

States of the Union

RED-WHITE RELATIONS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



JOHN E. CUNNINGHAM

IT is just a year (NL, April 25, 1977) since I wrote in these pages of the "remarkable progress" being made by the Indians in their 400-year-old defense of tribal sovereignty. At the time, the courts were affirming scores of old statutes and treaties that protected Indian claims to land, minerals, fish, and game; and the Congress seemed ready to legislate sweeping reforms in traditional red-white relations. In fact, the laws being drafted only a springtime ago promised to

elevate the status of tribes from that of colonial wards to "nations within a nation," a turn of events the tribes have been yearning for from the day they were defeated and put on reservations.

Well, I spoke too soon. In the ensuing 12 months the tribes have suffered a series of reversals and now appear to be in full political retreat. A white citizens organization called the Interstate Congress of Equal Rights and Responsibilities (ICERR), merely a speck on the Indian horizon last April, has grown into a dark cloud; its shadow falls on Capitol Hill, where no less than 11 white "backlash" bills have been introduced and more are promised.

The measures have much in common: Each would repeal in one way or another agreements earlier entered into by the U.S. government and the various tribes; and the majority are specific responses to recent Indian court victories. Two Maine Democrats, for example—Senator William Hathaway and Representative William S. Cohen—are sponsoring a bill that would "extinguish aboriginal title" to all land in Maine. If passed, it would place in serious jeopardy the Penobscots' and Passamogoddys' claim to 40 per cent

of the land in that state—a claim that has been upheld by two Federal courts.

Similarly, the senators from Massachusetts—Democrat Edward M. Kennedy and Republican Edward W. Brooke—have teamed up on a measure that would deprive the Mashpee tribe of its claim to some 2,000 acres around Cape Cod. But the most outrageous entry, and the one that most accurately mirrors ICERR aspirations, is H.R. 9054, otherwise known as The Native American Equal Opportunity Act. The work of Representative John E. Cunningham (D.-Wash.), it is meant to "abrogate all treaties entered into by the United States with Indian tribes"—a master stroke that would render null and void four centuries-worth of white promises.

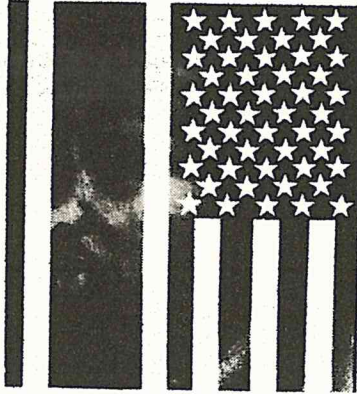
Cunningham's measure goes further still: It revives the old, tawdry idea of "termination," which is what Congressmen in the 1950s called their efforts to break up the reservations and disperse the tribes. In Cunningham's scheme, the land now held in trust for Indians by the United States would be given to them outright; after that the Indians could choose to divide the acreage among themselves, or they could form land-holding corporations "with tribe members as stockholders."

Cunningham hopes to thus "end the paternal and protective roles currently played by the BIA" (Bureau of Indian Affairs); but if the termination fiasco of the Eisenhower era is any predictor, the Cunningham Act would end much more than paternalism: It would effectively extinguish the tribes, few of whose members are prepared either by education or culture for the burdens of private property. When the Menominees of Wisconsin were terminated in 1957, and the land was divided up among members of the tribe, many of the new owners sold their parcels to the first white buyer who made an offer. (However miserly the offer, it was likely to seem generous to a starving Menominee.)

Indian leaders, who regard the Cunningham bill as the ultimate disaster, doubt it will pass. Nevertheless, it does

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one in my family that made it this far," said Miss Felder, who is 30. "Maybe it will motivate my kids, to see their mother out there pushing."

Yet just making it to a place like Baltimore City is no sure sign of upward mobility. Some students frankly admit that they are in school only because they cannot find a job. And even for graduates with some skills, it is not always easy. "I think it's all a farce," snapped Makeda Kimanthi, a fiery young woman who bore a child when she was 16. "They've created all these financial aid programs, but when you try to get a job—zilch—there are no jobs. It's almost like a pacifier. They create these programs to keep folks quiet."

She is not alone in her anger. Although the most overt forms of racism are gone, many blacks feel they continue to suffer from more subtle kinds of bias. A young telephone operator eating lunch at the Mondawmin shopping center, who had a decent, well-paying job, complained that whites were still promoted ahead of her. Her companion, who had gotten into the ironworkers union after going through a training program sponsored by the Urban League, also felt whites got first crack at the good jobs.

BUT THE movement of jobs out of the urban areas of the North and Midwest is the biggest problem facing many blacks. Aaron Neblett, 55 years old, whom I met while he was idly passing the time in a carry-out sandwich shop, is a case in point. He had worked for the same copper company here for 21 years before it pulled up stakes and moved to Texas 18 months ago, and he has been out of work since. He has had to borrow \$2,000 from a loan shark just to keep going, and by next month, he will be broke again.

Ordinarily an experienced worker like Neblett might find work as a laborer, but not in today's tight market. "Let's face it," he laughed, "when you see a white man running an air hammer, things are rough."

As he gazed out the window at the

shabby streets of East Baltimore, Neblett complained that the large construction projects now revamping the center of the city have had little impact in the black community. "What good does it do to beautify the city if it don't help us?" he asked.

Joe Allen, the owner of the sandwich shop, had a similar complaint. White lending institutions are reluctant to lend money to a black businessman, and he cannot get the money to improve his operations. "No money flows up this way," he said.

Allen does not blame all the problems of the black community on the whites, however. Echoing the feelings of Van Johnson, he believes that many young blacks do not work hard enough. The shopkeeper wants to hire some part-time help for busy hours but cannot find it—despite an unemployment rate for black teenagers of about 40 per cent. "They're too particular," he complained. "They don't want to do this, they don't want to do that. They don't want to work the night shift, or on weekends—all that jazz."

Verona Blackston, a waitress in the shop, agreed. "When I was young, I worked in a nursing home and took home \$27.50 every two weeks," she said. "I needed the job. I kept it, and I looked for something better. You can work up to something better."

But it is hard to see how women like Roberta Tabb can do much of anything. Now 36 and the mother of six, she had her first child when she was in the eighth grade and quit school. Occasionally she gets a day's domestic work, that's all. As she sat in the waiting room of the welfare office she chanted a familiar litany: "There's just no jobs—none. And if you got no high school diploma, no way."

One comes away from the black community in Baltimore, then, with a mixed picture: of growth and change, of stagnation and defeat. For every James Sewell who rises to the top, a Patricia Stillman stays stuck to the bottom. Much has been achieved, much more needs to be done—there and elsewhere in urban America.