



“The Indian New Deal”

The Indian Reorganization Act (Wheeler – Howard Act)

Tribal leaders from the Flathead Indian Reservation take a look at the White House as they visit Washington D.C. to be the first tribe to submit a constitution under the terms of the Wheeler-Howard Act.

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Indian Education for All Unit
Montana Office of Public Instruction

The Indian New Deal

THE SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT STANDARDS FOR NINTH - TWELFTH GRADE

(1) The civics and government content standards for ninth through twelfth grade are that each student will:

(g) explain the foundations and complexity of sovereignty for federally recognized tribes in Montana;

(4) The history content standards for ninth through twelfth grade are that each student will:

(d) analyze multiple, and complex causal factors that have shaped major events in US and world history, including American Indian history;

(e) explain events in relation to both their intended and unintended consequences, including governmental policies impacting American Indians;

Essential Understanding Regarding Montana Indians # 5

There were many federal policies put into place throughout American history that have affected Indian people in the past and continue to shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Much of Indian history can be related through several major federal policy periods:

- **Colonization/Colonial Period, 1492 - 1800s**
- **Treaty-Making and Removal Period, 1778 – 1871**
- **Reservation Period - Allotment and Assimilation, 1887 - 1934**
- **Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934 – 1953**
- **Termination and Relocation Period, 1953 – 1968**
- **Self-Determination Period, 1975 - Present**

Although the history of federal Indian policy is long and complex, understanding its main legislative pieces and outcomes helps provide context for the contemporary experiences of American Indian people and tribal communities.

Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians # 7

American Indian tribal nations are inherent sovereign nations and they possess sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, under the American legal system, the extent and breadth of self-governing powers are not the same for each tribe.



Seals of the Tribal Nations

The “New Deal” for American Indians

Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934 – 1953.

- ✓ The realization that allotment and other assimilation policies were not working prompted a reform movement during the 1920s.
- ✓ The direction of this movement was influenced by numerous studies on the appalling living conditions on reservations; one of the most important was “The Problem of Indian Administration,” or the Meriam Report. The shocking findings reported in these publications led to the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934.
- ✓ Under the IRA, allotment of Indian reservations ended, and Indian allotments were put into permanent trust status, not alienable or taxable. Tribal nations were also encouraged to reorganize their traditional governing structures by creating formal governments or business committees fashioned after models developed by the BIA in Washington, D.C.

The “New Deal” for American Indians

Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934 – 1953.

- ✓ The Indian Reorganization Act was introduced in the House by Senator Wheeler of Montana and Congressman Howard of Nebraska, and it is also referred to as the Wheeler-Howard Act.
- ✓ Tribes developed constitutions, charters, and by-laws, all of which were subject to the ultimate authority of the federal government. Although the IRA made steps towards returning some self-governing powers to tribes, it was not designed to confer complete autonomy and not all tribes were inclined to adopt it.
- ✓ Each tribe had to specifically vote against the IRA for it not to be implemented. Because many of the Indians who were against the IRA were traditionalists, they avoided voting at all. This lack of votes against the IRA was counted as votes for it.
- ✓ Ultimately, 181 tribes voted to accept the IRA, including the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, which were the first in the nation to reorganize under its terms. Seventy-seven tribes, including the Crow Tribe, voted against it.

The “New Deal” for American Indians

The Meriam Report (The Problem of Indian Administration).

In 1928, the federal government commissioned a team of investigators to conduct a seven-month study and write a summary report on socioeconomic conditions in Indian Country. The result was a detailed 872-page survey entitled, The Problem of Indian Administration. The report is commonly referred to as “The Meriam Report” for the reports lead investigator, Lewis Meriam of the Brookings Institution. **The study declared the federal government’s longstanding policy of allotment and assimilation an abject failure that had created tremendous economic hardship on reservations across the country.** The authors of the report concluded *“An overwhelming majority of the Indians are poor, even extremely poor.”*

The Problem of Indian Administration was a government- commissioned study that recognized that “encroachment of white civilization” was responsible for loss of land and livelihood; that the policy of assimilation had resulted in a breakdown in Native social systems; and that maybe individual landownership and the attempt to mold all Indian people into Euro- American farmers wasn’t such a good idea after all.

The Meriam Report led to major changes in federal Indian policy.

The “New Deal” for American Indians

Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934 – 1953.

Essential Questions

- ✓ What factors influenced the passage of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act?
- ✓ To what extent did the Meriam Report influence U.S. government officials?
- ✓ What was the historical context during this policy period?
- ✓ How are current Montana tribal governments similar and how do they differ in certain aspects?