

States of the Union

FROM BULLETS TO BALLOTS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

In days before the printing press, the memory of interracial wrongs and atrocities was not artificially fostered. Green earth forgets—when the school-master and the historian are not on the scene.

G. M. TREVELYAN

Where today is the Pequot? Where are the Narragansetts, the Mohawks, the Pokanoket . . . ? They have vanished before the avarice and the oppression of the White Man, as snow before a summer sun.

TECUMSEH,
Shawnee Chief

TREVELYAN, the Monet of English historians (broad canvases, murky illuminations), rejoiced in the capacity of invading Vikings and defending Anglo-Saxons to bury the battle-ax and live as one people. But the process required two centuries, and before acculturation "took," many a Viking battle-ax had split the skull of many a Saxon monk. The earth was first crimson, much later green.

When, a millennium after, Kipling cried "Lest we forget!", he was counseling national humility in a time of imperial arrogance ("Lo, all our pomp of yesterday/Is one with

Nineveh and Tyre!"), yet it instantly became a motto to be chiseled beneath statues of Nelson, Wellington and Drake. This raises the questions of whether a nation that remembers its heroes and martyrs can forget its enemies, and whether a history of hatreds is superior to no history at all. The answers are contained in the lintels of Stonehenge, or perhaps in the four heads that reign atop Rushmore. Certainly not in Trevelyan.

All of which is a prologue to the news from Pine Ridge, South Dakota: Last month a plurality of the Oglala Sioux there selected Russell Means—a leader of the militant American Indian Movement (AIM) and a villain in the eyes of the U.S. Department of Justice—to be their candidate for tribal chairman. Richard Wilson, the incumbent, came in a close second, with 10 other candidates bringing up the rear. Voters will decide between Means and Wilson in a runoff election in February (too late, alas, for this issue).

Means' victory was plainly a surprise to local white observers, nearly all of whom had been confidently predicting his eclipse and at the same time claiming a special under-

standing of the Indian psyche. "The Indians won't vote for a troublemaker," a businessman in Rapid City told me recently. "That's not their way. They like a man who will tell them what to do."

A Federal official in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, declared the day before the election that he could not conceive of any sensible Indian voting for Means, because the AIM leader was under indictment for a variety of alleged felonies stemming from last spring's occupation of Wounded Knee. Of course, the Federal actions against him and five other participants on such counts as conspiracy to commit burglary, assault and larceny—and to manufacture Molotov cocktails—have to many seemed more a vendetta against Indians than a crusade against crime (see my "Return to Wounded Knee," NL, November 26, 1973). Besides, the trial now taking place in St. Paul has generated the sort of publicity that might embarrass Means on Park Avenue but can do him no harm on Pine Ridge. He is, after all, standing up to The Government, an admirable though infrequent posture on the reservation. If the people of Boston

could make James M. Curley their mayor while he was fretting in prison, the people of Pine Ridge can make Means their chairman while he is having his day in court.

But I am drifting from the subject, which is history. Means and his brothers in AIM chose Wounded Knee as the site for their extended protest because there, in 1890, U.S. soldiers slaughtered nearly 200 unarmed Sioux men, women and children, leaving them to die in the snow; and also because more than 2 million Americans have read Dee Brown's popular account of the massacre, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Trevelyan's agitative printing press had been working overtime.

The broad purpose of AIM's 71-day demonstration was to revive the Sioux nation—or at least the portion of it dwelling on Pine Ridge—just as the Ghost Dance movement a century before had attempted to recapture Indian culture from the dead hand of white soldiers and missionaries. Essentially a religious rebellion embodying the Indians' mystic response to U.S. colonialism, it was misread by the authorities as an armed uprising and was forcibly suppressed at Wounded Knee #1. The Sioux—once and for all, it then appeared—surrendered their arms and their dreams. "My children," said the old Ghost Dance prophet, Wokova, to his flock after the massacre, "today I call upon you to travel a new trail, the only trail now open—the White Man's Road. . . ."

They have been trudging down that road ever since, and for most it has proved a *cul-de-sac*. Wretched and half-starved, too weak to fight and too "Indian" to assimilate, the Sioux have languished on their reservations. Like the admirers of Richard Cory, they "waited for the light,/And went without the meat. . . ." It is tempting now to say that the light has at last appeared, and that the vote at Pine Ridge spells a rejuvenation of the Sioux. That may be, but it is not the sort of rejuvenation Means' an-

cestors yearned for, not a religious revival nor a joyful return to "the old ways"; rather, it is a practical amalgam of Wokova and Washington, a distinctly American phenomenon—an election!—pointing toward a final reconciliation among the Sioux people with White ways and institutions.

I am not claiming that the citizens of Pine Ridge made the shrewdest choices for the runoff. Indeed, Richard Wilson's two-year stint as chairman has been distinguished mainly by his "goon squad" of tribal police who have terrorized the reservation; and Russell Means' uppercase pretensions—"We are destined



RUSSELL MEANS

to teach our Brothers and Sisters . . . the beauty of following the ways of the Great Mystery and being a Redman and being Free"—are far from promising. I am saying that the Sioux have discovered how to assert their tribal will and esprit in a "Western" manner—thereby blending two histories.

WHAT WE are witnessing is the harvest of a crop the New Deal sowed in 1934 with its much-maligned Indian Reorganization Act. That legislation, created and piloted through Congress by John Collier—the best by far of all our Indian commissioners—encouraged tribes to attempt rep-

resentative government through duly elected tribal heads and councils. True, the plan was "ethnocentric," a naïve effort to turn Indian reservations into American Main Streets; true also, the new arrangements had the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) breathing down the tribes' necks, and on more than one reservation the tribal government that emerged was little better than a personal secretariat to the BIA superintendent, who still reigned supreme. Nonetheless, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 laid the groundwork for Pine Ridge's rebellion by ballot 30 years later.

The Collier reforms have been berated by Indian friends and foes alike—foes, because the new system could ultimately lead to self-determination, thus converting a "vanishing race" into a permanent fixture on the American landscape; and friends, because the formal democratic structure was destroying the old selection system in which outstanding Indian leaders—Black Elk, for instance, or Crazy Horse—seemed naturally to rise to the top by a process of silent consent and by what might be called political levitation. AIM has always insisted that Richard Wilson was not the tribe's *real* leader, merely its elected one, and one of the group's workers told me some weeks before the election, "If Means loses, it'll prove that voting is not the Indian way."

But what, at this time in this place, is "the Indian way"? Is it the petty tyranny of a Wilson? The mystic militancy of a Means? The St. Vitus vision of a Wokova? "The sunken stream can flow again," prophesied Collier, "the ravaged desert can bloom, and the great past is not killed. The Indian experience tells us this." I think it tells us something else: That streams merge and alter each other's course; that cultural deserts, nourished by such streams, bloom in unexpected ways; and that the past may be princely but it is not sovereign. The green earth never forgets, and never stops turning.