

States of the Union

WHITEWASHING THE INDIANS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



I'VE BEEN reading a batch of New Year's resolutions written by Navaho schoolchildren. They live in such remote fastnesses as Lukachukai Valley, Coalmine Mesa and Wide Ruins, but their resolutions are in the American mainstream.

Evelyn Mailboy writes, "I really want to learn. I really want to study. I don't want to sit around." Della Mae Begaye promises, "I'll not be lazy. I'll not sleep in class. I'll listen." Larry Benally resolves to "Work hard. Try to do my best

in each subject." Such pledges might have been made by young Tom Edison, or by immigrant children reaching for a star in the bourgeois firmament.

True, they may merely be the mouthings of children long accustomed to satisfying the peculiar demands of authority while keeping their own counsel. Yet Indians have always seemed eager to learn whatever the white man has been willing to teach. "Father," the Seneca leader Cornplanter pleaded with President Washington, "we ask that you teach us to plough and grind corn, and above all that you will teach our children to read and to write."

Alas, we have done neither very well, mainly because we have always confused education with assimilation. It is an old story. Our schools have been a malevolent melting pot for absorbing any culture, any group, suspected of being unique.

In the case of the Indians, the process of Americanization has been especially cruel. From the beginning our policy was to kill as

many Indians as conscience and firepower would allow, then whitenash the rest by means of special schools and churches. (Note that "Ten Little Indians," unlike "One Two, Buckle My Shoe" and other counting rhymes, begins at the top and works down to, "And then there were none.")

For four centuries—ever since the Jesuits established a mission school for Florida Indians in 1568—white missionaries have preached ethnic pieties and white schools have practiced a gentleman's genocide. "The purpose of Indian schools," declared The Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, who founded Dartmouth College in 1769, "is to free Indian children from the language and habits of their untutored and oftentimes savage parents."

In order to "free" Indian children, we stole them from their tribes and families and shipped them to boarding schools far from home. Once exiled, the children were forbidden to speak their tribal languages or to practice their religion on pain of instant and brutal punishment. Recently an anthro-

pologist in California offered to pay an elderly Indian woman, a member of the Hupa tribe, to help him transcribe the old Hupa language. For an answer the woman rolled up a sleeve and revealed a horribly twisted arm. "When I was a little child," she said, "my teacher broke this arm because I'd talked Indian. Now you say you'll pay me for doing the same thing."

Many arms and many tribes have been broken, but somehow the Indians have survived. Like the Jews of old, they will neither recant nor assimilate. Plymouth Rock is their Wailing Wall. Yet one wonders how much longer they can endure. The Indians are the poorest among us, they die younger, they commit suicide at three times the national rate. Indeed, thousands of Federal bureaucrats are at present preoccupied with the question of what is to be done about "the Indian problem."

The first thing they might do is beware of those who view a whole people as a problem. That always means trouble. In 1840, for example, the Russian Council of State sent a memorandum to Tsar Nicholas I outlining solutions to "the Jewish problem." The Council complained that Jews sent their children to Jewish schools where they were taught by "a class of domestic teachers immersed in profoundest ignorance and superstition."

Under the influence of these fanatics, the children imbibe pernicious notions of intolerance toward other nations."

The solution, of course, was to send Jewish children to "special secular schools," discourage their use of Yiddish and Hebrew, and break the power of Jewish self-government in the ghettos. It was a classic script, and it could have been written by Eleazar Wheelock, or later, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. (The Russians' version of the BIA was something called the Committee for Radical Transformation of Jews. Later they created

another agency, the Committee for Revision of the Jewish Question.)

None of these measures brought the Jews any closer to assimilation. They clung to their "pernicious notions," praised Jehovah and awaited their fate. A century later it arrived, courtesy of the Nazis.

While Hitler was ordering a "final solution" to the Jewish problem, Americans were directing the same language at Indians. A 1944 House Select Committee on Indian Affairs offered recommendations on achieving "the final solution of the Indian problem." Boarding schools were thought to be the key. "The goal of Indian education," noted the Committee, twanging Wheelock's bowstring, "should be to make the Indian child a better American rather than to equip him simply to be a better Indian."

IT NEVER occurred to the congressmen that the two goals might be compatible, in fact, inseparable. There is no way to educate an Indian child other than through, and with respect for, his Indian-ness.

In the 19th century the Choctaws and the Cherokees educated their own children. Thanks to the Cherokee scholar Sequoyia's invention of an alphabet in 1821, and to a strong tribal constitution, the Cherokees created "the finest school system west of the Mississippi River" (according to Senator Edward Kennedy's Subcommittee on Indian Education). In those days 90 per cent of the Cherokee nation was literate in two languages. Together with the Choctaws it established more than 200 schools and sent many graduates to eastern colleges.

But in 1906 the Federal government abolished the whole system and substituted white-controlled schools shaped along Tsarist lines. In consequence, 40 per cent of today's Cherokee adult population is functionally illiterate, in many public schools the Cherokee dropout rate runs as high as 75 per cent

The Cherokee disaster is an American tragedy, reflecting as it does our lack of faith in the democratic process. The great strength of the Cherokee school system was that it was managed by Cherokees. Today, as anthropologist Willard Walker has pointed out, Cherokees view the school "as a white man's institution over which parents have no control."

We have a lot to learn about pluralism, about live-and-let-live, and Indians can teach us. When Barboncito, the Navaho warrior, was captured by white soldiers in 1868, he said to his captors, "I hope to God you will not ask me to go to any other country except my own."

But schools are another country for most Indian children.

Education by exile is an American custom, and Indian children have not been the only victims. Dr. Leonard Covello, New York City's first Italo-American school principal, recalls what it was like to attend public school 70 years ago.

"During this period the Italian language was completely ignored."

In fact, throughout my whole elementary school career, I do not recall the mention of Italy or of the Italian language or what famous Italians had done in the world. We soon got the idea that 'Italian' meant something inferior. We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents."

Has anything changed since then? Recently a teacher asked an eight-year-old Zuni boy in New Mexico to draw a picture of his community. At the bottom of his sheet the boy drew a typical pueblo cluster, a ladder reached up toward a yellow blob, the sun, which in Zuni tradition is the source of all power. The sun was vertically striped. And at the very top of the page, reigning over all, was a small American flag.

"But why," asked the teacher, "have you put stripes over the sun?"

"Don't you see?" came the answer. "The sun is behind bars."