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Ethnic Studies 100

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### The Failure of Assimilation Policies to Solve Ethnic Conflicts

Ever since the start of the American colonization, people from many different nations have migrated to the North American Continent. As local and federal governments formed to govern the colonists in the new land, certain policies were written because of numerous ethnic conflicts that arose between nationalities which immigrated to the country. In the United States government, two main policies of assimilation and integration were adapted in attempt to contain, control, and eventually solve these ethnic conflicts. There was a long-established expectation by modern nations that ethnic conflicts, and eventually ethnic groups, would inevitably demise and government policies were written with that in mind. However, despite established expectations on ethnicity, to this very day neither assimilation, segregation nor any other government policy has effectively solved conflicting interests of different ethnic groups.

There was a common belief that ethnicity would eventually be swallowed up by the modern world and would cease to exist. However, over the past decades, this has proven to be wrong. Professor Stephen Cornell writes that “what made these various manifestations of resurgent groups ties so puzzling was the long-held expectation of their imminent, eventual, or ultimate demise.” When the U.S government adapted the assimilation policy they anticipated that

ethnic groups, in this case the Native Americans, would flow into Anglo-European civilization and forget their previous history, customs, and religion. However, as Cornell points out “Well-established assimilationist expectations came up against persistent ethnic and racial realities (Cornell 48).

The biggest example of “persistent ethnic and racial realities” happened with the Native Americans. Robert Remini, a historian, wrote that "once the Indians adopted the practice of private property, built homes, farmed, educated their children, and embraced Christianity, these Native Americans would win acceptance from white Americans" (Remini). In other words, the Indians would be assimilated into American society and cease to be Indians. Henry Knox wrote to George Washington about his ideas for the “Aboriginals of the Country”;

“How different would be the sensation of a philosophic mind to reflect that instead of exterminating a part of the human race by our modes of population that we had persevered through all difficulties and at last had imparted our Knowledge of cultivating and the arts, to the Aboriginals of the Country by which the source of future life and happiness had been preserved and extended. But it has been conceived to be impracticable to civilize the Indians of North America — This opinion is probably more convenient than just.

—Henry Knox to George Washington, 1790s. (Predue)

The federal government adopted this view and beginning in 1871, began implementing assimilation practices. The United States appointed agents, like Benjamin Hawkins, to live among the Native Americans and to teach them how to live like whites. Later in the decade, Indian children were taken out of their villages and forced to attend boarding schools where all their former heritage was forbidden. According to Captain Richard H. Pratt this practice would

“kill the Indian, and save the man”. In 1887 the federal government passed the General Allotment Act, better known as the Dawes Act. This act divided Indian reservations and gave each family their own plot of land. The intent of the Dawes Act was to force Indians to assimilate into Western culture by making them farmers and encouraging them to engage in individual enterprise. However, this did not work out for the Indians who were often cheated out of their lands, discriminated, and despite being “Americanized” in theory, were unable to adapt to the new lifestyle (Haug).

The assimilation policy within the Dawes Act did not work well and this fact was anticipated and recognized as the decades passed by, and in 1934, the allotment practice was terminated by an Act of Congress. At this time most Indians were poor, ill educated, and very ill-adapted to succeed in American-Anglo society. The assimilation process with the Native Americans had failed despite government efforts otherwise. These facts were pointed out in the Meriam survey, published in 1928, which, ironically, still concluded a need for more Indian assimilation stating the Government branch of Indian affairs should be “devoting its main energies to the social and economic advancement of the Indians” so that “they may be absorbed into the prevailing civilization or be fitted to live in the presence of that civilization at least in accordance with a minimum standard of health and decency” (Meriam 21).

Although assimilation was, in fact, “a recurrent objective in U.S. Indian policy and very much the preferred outcome for many policymakers and other Whites who took an interest in Indian affairs”, it was impossible for the expanding nation to succeed. (Cornell 116). Several main reasons why Indian assimilation failed was because of “land expropriation, reservation confinement, the racial antagonism of many Whites, and the desire to teach Indians the ways of

Euro-American civilization before integrating them into American society”. This created a very stressful situation for the Natives where they could only manage to barely survive as a group, let alone flourish in the competitive American civilization (Cornell 116).

The film, *The American Experience: In the White Man's Image*, written and directed by Christine Lesiak, shows the mentality of the United States toward the Native Americans. They were viewed as savages who were unable to live as civilized people. Even after efforts to educate and civilize them, most of the Indian students returned to their reservations. Despite attempts to advance the Indians, the degrading views of most Americans, white man's greed for expansion and possession of Indian lands, and the overall ethnic conflict between Indians and Americans, did not allow them to assimilate into Western society. The Indians were taught how to be white people, but they couldn't become white people even when forced to. The failure of the assimilation process had much to do with the continued discrimination by majority of the European American population.

Similarly to Native Americans, African Americans living in the United States also resisted the “push for assimilation to White cultural norms”. Just like the Indians, who were finally recognized as a prominent ethnic group, African Americans also sought to establish their identity. “What began as a distributive politics about housing, jobs, and other resources, arguing that , fundamentally, ‘we are all the same,’ had evolved into a politics of recognition and ethnic assertions, claiming emphatically that “we are different” (Cornell 47).

The traditional views of imperialists, who sought to expand their empires and assimilate different ethnic groups, were challenged. Ethnicity withstood the test of time, assimilation, discrimination, and segregation. Nathan Glazer writes that there was a “resurgence of ethnicity

and race.” Only after decades of failed attempts to assimilate different ethnic groups, did the federal government turn to a new policy of integration to solve ethnic conflicts. However, it was a bitter struggle to get there.

In 1964, Congress passed a Civil Rights Bill which advanced the integration of ethnic groups more than before. There was fervent opposition to the bill. Senator Strom Thurmond argued that, "This so-called Civil Rights Proposals, which the President has sent to Capitol Hill for enactment into law, are unconstitutional, unnecessary, unwise and extend beyond the realm of reason.” Although Thurmond and many others did not think the civil rights bill was the correct solution to ethnic conflict in the United States, the bill narrowly passed in Congress. (UPI.com).

Eventually Congress passed other bills such as the Voting Right Act of 1965 and the Civil Right Act of 1968, not to mention the Supreme Court decision of Loving vs. Virginia. All these bills attempted to create political equality in the United States. The ideal that the government tried to achieve was the “participation in all the rights and privileges of U.S citizenship on equal terms”. This was now the new government policy on managing ethnic conflicts. Instead of trying to assist the supposedly inevitable demise of ethnic groups, the government attempted to guarantee equal protection and pursuit of happiness for all citizens regardless of skin, gender, and race. Of course, many will argue that integration has not solved ethnicity conflicts as it was originally intended to do, but because of integration policies, government pressure upon ethnic minorities finally lifted.

Although some aspects of assimilation policies remain in today’s society, it is reasonable to conclude that assimilation practices undertaken by the federal government were unsuccessful.

The long-held expectation that human ethnicity would eventually demise is slowly fading away. Race and ethnicity have become prominent factors in all nations of the world, especially in the United States. Past experiences, historical studies, and a new understanding of the persistence of race and ethnicity has lead to more ethnic-friendly government policies of integration. Contrary to assimilation, integration policy has been much more successful in dealing with ethnic conflicts.

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