sup>35</sup>

From its beginning the Society of American Indians was concerned with the position American Indians occupied in American life. The Society’s members accentuated the fact that Indians, with their unregulated legal status, were not only an invisible part of society but were also unable to fight for their rights. On one hand, their peculiar place within the American legal system allowed Natives to be treated as “domestic dependent nations”, maintaining the right to self-government; on the other, in reality, their status was reduced to being government wards under the protection of the Great Father, the President of the United States.<sup>36</sup> SAI activists sensed such absurdity very well: *He [the American Indian] has been independent in his tribal relations, yet dependent upon the government which has surrounded him. He has been regarded as a sovereign, yet treated as a ward. He has been a part of the government, yet not a member of it. He has been subject to the laws of the land, yet often without protection under them, and without the right to participate in their enactment. He has been expected to conform to the ways of civilized life, yet he has been restrained to his tribal relations.*<sup>37</sup>

The more the Society’s members examined the legal status of the American Indian the more they critiqued the form of government the American people were subject to. They pointed out that in American democracy, there was no place for Indians, since democratic rulers elected by the majority were not eager to take into account the needs of ethnic minorities. Although this kind of political system should promote such values as equality, freedom, and justice, it failed to do so in regard to the native people. According to SAI’s officers, the type of government under which the Americans lived might be perceived in terms of a game with rules the Indians did not understand. They were unequal players not because “the game was too complex for the red man, and not because he did not himself barter, but because he did not have the means of making an elaborate set of rules and have the power to enforce them.”<sup>38</sup>

In defining the legitimate status of the native people at the beginning of the twentieth century, SAI leaders distinguished two categories that well described

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<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Such a term, coined by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1831, defined the federal-tribal relationship. That year, the U.S. Supreme Court in the court case *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* ruled that the Cherokee Indians and other Indian tribes should be treated as “domestic dependent nations.” See V. Deloria, Jr., C. M. Lytle, *The Nations Within: Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*, New York 1984, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> G. E. Parker, *The Great End: American Citizenship for the Indian*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> A. C. Parker, *Making Democracy Safe for the Indians*, “American Indian Magazine” 1918, vol. 6, p. 26.

the position of the Indian in American society: federal wards and citizen-wards.<sup>39</sup> The first term referred to Indians who were not inclined to enter the path of white man's civilization and did not relish the prospect of being farmers; the second definition described those Natives who became landowners and had been assigned parcels of land by virtue of the Dawes Act. SAI activists comprehended that this law was not only designed to promote individualism among Indians but could also be instrumental in granting citizenship to Indians. There was a connection between US citizenship and property ownership since "US citizens have a fundamental right to acquire fee simple title to land as private property."<sup>40</sup> Thus, according to SAI, those Indians who had obtained allotments under the Dawes Act, should be treated as US citizens. The reality, however, was more complex. The allotment policy quickly turned out to be a failure in regard to regulating the legal status of Native Americans. SAI activists indicated that the right of property ownership enabled Indians only to become citizens of the state. They emphasized that the allotted Indians enjoyed the status of citizens only in certain states such Nebraska or Oklahoma; their citizenship, however, did not extend to the national level.<sup>41</sup>

SAI officers realized that federal wardship was not the same as full citizenship for Indians. The first category meant limited civil liberties and federal guardianship; the second stood for acquiring legitimate socio-political status in a democratic society. They were aware that government dealings with the Indian through the Bureau of Indian Affairs failed to protect its wards. Native Americans were, first of all, the victims of racial discrimination, and were not equal before the law; they had difficulty in accessing courts and could not vote. Therefore, all of SAI's attacks were directed toward the Bureau of Indian Affairs which, as they said, was "standing between the citizens and the Indians,"<sup>42</sup> preventing them from shaking off the yoke of wardship and obtaining US citizenship. SAI activists even advocated the abolishment of the BIA, an institution permeated with corruption and mismanagement, "in order to let the Indians go."<sup>43</sup>

The Society of American Indians intensified their debate over Indian citizenship with the American entry into World War I in 1917. Its members lamented that although young Indians were bleeding on the battlefields of Europe fighting

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<sup>39</sup> Idem, *The Legal Status of the American Indian*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1914, vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> K. T. Lomawaima, *The Mutuality of Citizenship and Sovereignty: The Society of American Indians and the Battle to Inherit America*, "The American Indian Quarterly" 2013, vol. 37, p. 337.

<sup>41</sup> A. C. Parker, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, *The Indian, the Country and the Government*, "American Indian Magazine" 1916, vol. 4, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> C. Montezuma, *Let My People Go*, "American Indian Magazine" 1916, vol. 4, p. 33.

against German imperialism in American uniforms, the federal government did not take any steps to award Native Americans with US citizenship. Those boys, sacrificing their lives on foreign soil, showed their utmost loyalty to America. “Three-fourths of these Indian soldiers”, Gertrude Bonnin deplored, “were volunteers and there were those also who did not claim exemption, so eager were they to defend their country and its democratic ideals.”<sup>44</sup> It is difficult to assess to what extent the Society’s advocacy efforts for Indian citizenship affected federal policy toward Natives. Undoubtedly, it was Indian participation in World War I that significantly contributed to the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act by Congress in 1924. It seems that the activists of the Society of American Indians had found themselves in the right place at the right time.<sup>45</sup>

The problem of Indian education constituted the last major issue within the “Indian question” the Society of American Indians approached. Its officers were convinced that the young generations of Native Americans were the future of the “red race” since for them education meant civilization, the only way to overcome ignorance and backwardness.

SAI’s activists defined education as a process of acquiring certain skills and knowledge by people in order to find a proper place in society. They emphasized its practical dimension, being realists in believing that education “unrelated to life is of no use” since “education is for life, – life in the workaday world with all its toil, success, discouragements, and heartaches.”<sup>46</sup> The learning process, for them, however, not only consisted in personal growth but also should be instrumental in shaping man’s moral character. SAI’s members pointed out that the young Indian generations should always remember the obligations and responsibilities education imposed on them, especially in regard to those less fortunate.<sup>47</sup>

Talking about Indian educational development, the Society agreed that there was no distinct difference between white and native students. The main problem encountered with regard to Indian education was the lack of proper attitude among Indian children. Examining their educational opportunities, Elvira Pike (Ute), observed that: *The Indian students of to-day are not so different from any other student that they require a special plan or method to bring about the right spirit; but as wards of the government, the Indians as a race and as*

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<sup>44</sup> G. Bonnin, *America, Home of the Red Man*, “American Indian Magazine” 1919, vol. 6, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> Colin Calloway claims that although this Act granted “citizenship and suffrage to all American Indians” there was, however, a great number of the Indian people who “had already been accorded citizenship.” Those were the Natives who decided to become farmers to receive the parcels of land under the Dawes Act or to serve in World War I. C. G. Calloway, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>46</sup> H R. Cloud, *Education of the American Indian*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

*students, have not been fairly treated. They have not had the proper freedom; and in many cases, instead of the right spirit, they have practically no spirit at all. They have been treated too much like prisoners who have committed some awful crime.*<sup>48</sup>

Debating the model of schooling for Indian students, SAI's leaders supported industrial and vocational education following the example of Carlisle Indian Industrial Institute which was founded by Richard Pratt as the first non-reservation school in 1879. They understood that in order to survive in the dominant society, Indians not only needed to acquire good English skills but also obtain professional qualifications enabling them to find a proper vocation. According to them, the basic goal of education was to fit people for work since "education," as Arthur Parker stated "must mean a training for production."<sup>49</sup> They stressed the importance of manual labor, since they believed that a well-trained Indian skilled worker should become a pillar of the Indian middle class as "good citizen and an efficient member of society."<sup>50</sup>

Touching upon the problem of Indian education, Society activists were convinced that although the vast majority of people had average intellectual ability, in every community there were outstanding individuals who stood in the forefront of society. Such people, highly-educated leaders, were essential for the future existence and development of the Indian race, according to SAI members. They realized that only the young generation of Indians coming from different tribal backgrounds, educated in the white man's schools and colleges, would be able to produce a new Indian leadership.<sup>51</sup> Those new leaders should enter the Indian Service replacing the BIA's present personnel, in order to take Indian matters into their own hands. There were voices among the Society that recommended "to give educated, or otherwise capable, Indians a larger part in the administration of Indian affairs," raising the question: "why not try, in governing the Indian and in administering his affairs, to use Indians?"<sup>52</sup>

The Society of American Indians did not last long. Although its leaders managed to hold a few annual conferences, publish a journal, and even succeed in presenting a memorial to President Woodrow Wilson, they failed to

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<sup>48</sup> E. Pike, *The Right Spirit for the Indian Students and How to Get It*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1913, vol. 1, p. 401.

<sup>49</sup> A. C. Parker, *Industrial and Vocational Training in Indian Schools*, "Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians" 1915, vol. 3, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> See J. M. Oskison, *The New Indian Leadership*, "American Indian Magazine" 1917, vol. 5, pp. 93–100 and S. Jones, *Reservation Leaders, the Good and the Bad*, "American Indian Magazine" 1916, vol. 4, pp. 36–37.

<sup>52</sup> J. M. Oskison, *In Governing the Indian, Use the Indian*, "American Indian Magazine" 1917, vol. 5, pp. 40–41.

agree on various Indian issues, especially abolition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and methods to obtain followers among reservation Indians.<sup>53</sup> Factionalism, however, was not the only problem the Society faced. As some historians argue, the leaders of the organization were idealistic intellectuals who, focusing too much on “proclaiming in so many ways their desire to participate in the forward march of American progress,”<sup>54</sup> distanced themselves from the real problems of their people. Plagued by inner disputes, SAI dissolved in the early twenties.<sup>55</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Society of American Indians was one of the most significant Indian organizations in the history of Native Americans. Although less known than the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and the American Indian Movement (AIM), SAI paved the way for the emergence of these two influential pan-Indian organizations. It should be stressed that the Society’s leaders managed to create the first pan-Indian forum to address the various issues of the so-called “Indian question.” Their response to white America did not involve war or religion but an intellectual form of pan-Indianism. Standing against the reservation system, SAI activists promoted cultural assimilation of Indians, being convinced that it was the only possible way to secure the Native a good place in white society. Putting their faith in social evolution, they also believed in man’s personal development, advocating Indians’ right to a decent education. Opposing racial inequality, SAI’s members conducted a campaign for granting US citizenship to Indians.

On the other hand however, despite their efforts to galvanize various Indian communities, SAI’s officers failed to gain wider support, especially from reservation Indians. It is unclear why they were not interested to reach out to traditionalist Natives, considering the fact that almost all the Society’s leaders, in some way, did experience real reservation life. They all were aware of the real problems American Indians faced in their everyday lives including the difficulty of maintaining treaty rights, fighting for mineral and water resources, struggling with federal legislation aimed at undermining tribal autonomy, forced education

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<sup>53</sup> A. C. Parker, *The Awakened American Indian*, “Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians” 1914, vol. 2, p. 269. Robert Warrior claims that the Society’s activists were not interested in gaining support from reservation Indians. He argues that “rather than having accountability toward constituencies in local American Indian communities as its main priority, SAI aimed most of its work at its supporters from the many white reform organizations, such as the Women’s National Indian Association, the Indian Rights Association and the Lake Mohonk Conference that shared the Society’s assimilation-with-justice goals.” R. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Tradition*, Minneapolis 1995, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Idem, *The SAI and the End(s) of Intellectual History*, “The American Indian Quarterly” 2013, vol. 37, p. 225.

<sup>55</sup> Most scholars concur that 1923 marked the decline of the SAI, since that year the Society held its last conference. See H. W. Hertzberg, op. cit., pp. 197–9, L. Maddox, op. cit., pp. 92, 126.

and weak Indian health care.<sup>56</sup> Stressing the power of the human mind and the importance of progress, SAI members believed in reforms; however, they were not able to influence the Washington officials responsible for conducting federal Indian policy. They were more theoreticians than pragmatists, without the power to initiate change to improve the lot of native tribes. Torn by their double identity, they were suspended between two cultures, the white man's civilization and the Indian world.

## **The Society of American Indians and the "Indian question" (1911–1923)**

### **Summary**

The Society of American Indians was established in 1911 as the first Pan-Indian organization with the aim of peaceful fighting for the rights of Indian nations in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Functioning in the so-called "Era of Progress", the Society proposed a number of postulates pertaining to the reform of the "Indian question", which constituted one of the burning issues of the twentieth century America. Its main activists: Charles Eastman, Carlos Montezuma, Arthur Parker, and Sherman Coolidge worked out a program of reforms, which first of all, called for the assimilation of the Indian population, so that they could adjust to the conditions of American social and political life. Opposing the system of reservations, the Society appealed to the indigenous people for loyalty towards the American authorities, promoted a model of education based on the American system, and opted for giving Indians full citizenship.

**Key words:** United States, North American Indians, Indian question, Pan-Indianism, Society of American Indians

## **Towarzystwo Indian Amerykańskich a kwestia indiańska, 1911–1923**

### **Streszczenie**

Towarzystwo Indian Amerykańskich powstało w 1911 r. jako pierwsza organizacja panindiańska mająca na celu pokojową walkę o prawa narodów in-

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<sup>56</sup> P. Iverson, op. cit., pp. 121–46, G. Bonnin, *A Year's Experience in Community Service Work among the Ute Tribe of Indians*, "American Indian Magazine" 1916, vol. 4, pp. 307–10, D. Martinez, op. cit., p. 7, H. E. Stamm, *People of the Wind River: The Eastern Shoshones, 1825–1900*, Norman 1999, p. 220.

diańskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych w pierwszych dekadach XX w. Działając w czasach tzw. Ery Postępu, Towarzystwo zaczęło wysuwać szereg propozycji dotyczących reformy „kwestii indiańskiej”, która stała się jednym z palących problemów dwudziestowiecznej Ameryki. Jego główni działacze, Charles Eastman, Carlos Montezuma, Arthur Parker i Sherman Coolidge opracowali program reform, który w pierwszym rządzie postulował asymilację ludności indiańskiej w celu dostosowania się Indian do warunków amerykańskiego życia społeczno-politycznego. Przecistawiając się systemowi rezerwatów, Towarzystwo Indian Amerykańskich apelowało do ludności tubylczej o lojalność wobec władz amerykańskich, lansowało model szkolnictwa oparty na amerykańskim systemie edukacji oraz orędowno na rzecz nadania Indianom pełnoprawnego obywatelstwa amerykańskiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Stany Zjednoczone, Indianie Ameryki Północnej, kwestia indiańska, panindianizm, Towarzystwo Indian Amerykańskich

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