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Despite all of the trauma inflicted upon the indigenous peoples of North America during the past several hundred years, they have survived. Today, Native Americans make up a vigorously growing part of the U.S. population. This Digest begins with a remembrance of Native Americans' past, followed by a brief description of their ancient and current diversity. The Digest continues with current information about where they live; the growth of their numbers; and the status of their health, employment, and education. The Digest closes with an assessment of recent progress made by Native Americans and challenges they still face.

IN THE BEGINNING...

It was clear, as we Americans began preparations for the celebration of the "discovery" of America by Columbus some 500 years ago, that the ground had shifted under our feet. First, we learned that Columbus was the fourth "discoverer" of America and that he never set foot on the land that makes up the United States. Then we learned that at least 3 million people already lived on the North American continent in 1492. We have also begun to appreciate that what Columbus took back--maize, potatoes, tobacco, and wilderness survival skills, for example--was far more important than what he left behind--mainly horses, guns, and disease. We now know, too, that the first real discoverers of the hemisphere probably migrated across the Bering Strait to the western part of the North American continent. From there, they migrated to South America, then back north through the eastern part of what is now the U.S. All of this took place thousands of years before 1492.

In fact, calling the Native peoples of North America "Indians" perpetuates Columbus' error in thinking he was in the East Indies. Indeed, given what we know today about the treatment of indigenous peoples during the westward expansion, the notion of venerating Columbus as a hero is unsettling. We know, for instance, how a major food source--the buffalo--came close to total ruin, along with Native families and tribal identities.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN 1992

Any description of Native Americans must begin with a reminder of a historical condition that continues to shape Native American societies even today. Native Americans, originally, were the entire American population. As such, they developed an amazing variety of linguistic and cultural traditions. Even today, when they make up less than one percent of the U.S. total, they represent half of the nation's languages and cultures. This diversity within a small population must be kept in mind, always.

Although many tribal traditions are at risk of dying out, Indians as a group are a growing population in 1992. Some 1,959,000 people claimed American Indian status on the 1990 Census form. There is extraordinary diversity in this population, representing

about 500 tribes in the U.S.; of these tribes, 308 are recognized by the federal government.

EXPANSION OF THE NATIVE POPULATION

Along with the 1.9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives, over 5 million Americans indicated on their Census forms that they were of Indian descent. If even a quarter of these 5 million people decide to reclaim their Indian heritage in the next Census (in the year 2000), there could be an astonishing growth in population figures for Native Americans--with no increase in birth rates. Recent movies and novels have featured Natives mostly in a favorable light. This improved media portrayal could increase the numbers who make the switch in which ethnic identity they claim. The Census taker used to decide a person's ethnic identity; today the respondent does, which is a step in the right direction.

RESIDENCE

We know from the 1990 Census where Native Americans live. Of the 1.9 million, about 637,000 are living on reservations or Trust Lands. However, 46,000 live in the New York/Long Island/New Jersey/Connecticut Combined Metro Area (CMA); 87,000 in the Los Angeles CMA; 15,000 in the Chicago CMA; and 40,000 in the San Francisco CMA; just to name the largest. A minimum of 252,000 Native Americans lived in cities in 1990. More than half of the Native American population in 1990 lived in the following six states: Oklahoma (252,000), California (242,000), Arizona (204,000), New Mexico (134,000), Alaska (86,000), and Washington state (81,000). In growth from 1980-1990, Oklahoma led with an 83,000 person increase. Arizona's population was up 51,000 and California's was up 41,000. One reservation dominates all others in population--the Navajo reservation that occupies parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah has 143,000 residents. The next largest reservation, home to the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) people, is Pine Ridge located in South Dakota, with 11,000. Of the 500 tribes and bands in the nation, 10 made up half of the Indian population in 1980. This fact means there is a large number of very small tribes; many of these small tribes have few young people, which makes their futures uncertain. (The word "endangered" comes to mind.)

FERTILITY AND HEALTH CHARACTERISTICS

American Indians have a fertility rate about twice that of other Americans, partly because they are, on average, about 7 years younger than the U.S. average. Actually, the birth rate is not increasing. Rather, infant deaths are decreasing, resulting in a large increase of young Natives. Indeed, the Census reports that from 1980 to 1990, Natives increased their numbers by 54 percent. The Indian Health Service has played a role in reducing infant mortality, from 60 deaths per 1,000 births from 1955 to 10 in 1985. Unfortunately, despite some reduction in alcoholism rates, the death rate from alcohol-related causes is still three times higher among Indians than the rate in the

general population. This rate includes deaths due to fetal alcohol syndrome and drug- and alcohol-related accidents, suicides, and criminal offenses. Of all treatment services provided by the Indian Health Service in 1988, 70 percent were alcohol-related. With some real progress in the areas of safe births and child health, the rest of Native health is a mixed bag.

Thus, while Natives have made major advances in reducing infant deaths and improving public health facilities, several major problems remain. The most prominent of the remaining needs include creating jobs on reservations and reducing alcohol-related accidents, crime, suicide, and poverty.

JOBS

A Native American who wants a middle class job will likely have to leave the reservation. This circumstance may account, in part, for the movement of Indians to metro areas. One way to increase the availability of jobs in rural areas and on reservations is to start new businesses. Many Natives are engaged in this strategy. In 1987, Indians owned 17,000 businesses with cash receipts of $800 million; Eskimos owned 2,300; and Aleuts owned 1,100. Most of these businesses employ small numbers of workers, and not all are located on reservations. A larger proportion of the 4,000 Native-owned businesses in Alaska are located in Native villages compared to the proportion of Native-owned businesses in California (numbering 3,200) that are located on reservations.

EDUCATION

Major changes in Native education have occurred in the past two decades. The notorious boarding schools, which took Indian children from their families and tribes and attempted to make Anglos out of them, are now mainly gone. More Indian youth are enrolled in schools and colleges that are either run by tribal leadership or in which tribal views are important to decisionmaking.

There has been a major increase in college attendance, indicated by the increase in the numbers of Natives taking the SAT--from 2,662 in 1976 to 18,000 in 1989. Of the 103,000 Natives who were in college in 1990, about half were in two-year colleges and half in four-year. The states with highest enrollments are California with 21,000 native students; Oklahoma with 9,600; Arizona with 8,800; and New Mexico with 4,500. The 24 Tribal Colleges, most of which offer two-year programs, have rapidly increasing enrollments. In addition, several associations currently encourage Indian youth to aspire to higher education. The American Indian Science and Engineering Society and the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering are just two of a growing number or such associations.

Less is known about the 391,000 Indians in elementary and secondary education. Many public schools on or near reservations are becoming increasingly responsive to the special needs of Indian youth. In some cases, the local tribal language and culture are

taught at school, which is a major reversal of the previous attempts (such as in the boarding schools) to eliminate Indian language and culture. Indian parents are becoming increasingly involved in school activities, including holding offices as school board members.

Many expect these improvements will help young Indians take pride in their language and cultural traditions, which should be important in increasing the number of youth who attend college. More needs to be done to provide information about college to youth in elementary and junior high school. Many Native students do not take the courses required for college admission, particularly in math and science.

THE BOTTOM LINE

This is a period of great possibilities for Native Americans. After centuries of misinformation, the average American has now gained a limited knowledge about the historical mistreatment of Natives, the importance of treaty rights, and the differences in world views between Americans of European descent and Native Americans. Examples of Native beliefs that are different from European-based beliefs include the following:

* that land is sacred and cannot be owned;

* that one is wise to wait for a speaker to finish and think deeply about what was said before formulating a response;

* that to foul the land is to insult your ancestors;

* that all things have their own identities, such as plants, which are "the rooted ones."

These are all ideas that many Americans find appealing. It may well be that many Native views of the world will become "mainstream" in the next decade.

Many of the problems faced by Native Americans can be traced back to the conflicts between their desire to perpetuate their cultural heritage and the pressure to assimilate into the larger society. All ethnic groups wrestle with this conflict to some extent. A complicating factor for Native Americans is that there is an incredible diversity of cultures that falls into the category of Native American. Rather than preserving one language and way of life, they must preserve hundreds of relatively complete cultures.

The current generation of American Indian and Alaska Native youth have a genuine choice between being proud to be an American and being proud to be a Native. As stated, those choices appear mutually exclusive. If they wish, they can live a tradition-oriented Native lifestyle, or they can move completely into the mainstream American middle class. Or (and this is the more complex choice) they can lead lives that include productive elements of both. Given the pluralistic American tradition, many share the hope that Indian youth will find ways to do the latter, both for the sake of their fulfillment as individuals and for the enrichment of American society.

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