

Native Americans and
the Legacy of Harry S. Truman

Native Americans and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman
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Based on the Fourth Truman Legacy Symposium
Harry Truman and Native Americans
May 2006
Key West, Florida

Edited by
Brian Hosmer

NATIVE
AMERICANS
and the LEGACY of
HARRY S. TRUMAN

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Harry Truman is known for observing “there is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.” Truman was a student of history, who believed that decision making required context and that an appreciation for that which came before—history—provided essential guidance for policymakers. In this, Truman echoed George Santayana’s often-repeated warning to those presuming to ignore the lessons of history.

An apropos place to begin a volume dealing with Truman’s legacy, this sentiment also speaks to the limits of the thirty-third president’s familiarity with American Indian history and the consequences that followed. Clearly sympathetic to American Indian struggles and determined to deploy the tools of government to improve the lives of “our First Americans,” as he sometimes referred to Native peoples, Truman largely equated Indian concerns with the experiences of other racial minorities. His focus on the historic “plight” of Indians led him to support remedies that linked amelioration of hardship with a more complete participation in American life. While this noble sentiment sometimes produced laudable accomplishments, Truman’s historical frame of reference ignored the specific character and dimensions of Native experiences. It also blinded Truman to the activities of Native peoples in his own times, who offered contrasting remedies that were themselves products of particular readings of history. In a way, Truman and Native people shared feelings of outrage and frustration at the historic treatment and ongoing condition of Indians and their communities. Just as often, they spoke past one another when it came to prescriptions and aspirations. Truman and Indians shared a determination to right old wrongs, but divergent, sometimes conflicting, interpretations of history led to misunderstanding.

As a student of history who acknowledged that there was always more to learn, Truman would, I think, have enjoyed this symposium. Several years ago, on a golf course in Laramie, Wyoming, Mike Devine asked whether I thought the Truman administration was significant for Native American affairs. My immediate response was to reference the era of termination, which began under Truman’s watch and gathered steam under Eisenhower before petering out in the 1960s and 1970s. For American Indian historians,

termination is remembered less than fondly, and I told Mike that a symposium on Truman's Indian policy might not present the former president in the best light. To his credit, Mike brushed off my concerns and suggested that the Truman presidency should be understood in its fullest sense and not reduced simply to hagiography. But even more, we agreed that a thoughtful analysis of Truman's Indian policies might also offer new insights into the totality of the Truman legacy.

Native Americans and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman is one fruit of this endeavor. Happily, it corresponds in time with a reexamination of that period, as Native and non-Native historians seek to understand termination more fully, as well as its relationships with the Indian New Deal and the surge of Indian activism that followed. As such, this volume is the product of multiple associations and contributions, and there are debts to be acknowledged.

First, the symposium and this volume would have been impossible absent significant institutional support. The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, under the direction of Michael Devine, provided essential material, human, and moral support from its initial conceptualization in windy Laramie all the way to our gathering in balmy Key West, and beyond. I owe Mike Devine a tremendous debt of gratitude for offering me this opportunity. The Harry S. Truman Little White House in Key West, Florida, provided not only a beautiful location for our gathering, but the very real sense that Truman was watching and listening from one of his favorite places on this earth. This was due in no small part to the generous participation of Clifton Truman Daniel, who reminded us of his grandfather's essential humanity even as we acknowledged some limitations to his vision. I am especially grateful to Bob Wolz, director of the Truman Little White House, for his careful attention to detail and determination to pull off the gathering even in the aftermath of two destructive hurricanes. The Newberry Library also stood behind this endeavor, lending its good name to our efforts and reminding us that D'Arcy McNickle, namesake of the library's renowned center for the study of American Indian history, was a key player in the drama that unfolded during Truman's presidency. As director of the McNickle Center, I appreciated the Newberry's willingness to intertwine its own history with the events discussed during the symposium.

In those days, the Newberry's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History also housed the Committee on Institutional Cooperation's American Indian Studies Consortium. The CIC AIS was a visionary enterprise, dedicated toward nurturing scholarship and promoting the work of graduate students from thirteen institutions of higher learning located

across the upper Midwest. CIC AIS supported this symposium and rightly interpreted it as an extension of its own mission. For that, I owe a debt of gratitude to the CIC, liberal arts deans from Big Ten universities, and the faculty and students of CIC AIS.

These institutional associations were also responsible for a particularly gratifying aspect of the symposium not reflected in this volume. On the day preceding the formal presentations, CIC AIS, the Newberry, and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) sponsored a workshop on "Emerging Research in the History of American Indian Policy." This roundtable featured several graduate students associated with CIC AIS who presented works in progress. But what made this gathering special was the participation of NARA archivists, who not only commented on scholarship but also extended our conversations toward the creative possibilities that inhere in conversations between archival professionals and academics. While academics and archivists (and librarians) certainly speak to one another, this gathering represented a unique opportunity for reciprocal exchanges between student and archivist, and in a public setting. All credit goes to Scott Roley, then of the Truman Library, and McNickle Center assistant director Laurie Arnold, who organized the event; to graduate students Kelly Branham, Joel Helfrich, Rachel Liebowitz, and Matthew Martinez; and to NARA respondents Jim McSeeny, Amy Williams, and Scott Roley.

NARA professionals from Kansas City to Independence to Key West managed the many details attending to any such gathering and, as anyone who has organized symposia knows, provided essential but sadly invisible service. My thanks to Kathy Cornelius, Judy Kreher, Scott Roley, and Amy Williams.

The burden for producing this book fell to Truman State University Press and the Truman Library. Here, it is my pleasure to acknowledge a special debt to Barbara Smith-Mandell, who kept us—really me—on track. Thanks as well to Ray Geselbracht, Nancy Rediger, Sam Rushay, and Randy Sewell. My apologies too as my own professional trajectory and shifting responsibilities caused this project to slip to the sidelines.

At the Newberry, I am indebted to John Powell, photoduplications manager, for permission to reprint images from that spectacular collection, to the peerless Ayer librarian John Aubrey for pointing me in productive directions, and to Jay Nelson for advance work in the archives and with our contributors. In Tulsa, my thanks to Mike Juen who helped with proofreading and compiling author biographies.

Charlie Campo, chief librarian of Bangor (Maine) *Daily News* facilitated permissions to reprint a photograph from their archives (thank you

Micah Pawling for alerting me to that photograph). Patricia Barahona, assistant curator of archives at the Historical Museum of South Florida, responded quickly and generously to my request to reprint one of their photographs.

Finally and most importantly a word to our contributors. We were blessed with the presence of major scholars and activists, from a former senator and assistant secretary of Indian affairs to some of the most important scholars in the various fields of American Indian studies. A particular appreciation to Tina Osceola (Seminole), executive director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, whose stirring address reminded all of us that success and Indianness are not contradictory concepts, Dexter Lethinen who filled in wonderfully when a health scare caused Buffalo Tiger (Miccosukee) to cancel his appearance, and Dave Devendorf, who shepherded Senator Campbell to and from Key West. In all cases, I am flattered to know that all of you were willing to take time from busy schedules to attend the symposium, to share your experiences and insights, and to bear with us as we moved, ever so slowly, toward completion of this volume. A special note of gratitude to Doug Miller, my student at UIC and now a PhD student at the University of Oklahoma, who generously provided a paper on relocation on very short notice.

In the end, this book is dedicated to our conference participants, and in the memory of William A. Hosmer, who loved history, enjoyed Truman, and would have reveled in this gathering.

Tulsa, Oklahoma
October 2009

HARRY TRUMAN AND NATIVE AMERICANS

Brian Hosmer

The passage of this act is an important milestone in our Government's administration of Indian affairs. It represents a carefully developed plan for dealing with the unsolved economic problems which have delayed the social advancement of this large segment of our Indian citizens. For these Indian groups it also represents a significant forward step in self-government—a principle to which the American people are deeply devoted.¹

—Statement by President Harry S. Truman,
on signing Bill for the Aid of the Navajo
and Hopi Indian Tribes, April 19, 1950

Termination is a bad word, a bad name, and an evil thought.²

—Philleo Nash, advisor to President Truman,
Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1961–65), 1983

Harry Truman became president at a critical moment in the course of American Indian policy and affairs. Not that he necessarily knew it. Confronted with urgent matters of war and peace, fraying alliances, reconversion to a peacetime economy, a fragile political mandate and, later, challenges associated with civil rights, the Cold War, and implementing the Fair Deal, Truman could be excused for devoting little attention to concerns outside his experiences and seemingly less urgent. Considering this, it may be useful to wonder if Truman had an Indian policy at all. David McCullough's magisterial biography of the thirty-third president implicitly confirms this assessment. Its index contains no entries for American Indian, Native American, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA),³ or its controversial

commissioner, Dillon S. Myer. Conspicuously absent are references to such signature legislative accomplishments as the Indian Claims Commission Act and the Navajo-Hopi Rehabilitation Act, or even termination—that policy initiative that so shaped Indian affairs from the Truman administration into the 1960s and indeed beyond. Given the broad reach of McCullough's scholarship, these omissions tell us a great deal about the place of Native affairs for Truman, and historians of his administration.⁴

Several factors may account for these omissions. On the one hand lies the historian's understandable impulse to focus on monumental events that have come to shape a consensus view of Truman's presidency. Here, decisions to drop the atomic bomb, commit troops to Korea, stare down the Soviets, initiate a national security apparatus, implement the Marshall Plan, and recognize the State of Israel conform to a narrative that places Truman at the center of postwar international crises in the age of the Cold War. Similarly, historians' attention to Truman's support for civil rights, his move to desegregate the armed forces, and his efforts to extend prosperity and social justice present Truman as a visionary in the domestic sphere. The buck famously stopped with Truman, whose steely resolve and straight talk have captivated historians even if unappreciated at the time. In this context, American Indians, "our First Americans" as Truman sometimes referred to them, must appear as bit players in a consequential presidency.

But there is more to this omission than first meets the eye. For the marginalization of Native historical experiences also owes at least as much to habits and conventions that reflect and perpetuate the reduced place of Indians in our national consciousness. Just as popular culture situates Indians in predictable places (as objects of museum displays, in movies, or, more recently and perhaps uncomfortably, as operators of profitable casinos), history books include Natives in usual and accustomed locations: on battlefields or as tragically doomed representatives of disappearing ways of life. Stereotypes owe something to truth, of course, but inevitably carry a price. If unnoticed at the time or unseen, as Frederick Hoxie argues in his essay, American Indian history is less marginal than it is obscured by our tendency to ignore indigenous peoples in telling and retelling American history. Separating Truman from Native Americans can be understood as a function of the way we think about history, where Indian history is somehow exotic—"other"—and removed from issues and events that really matter. Historical treatments of Indians replicate patterns that relegate Native people to the margins of American life, where Indian history is seen as apart from, rather than a part of, national narratives that in this instance emphasize the Cold War and civil rights.⁵

Contributors to this volume, which arose from the 2006 Harry S.

Truman Legacy Symposium, argue otherwise. Hosted by the Harry S. Truman Little White House and co-sponsored by the Truman Library and Museum, the Newberry Library's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History, and the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) American Indian Studies Consortium, "Harry Truman and Native Americans" brought together academics from various fields, activists and attorneys, politicians of national reputation, and representatives from Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Nations. All were asked to reflect upon Indian affairs during the Truman years, which they did. But quite on their own, contributors considered *legacies*. Partly implicit in the title of this meeting (it was one of a series of symposia, after all), this emphasis on seeking meaning beyond the Truman presidency testifies to outcomes and consequences, and challenges us again to see the unseen and to understand linkages between broader currents that shaped that presidency and their resonance for Native communities, then and today.



Barely a month before Truman assumed the presidency, John Collier, commissioner of Indian affairs throughout Franklin Roosevelt's administration, resigned his post under pressure. Exhausted by scathing criticism for his policies supporting tribal self-government over forced assimilation, Collier exited the scene, and with that, the Indian "New Deal," already sputtering under the weight of wartime priorities, effectively stalled. In its place came a complex mix of initiatives identified in history as "termination." Conventionally described according to three interlocking agendas—*compensation*, or a final settlement of outstanding tribal claims against the federal government; *relocation*, meaning programs designed to induce Indians to abandon reservations for urban centers; and *termination*, code for the dismantling of the federal government's trust relationship with (and support for) Native nations as distinct corporate entities with status supported by the U.S. Constitution and legal precedent—termination represented a return to policies that promoted assimilation and constituted a thorough repudiation of Collierism.⁶

Termination cut a wide swath across Indian country. By the end of Truman's administration, relocation was well underway, a deeply flawed claims process anticipated a final resolution of tribal grievances, and Congress and the executive branch had pressed ahead with a controversial reclamation project that flooded fully one-third of the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. The fate of Indian programs (much less the BIA itself) hung in the balance as administrators and observers eagerly anticipated the eventual end of reservations. The pace of change only

increased with the emergence of Republican rule. Under Eisenhower, Congress passed landmark legislation formalizing the government's intent to terminate the special status of tribes (House Concurrent Resolution 108, 1953) and announced its intention to shift jurisdiction over reservation criminal and civil matters to states (Public Law 280, 1953). At virtually the same time, hastily convened congressional hearings produced legislation targeting Menominees and Klamaths, and singled out communities from New York, California, and Utah to Texas and Florida. Between 1954 and the close of the 1960s when termination stalled (before being formally renounced in the early 1970s), more than one hundred tribes were officially "terminated," directly affecting 11,000 people and more than 1.3 million acres of land. At the same time, Congress and executive branch agencies pressed ahead with economic development plans that diminished Indian trust land by 2.5 percent, cut off federal services for 3 percent of all federally recognized Indians, and left impoverished communities even less able to sustain growing populations. Little by little, many thousands of Natives abandoned home and community for uncertain futures in cities.⁷

Ultimately, termination prompted reaction from non-Natives opposed to the dismantling of tribal culture, but more importantly from Natives who organized and lobbied for recognition of Native rights. In the end, the politicization of American Indians, first in opposition to termination and later in support of self-determination and sovereignty, ranks among the most important legacies of the termination era. But still, as attorney and historian Charles Wilkinson (himself a player in the drive to reverse termination's effects) wrote, "for Indian people, the word termination represents the third rail, shorthand for all that is extreme and confiscatory in federal Indian policy." All of this began under Truman, even if the president, more likely than not, never fully appreciated the potential magnitude of the political movement emerging out of a moral, ethical, and humanitarian crisis then taking shape.⁸

FROM NEW DEAL TO TERMINATION—AND BACK

Most historians agree that some mixture of dissatisfaction with the Indian New Deal, postwar cultural conformity and desires for national unity, anticommunism at home and abroad, and the increasingly visible, and intolerable, contradiction between America's support for liberty abroad amidst racial segregation at home, undermined whatever support existed for tribal self-government and cultural pluralism that existed during the Collier years. Many agree with Paul Rosier's observation that critics of the Indian New Deal "fused nineteenth-century language of the allotment

era with the new language of World War II and of the emerging Cold War—anticommunism, individualism, emancipation, and liberation.”⁹ On the ground and at that historical moment, politicians and industrialists sought to exploit western resources, and criticized reservations as impediments to progress and prosperity. One letter to Wyoming’s U.S. Senator Joseph O’Mahoney captured the views of many. “I am distressed when I see great stretches of this land available for irrigation, uncultivated,” wrote Joseph B. Lutz, a federal probation officer assigned to that state. “Any plan,” he continued, “that will help to develop initiative and independence for the Indian and assist in the assimilation of these families into the general American population, would be both wholesome and practical.” For good measure, Lutz also encapsulated some of the sentiment behind termination, when he took pains to point out that “since there is little or no prejudices [sic] in this country against Indian blood there is no good reason from my point of view why they should not be taken into our white families as wives and mothers.”¹⁰

Others viewed federal protection for separate Indian communities as an expensive anachronism that undermined the authority of states and counties, removed lands from tax rolls, and seemingly justified duplicative social programs. In this political environment, Collier’s efforts to support Indian cultural values, preserved and sustained on and through self-governing reservation communities, seemed un-American at best, dangerous at worst. Collier battled these forces all through the 1930s, and for a time succeeded in protecting the Indian New Deal. But the criticism was damaging, particularly when congressional antagonists could draw upon Native activists like Joseph Bruner, the Creek businessman and president of the right-wing American Indian Federation, who accused the commissioner of forcing socialist ideas upon an unsuspecting, and presumably easily duped, population.¹¹ In one such letter, Bruner reported on congressional “hearings against Collier and Collierism, which by the way is Communism and Atheism.” In words that fly off the page, Bruner announced that “We are opposed to the appropriation of so much as ONE PENNY out of the public treasury for the carrying out of this COLLIER-COMMUNISTIC SCHEME.”¹² Collier proved more than a match for Bruner, but support for his Indian New Deal—communistic and atheistic or not—proved shallow. By 1943, with the Office of Indian Affairs temporarily relocated to Chicago’s Merchandise Mart building, Oklahoma’s Senator Elmer Thomas announced his intention to abolish the Office of Indian Affairs, charging that Collier’s policies “promoted segregation, made the Indian a guinea pig for experimentation, tied him to the land in perpetuity, and made him satisfied with all the limitations of primitive life.” Collier and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes

CONTRIBUTORS

BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL (Northern Cheyenne), a former U.S. senator (1993–2005) from Colorado, was the first American Indian to serve in the Senate in more than sixty years. A leader in public lands policy, he is recognized for the passage of landmark legislation to settle Native American water rights. He is also acknowledged for initiating and passing legislation to establish the National Museum of the American Indian within the Smithsonian Institution. In addition to his political life, Campbell is a self-employed jewelry designer, a rancher, and was a trainer of champion quarter horses. In 2007 Campbell designed the acclaimed “Creation Pendant” for the National Museum of the American Indian.

JESSICA R. CATTELINO received her PhD from New York University and is currently associate professor of anthropology at University of California, Los Angeles. She has been an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, a member in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ, and a Weatherhead Fellow at the School of American Research (now School for Advanced Research) in Santa Fe, NM. Her first book, *High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty*, examined the cultural, political, and economic stakes of tribal casinos for Florida Seminoles. Her current research project explores citizenship and territoriality in the Florida Everglades, with focus on the Seminole Big Cypress Reservation and the nearby agricultural town of Clewiston.

ADA E. DEER (Menominee) is a nationally recognized social worker, community organizer, activist, and political leader. A champion of Indian rights, she led the successful campaign to restore federal recognition of the Menominee Tribe. She became the first woman chair of the Menominee Nation, first woman to head the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the first American Indian woman to run for U.S. Congress and Wisconsin secretary of state. Currently she is a distinguished lecturer emeritus, and professor in the School of Social Work and American Indian Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She is also a fellow at the Harvard Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

JOHN ECHOHAWK (Pawnee) is executive director of the Native American Rights Fund (NARF). He was the first graduate (1970) of the University of New Mexico's special program to train Indian lawyers and was a founding member of the American Indian Law Students Association while in law school. Echohawk has been with NARF since its inception and has served as executive director since 1977. He has been recognized as one of the one hundred most influential lawyers in America by the National Law Journal since 1988 and has received numerous service awards and other recognitions for his leadership in the field of Indian law. Echohawk serves on the boards of the American Indian Resources Institute, the Association on American Indian Affairs, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development.

KEN HECHLER received a PhD in political science from Columbia University and taught at Columbia College and Barnard College. Hechler went on to teach political science at Princeton, and then accepted the post of special assistant in charge of research for President Truman. In 1958, Hechler was elected a U.S. Congressman of West Virginia and was re-elected for eighteen years. He was the only congressman to march with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama; in 2006 he was Grand Marshall in the Martin Luther King Parade in Huntington, West Virginia, and was presented the Civil Rights Award by West Virginia's governor. Ken Hechler is the author of several works, including *The Bridge at Remagen* (1957), *Working with Truman: A Personal Memoir of the White House Years* (1982), and *Super Marine: The Buddy Jones Story* (2007).

BRIAN HOSMER holds the H. G. Barnard Chair in Western American History at the University of Tulsa. Previously, he served as director of the Newberry Library's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History, and was associate professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research interests focus on wage labor, economic change, and cultural identity on Indian reservations during the twentieth century. Hosmer is author of *American Indians in the Marketplace*, co-editor of *Native Pathways*, and is currently at work on a labor history of the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming and a history of American Indians in Illinois. In an earlier lifetime, he taught at the University of Wyoming, where he served for a time as chair of the history department.

FREDRICK E. HOXIE is the Swanlund Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He also holds an appointment in the College

of Law and is an affiliated faculty member in the university's American Indian Studies Program. He received his PhD from Brandeis University and has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation. Prior to his appointment at Illinois he taught at Antioch College and Northwestern University, and served as McNickle Center director and vice president for research and education at the Newberry Library. Hoxie has worked as an expert witness for several tribes, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. He has curated exhibits and has written three books and more than two dozen scholarly articles on federal Indian policy, the history of Native communities, and the teaching of American Indian history.

HARRY A. KERSEY JR. is emeritus professor of history at Florida Atlantic University, specializing in multicultural issues in the United States and abroad. He is a recognized expert on the Seminole and Miccosukee Indians of Florida, and for a decade he was a member of the Florida Governor's Council on Indian Affairs. Kersey has received numerous research grants and contracts from agencies including the American Philosophical Society, National Endowment for the Humanities, the Newberry Library, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Kersey has published more than eighty articles and chapters in scholarly works. He is the author or co-author of nine books including *Buffalo Tiger, A Life in the Everglades* (2002), a work co-authored with the venerable Miccosukee leader, which received both the James J. Horgan Book Award and the Samuel Proctor Oral History Prize. Professor Kersey's most recent book is *The Stranahans of Fort Lauderdale: A Pioneer Family of New River* (2003).

DOUGLAS K. MILLER is a doctoral student in American history at the University of Oklahoma. He received a BA in history from the University of Minnesota and an MA in history from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research interests include American Indian urban relocation, Indian activism, and the International Indian Treaty Council. He has presented work on these topics at the American Society for Ethnohistory Conference and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Conference.

SAMUEL RUSHAY JR. holds a doctorate in U.S. history from Ohio University. He is supervisory archivist at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, where he worked as an archivist from 1993 to 1997. From 1997 to 2007, he was an archivist and subject matter expert on the Nixon Presidential

Materials Staff at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Rushay is the author of “Listening to Nixon: An Archivist’s Reflections on his Work with the White House Tapes,” and “Harry Truman’s History Lessons,” which appeared in the National Archives and Records Administration’s *Prologue* magazine. He also published “Harry Truman’s Masonic Career as Revealed in the Truman Library’s Collections,” in the Summer 2009 issue of *The Missouri Freemason*.

HELEN HORNBECK TANNER, a retired geographer and historian, is the country’s foremost researcher and disseminator of Native American history of the Great Lakes region. She is known for her involvement in claims brought before the Indian Claims Commission and as an expert on Native American history and Native rights. Among her many books and articles is the *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (1987), which has been called “the only accurate mapping of Native American tribes.” Tanner has taught at the University of Michigan and served as a senior research fellow at the Newberry Library in Chicago, which established the Susan K. Power and Helen Hornbeck Tanner Fellowship for a graduate student of Native American ancestry.

DAVID E. WILKINS (Lumbee) is McKnight Presidential Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota. He teaches and writes in the areas of comparative politics, American political theory, federal Indian policy, tribal government, and history of colonialism and native peoples. He has been recognized for his accomplishments with awards such as Fulbright Fellow (Distinguished Chairs Program), University of Calgary Chair in North American Studies, and the McKnight Research Award, University of Minnesota Arts and Humanities Endowment Fund. He is the author of several books including *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law* and *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*.

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While several valid terms are used in this book to refer to indigenous peoples, this index uses the terms “Native Americans” and “Native,” except in names of agencies and organizations.

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