

A Plea to "Citizenize" Indians

Indian reservations, some white reformers believed, isolated native Americans and prevented them from acquiring the benefits of American life. In 1887 the federal government launched boarding schools designed to remove young Indians from their homes and families on reservations and, as Richard Pratt — the leader of one such school — declared, "citizenize" them. In a speech to a group of reformers in 1892, Pratt described the vices of reservations and the virtues of schooling that would bring young native Americans into the mainstream of American society. Pratt's remarks illustrate the combination of ideas about racial and cultural superiority common among white Americans of the era.

Richard Pratt

"Kill the Indian . . . and save the man," 1892

A great general¹ has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. . . . In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.

We are just now making a great pretence of anxiety to civilize the Indians. I use the word "pretence" purposely, and mean it to have all the significance it can possibly carry. Washington believed that commerce freely entered into between us and the Indians would bring about their civilization, and Washington was right. He was followed by Jefferson, who inaugurated the reservation plan. Jefferson's reservation was to be the country west of the Mississippi; and he issued instructions to those controlling Indian matters to get the Indians there, and let the Great River be the line between them and the whites. Any method of securing removal — persuasion, purchase, or force — was authorized.

Jefferson's plan became the permanent policy. The removals have generally been accomplished by purchase, and the evils of this are greater than those of all the others combined. . . .

It is a sad day for the Indians when they fall under the assaults of our troops . . . but a far sadder day is it for them when they fall under the baneful influences

Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892), 46–59; reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," in Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260–71.

¹Pratt refers to Philip Sheridan, a high-ranking Union general during the Civil War, overall commander of army forces in the West from 1867 to 1883, and general-in-chief of the army from 1883 to 1888.

of a treaty agreement with the United States whereby they are to receive large annuities, and to be protected on reservations, and held apart from all association with the best of our civilization. The destruction is not so speedy, but it is far more general. . . .

"Put yourself in his place" is as good a guide to a proper conception of the Indian and his cause as it is to help us to right conclusions in our relations with other men. For many years we greatly oppressed the black man, but the germ of human liberty remained among us and grew, until, in spite of our irregularities, there came from the lowest savagery into intelligent manhood and freedom among us more than seven millions of our population, who are to-day an element of industrial value with which we could not well dispense. However great this victory has been for us, we have not yet fully learned our lesson nor completed our work; nor will we have done so until there is throughout all of our communities the most unequivocal and complete acceptance of our own doctrines, both national and religious. Not until there shall be in every locality throughout the nation a supremacy of the Bible principle of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and full obedience to the doctrine of our Declaration that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created free and equal, with certain inalienable rights," and of the clause in our Constitution which forbids that there shall be "any abridgment of the rights of citizens on account of race, color, or previous condition." I leave off the last two words "of servitude," because I want to be entirely and consistently American.

Inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Horrible as were the experiences of its introduction, and of slavery itself, there was concealed in them the greatest blessing that ever came to the Negro race — seven millions of blacks from cannibalism in darkest Africa to citizenship in free and enlightened America; not full, not complete citizenship, but possible — probable — citizenship, and on the highway and near to it.

There is a great lesson in this. The schools did not make them citizens, the schools did not teach them the language, nor make them industrious and self-supporting. Denied the right of schools, they became English-speaking and industrious through the influences of association. Scattered here and there, under the care and authority of individuals of the higher race, they learned self-support and something of citizenship, and so reached their present place. No other influence or force would have so speedily accomplished such a result. Left in Africa, surrounded by their fellow-savages, our seven millions of industrious black fellow-citizens would still be savages. Transferred into these new surroundings and experiences, behold the result. They became English-speaking and civilized, because forced into association with English-speaking and civilized people; became healthy and multiplied, because they were property; and industrious, because industry, which brings contentment and health, was a necessary quality to increase their value.

The Indians under our care remained savage, because forced back upon themselves and away from association with English-speaking and civilized people, and because of our savage example and treatment of them. . . .

We have never made any attempt to civilize them with the idea of taking them into the nation, and all of our policies have been against citizenizing and absorbing them. . . .

A public school system especially for the Indians is a tribal system; and this very fact says to them that we believe them to be incompetent, that they must not

attempt to cope with us. Such schools build up tribal pride, tribal purposes, and tribal demands upon the government. They formulate the notion that the government owes them a living and vast sums of money; and by improving their education on these lines, but giving no other experience and leading to no aspirations beyond the tribe, leaves them in their chronic condition of helplessness, so far as reaching the ability to compete with the white race is concerned. . . .

Indian schools are just as well calculated to keep the Indians intact as Indians as Catholic schools are to keep the Catholics intact. Under our principles we have established the public school system, where people of all races may become unified in every way, and loyal to the government; but we do not gather the people of one nation into schools by themselves, and the people of another nation into schools by themselves, but we invite the youth of all peoples into all schools. We shall not succeed in Americanizing the Indian unless we take him in in exactly the same way. . . .

[A]nother influence . . . in Indian matters . . . is the missionary as a citizenizing influence upon the Indians. The missionary goes to the Indian; he learns the language; he associates with him; he makes the Indian feel he is friendly, and has great desire to help him; he even teaches the Indian English. But the fruits of his labor, by all the examples that I know, have been to strengthen and encourage him to remain separate and apart from the rest of us. Of course, the more advanced, those who have a desire to become civilized, and to live like white men, who would with little encouragement go out into our communities, are the first to join the missionary's forces. They become his lieutenants to gather in others. The missionary must necessarily hold on to every help he can get to push forward his schemes and plans, so that he may make a good report to his Church; and, in order to enlarge his work and make it a success, he must keep his community together. Consequently, any who care to get out into the nation, and learn from actual experience what it is to be civilized, what is the full length and breadth and height and depth of our civilization, must stay and help the missionary. The operation of this has been disastrous to any individual's escape from the tribe, has vastly and unnecessarily prolonged the solution of the question, and has needlessly cost the charitable people of this country large sums of money, to say nothing of the added cost to the government, the delay in accomplishing their civilization, and their destruction caused by such delay. . . .

We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization. America has different customs and civilizations from Germany. What would be the result of an attempt to plant American customs and civilization among the Germans in Germany, demanding that they shall become thoroughly American before we admit them to the country? Now, what we have all along attempted to do for and with the Indians is just exactly that, and nothing else. We invite the Germans to come into our country and communities, and share our customs, our civilization, to be of it; and the result is immediate success. Why not try it on the Indians? Why not invite them into experiences in our communities? Why always invite and compel them to remain a people unto themselves?

It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is born an inevitable savage. He is born a blank, like all the rest of us. Left in the surroundings of savagery, he grows to possess a savage language, superstition, and life. We, left in the surroundings of civilization, grow to possess a civilized language, life, and purpose. Transfer the infant white to the savage surroundings, he will grow to possess a

savage language, superstition, and habit. Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit. These results have been established over and over again beyond all question; and it is also well established that those advanced in life, even to maturity, of either class, lose already acquired qualities belonging to the side of their birth, and gradually take on those of the side to which they have been transferred.

As we have taken into our national family seven millions of Negroes, and as we receive foreigners at the rate of more than five hundred thousand a year, and assimilate them, it would seem that the time may have arrived when we can very properly make at least the attempt to assimilate our two hundred and fifty thousand Indians. . . .

Theorizing citizenship into people is a slow operation. What a farce it would be to attempt teaching American citizenship to the negroes in Africa. They could not understand it; and, if they did, in the midst of such contrary influences, they could never use it. Neither can the Indians understand or use American citizenship theoretically taught to them on Indian reservations. They must get into the swim of American citizenship. They must feel the touch of it day after day, until they become saturated with the spirit of it, and thus become equal to it.

When we cease to teach the Indian that he is less than a man; when we recognize fully that he is capable in all respects as we are, and that he only needs the opportunities and privileges which we possess to enable him to assert his humanity and manhood; when we act consistently towards him in accordance with that recognition; when we cease to fetter him to conditions which keep him in bondage, surrounded by retrogressive influences; when we allow him the freedom of association and the developing influences of social contact — then the Indian will quickly demonstrate that he can be truly civilized, and he himself will solve the question of what to do with the Indian.

QUESTIONS FOR READING AND DISCUSSION

1. Why did Pratt oppose reservations? How would schools achieve Pratt's goal to "Kill the Indian . . . and save the man"?
2. What did Pratt mean by asserting that "our greatest mistake [is] in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization"? Did he consider education or Christianity mistakes for Indians? Why or why not?
3. What lessons did Pratt draw from the experiences of African Americans? Did he believe they represented a success story for his goal of "citizenizing"?
4. What assumptions about civilization and race did Pratt make? What assumptions did he make about white Americans, native Americans, African Americans, and Catholics? For him, what was the goal of "citizenizing"?