

# States of the Union

## LIVING THE HOPI LEGEND

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



ACCORDING TO the Hopi Indian creation myth, summarized by Harold Courlander in *The Fourth World of the Hopis* (Crown, 239 pp., \$6.95), human beings arrived on earth through a hole in the top of the nether world. They had counted on leaving behind "all who perform wicked deeds," thus insuring an earthly paradise free from sin and grief. But a clever sorceress slipped in among them and polluted the moral atmosphere.

What was to be done? Should the evil woman be flung back into the abyss? In Indian fashion "there was a discussion. People argued about the matter." Finally an old man

spoke: "Let her stay. Good and evil are everywhere. From the beginning to the end of time good and evil must struggle against each other. So let the woman stay."

And so it was settled. The arrangement, suggesting a pragmatic shrug, is surely more appealing than the story of Adam and Eve, which prefers banishment to live-and-let-live.

But there is more. When it comes time to sort the people into tribes—Utes, Pimas, Navahos, Apaches—the Bahanas, or White People, invite the sorceress to join them. "Even though she is evil," the White chief points out, "she has great knowledge."

Her knowledge will be useful to the people. Which prompts the Hopi leader, standing on the edge of the world and at the dawn of time, to make a shrewd prediction: "The Bahanas will grow strong. They will learn evil as well as good, and they will have secrets that are not known to us. Therefore, whenever we meet the Bahanas let us listen with caution to what they say. Let us stand apart from their ways."

Perhaps the Indians were not cautious enough. Perhaps they should

not have welcomed Columbus, as he said in a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, "with a frankness and liberality which no one would believe without witnessing it. They manifest such generosity," he marveled, "that they would give away their own hearts." And in due course they did, along with their homes and much of their heritage.

The wonder is that Indians continue to walk among us, and talk among us—in more than 300 tribal tongues. While the Indian population is still under 1 million, it is increasing three times faster than the white population. Moreover, if the many new books about Indians are any sign, the red man remains much on our minds and on our collective conscience. Somehow he has stood the Hopi creation myth on its head, he is a sorcerer-in-reverse, his wisdom and martyrdom "contaminating" our Western belief in technological progress.

The late jurist Felix Cohen, a friend to the Indians, was among the first to grasp the remarkable equation linking red and white: "Like the miner's canary," he observed, "the Indian marks the shifts from fresh air to poison gas in our political atmosphere, and our treatment of Indians reflects the rise and fall of our democratic faith."

Several of our writers these days are keeping the faith—Courlander, for example, by recreating Hopi legends, many of them seemingly pried loose from reluctant elders of the tribe who were anxious that their myths endure yet fearful of revealing ancient secrets. Though Courlander's prose is workaday and sometimes lackluster, the stories are strong. Some amusing and some somber, all are freighted with a cosmic sense of consequences.

There is a story about a boy who is mistreated by his father. He runs away and joins the antelopes. The father is filled with remorse. Each day he watches the antelopes, "hoping to catch sight of his son." But there is no boy there, only antelopes,

nothing more' Every Indian tribe knows such stones, in which The Powers punish a man who has mistreated another And the punishment is rarely a thunderbolt, generally it takes the form of a cruel joke that enlarges the victim's conscience even as it japes him Like its practitioners, Indian religion tends to be both playful and tough

But from Columbus' day to the present most whites have dismissed its significance 'They are not idolators,' wrote Columbus, "nor have they any sort of religion, except believing that power and goodness are in heaven" Humility of this kind toward the cosmos could be no match for Christianity in full Inquisitorial tilt Wilcomb E Washburn, a scholar at the Smithsonian Institution, makes this chillingly clear in his excellent treatise on *Red Man's Land—White Man's Law* (Scribner's, 280 pp., \$7.95) "The New Testament message might have been understood and honored by the Indians," he notes, "had it been preached as it was on the shores of Galilee But by the time the American Indian came face to face with the doctrine of Christ it had hardened in a mould of bigotry, intolerance, militancy and greed which made it the mortal enemy of the native American"

Catholic doctrine writes Washburn, viewed the Indian as someone to be exploited and saved Thus whenever the Spaniards attacked Indians they had first to read aloud a ludicrous harangue, officially called the Requirement, that invited Indians to acknowledge the Church as the Ruler and Superior of the whole world," or else suffer the bloody and immediate consequences

Since the Indians were by then observing extreme caution in regard to Bahanas and since in any case the Requirement was in Spanish it is doubtful that a red man ever heard it Washburn says it got to be a joke even among the Spaniards, he quotes another authority, Lewis U Hanke, to the effect that "captains muttered

its theological phrases into their beards on the edge of sleeping Indian settlements and at times some leather-lunged Spanish notary hurled its sonorous phrases after the Indians as they fled into the mountains"

Washburn gives the Puritans even shorter shrift In times of dispute, he says, they blamed the Indians, in times of peace they praised God A Virginian editor "expressed with unconscious irony the often-repeated complaint that the natives were 'so malicious, that they seldom forgot an injury'"

What amazes Washburn and what we recognize at once as our peculiar legacy is moral complacency—that annoying chemistry of white-might-right Theodore Roosevelt put it as lucidly and stupidly as any man, writing that "the settler and the pioneer have at bottom had justice on their side, this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages"

Yet the history of red-white relations has not been one of unrelieved exploitation From time to time Cohen's canary has chirped Indeed, it was Cohen who pointed out in 1947 that \$800 million in Federal funds had been appropriated for the honorable purchase of Indian lands "To pay \$800,000,000 for a principle," he noted, "is not a common occurrence in the world's history"

**W**AS THE expenditure sufficient to our moral purposes? An answer may be found in *The Red Man in the New World Drama* (Macmillan, 418 pp., \$8.95), Jennings C. Wise's brilliant history, first published in 1931 and now updated by Vine Deloria Jr. Wise writes with the assurance of Carlyle and the sweep of Toynbee, if he is sometimes presumptuous—as when he insists that the legendary Dekanawida, an Iroquois seer of the 16th century, was really a Frenchman in league with the Jesuits—he is never dull

It is Wise's genius to posit the existence of a new, continuous political party in the United States—"new" in the sense that nobody mentioned it before The Buffalo party, as he calls it, coalesced in 1782 among frontier settlers for whom it was "unthinkable that the Indian tribes had any rights to the land upon which they had been seated prior to the Revolution The popular view was well expressed by Brackenridge, a frontier editor who wrote that so far from admitting the Indian title, he conceived that not having made a better use of the land for many hundred years 'the aborigines had forfeited all pretense to a claim', that he would 'as soon' admit the title of the buffalo as that of the Indian Since 'the animals vulgarly called Indians' were by nature 'ferce and cruel,' he considered that their 'extirpation' would be useful' to the world"

The Buffalo party, claims Wise, "was henceforth to dominate the states and often the general government" Its contempt for the red man and its hunger for his land were to produce a century of war, land theft and near genocide

Deloria, an articulate, militant Sioux who brought us *Custer Died for Your Sins*, naturally agrees with Wise's general doctrine But at assimilation, Deloria and Wise diverge "The conclusion that the Indian problem would eventually be solved by the amalgamation of the white and red races," Wise states, "was impelled by all the evidence available" Deloria, on the other hand, declares in a final chapter "The important aspect of the story of the red man is his stubborn refusal to give up his tribal identity and become simply another American citizen While the years have shown a partial assimilation of other groups, only the red man has stood firm, resisting all efforts to merge him with the groups that surround him" The words of the Hopi leader—"let us stand apart from their ways"—continue to echo