

Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006.*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10839>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Christina Dokou, « Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-2, document 8, Online since 28 April 2015, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10839>

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- 1 This volume painstakingly researches a historical event that few know about, especially outside the U.S., but which is of paramount importance in understanding what leftist intellectuals like Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky continue to decry as the unceasingly destructive mixture of American imperialism and exceptionalism. In 1954, “[i]n the name of freeing the Indians from government restrictions Congress removed the tribal status of more than nine dozen tribes with nearly 13,000 members from Oregon to South Carolina and from Wisconsin to Texas” (xiii), an event which became known as “termination” and was not repealed until the early 21st century—unfortunately not before its devastating effects on the marginalized and impoverished Native American populations had had ample time to take their toll.
- 2 The first chapter of the book, titled “Policy,” delineates the reasons and motions behind the voting of the termination bill by President Eisenhower: based on the findings of the Hoover commission, which urged for a reduction of government spending on various agencies, and on what Ulrich identifies as “the goal of European immigrants to the New World from the time the first of them settled on the Atlantic Coast: get rid of the Indians” (3), this offshoot of Manifest Destiny was the brainchild of Senator Arthur V. Watkins (R-Utah) and secretary of the interior Douglas McKay. Chapter after chapter, Ulrich chronicles how Watkins typically bullied his way through each set of pre-termination hearings, completely ignoring Native viewpoints and necessities in the few cases where Natives were actually allowed to be present, and callously deriding Natives as lazy tax-dodgers, conveniently sidestepping the fact that it was centuries of white damage done to them that had reduced them to abjection; how lies, coercion, and unfulfilled promises, as well as the exploitation of the fact that the Natives didn’t comprehend at all what it was they were agreeing to, led to the signing of the controversial termination treaties; how

the pitifully inadequate amounts of per capita compensation given—amounts that, in many cases, were already owed the Indians as compensation for prior broken treaties—were, for lack of proper guidance and information, squandered on useless industrial goods and alcohol; how the immediate withdrawal of federal protection and the enforcement of taxes upon completely impoverished populations led to whole generations being denied access to basic health care, education, and a viable economic future; how the Indians, completely inexperienced in the ways of white governmental or business administration, were effectively left as prey to the greed of white corporate and private interests given free reign over pristine Native forests, fishing and hunting grounds, communal businesses, and mineral-rich subsoil led to the despoiling of a desperate people of their only sustainable means of survival; how families were broken apart, “relocated” and denied access to their own homes; and, most importantly, how the violent and sudden taking away of their status as “Indians,” along with access to their cultures, languages and traditions, became eventually the most devastating, dispiriting blow those individuals had to suffer through in the long decades until restoration.

- 3 In effect, Ulrich’s research does the exact opposite of the Watkins commission, which is to act as the reporter that she is and keep an ear close to the ground. She listens to the Native voices, seeks out all the small but meaningful details, and eventually offers a deeply informed picture, complete with appendices, meticulous historical notes, and an extensive bibliography. It is indeed one of the book’s virtues that it does not assume a single voice of authority, but cedes the stage regularly to Native voices of termination survivors and activists, without omitting verbatim quotes from the Watkins hearings: even to those familiar with the long history of the white extermination of the Native populations, the juxtaposition effect of those voices is stunning. The format of the book is in fact predicated on such a mirror-effect, with the first part chronicling, in eight chapters, the particular effects of termination on a number of Native nations/tribes, and the second delineating, in chronological order and also eight chapters, the corresponding struggle for, and immediate benefits of, restoration for each one of those nations/tribes discussed in the first part. Thus it is clear for the reader to understand exactly what the catastrophic ramifications were on a personal, tribal and pan-American level, and how the lifting of the termination blight—a long process of fierce legal battles and presidential decrees that spanned from Richard Nixon (1973) to George W. Bush Jr (1990)—restored many of the injustices and gave opportunity for a financial, political and cultural renaissance across the board, mostly achieved at great Native cost and brave effort. Ulrich makes a particular point of noting the important role played by Native community leaders and activists in the restoration struggle, a large number of which were remarkable women: “Ada Deer for the Menominees, Sue Shaffer for the Cow Creeks, Kathryn Harrison for the Grand Rondes, Dee Pigsley for the Siletz” (239). She also gives fair due to the few but determined U.S. Congressmen and Senators that stood by the Indian cause and helped fight the political front of the restoration battle, as well as to the few benefits that were actually gained from the catastrophe, such as a greater sense of administrative savvy and autonomy for the Indians, and a new sense of civic capacity which led them to take maximum advantage of post-restoration opportunities to benefit themselves and their communities by building casinos, developing local arts, crafts and businesses, and organizing politically into strong trans-national alliances. Ulrich also does not fail to mention the few rivalries that erupted among Native tribes over the acquisition of this new available wealth, or the various loose ends of termination policies and injustices that had not yet been addressed by 2006, but the overall feeling of this

informative and engaging historical and cultural micro- and macro-view of the event is a positive message of hope: as historian Alvin M. Josephy is quoted saying, “It encouraged a feeling that ‘you, too, can win. Stand up and fight’” (239).

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