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Educational Myths of an American Empire: Colonial Narratives and The Meriam Report

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Abstract: The Meriam Report is a remarkable historical artifact of the United States' colonial project. The idea of a stronger nation through education embodied in the report betrays the report's imperial core. The report's authors express moral outrage at the failure of the United States to respect the human dignity of Native Americans. To absolve these failures, the report repeatedly looks to education as the way forward. My interest is in the discursive construction of that argument, specifically how new discourses of progress, scientific management, and modern administrative principles were used to justify expansion of the federal government and solidify the moral mission of the nation. I show how the language and discursive practices of the report extend a relationship of benevolent domination over the nation's Indigenous population.

Introduction

In 1928, the government of the United States released a jarring report on the condition of Native Americans. Popularly called the "Meriam Report," the publication was the result of two years of fieldwork from an interdisciplinary team. It compiled a vast collection of statistics, diligently collected details and harrowing testimonials, all in support of a damning conclusion: the federal government had failed its most basic obligations to support the welfare of Native Americans. Massive sections were devoted to health care, economic development, and family life. Celebrated by the press at the time and hailed by historians in the following decades,[1] the report became perceived as a turning point in the treatment of Native Americans. Throughout the 800-page report was a recurring call for better Native education,[2] and amidst the recognition of its importance this running theme betrays the fundamentally colonial drive at the heart of calls for reform.

The Meriam Report is a remarkable historical artifact of the United States' colonial project. I argue that the idea of a stronger nation through education betrays the imperial core of this artifact. At first glance, this may be difficult to detect as it decried four decades of corrupt and ineffective Native American policy, shining a spotlight on frugal government funding, abuse, and land theft. The report's authors express disappointment and moral outrage at the utter failure of the United States to respect the common human dignity of Native Americans. To absolve these failures, the report repeatedly looks to education as the way forward. My interest is in the discursive construction of that argument, specifically how new discourses of progress, scientific management, and modern administrative principles were used to justify the expansion of the federal government and solidify the moral mission of the nation. I analyze one section in particular, the comprehensive survey of the state of Native American education, to show how education was central to the specific type of empire that was being constructed by the United

[1] See for example Jennifer L. Bertolet, "After the Meriam Report: W. Carson Ryan, Jr. and the Transformation of American Indian Education, 1928-1936." PhD diss., George Washington University, 2007; Margaret Szasz. *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-determination since 1928*. (University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Randolph C. Downes. "A Crusade for Indian Reform, 1922-1934." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1945): 331-354; Kenneth R. Philp. *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform: 1920-1954*. (University of Arizona Press. 1977).

[2] Joseph Watras. "Progressive Education and Native American Schools, 1929-1950." *Educational Foundations*, 18 (2004): 81-105.

States in the 1920s and 30s. A few years after the report was published, the New Deal would be enacted, followed by the Wheeler-Howard Act,[3] legislation which set the grounds for Native self-determination. Those accomplishments exist alongside the discursive imprint of America's long fixation with the "Indian Problem," that singular phrase[4] capturing a morphing preoccupation of policymakers, wealthy philanthropists, generals on the Western plains, and educators.[5] Starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, their debates would coalesce around the understanding that there was one way to lead Native Americans away from extinction and towards civilization: education.

Education has always been at the heart of empire building.[6] Using discourse analysis, I show how the language and discursive practices of the report extend a relationship of benevolent domination over the nation's Indigenous population. This ideology, thoroughly baked into the language and practices of the Meriam Report, is what makes it an imperial document, and it is a background that continues to inform reform around the world today, including present-day policies, concepts of education, and ideas about civilization.

This is not a study of the impact of US education policy on Native peoples or even of Indigenous education — Native voices, stories, perspectives are absent. Instead, it's an exploration of the stories a conquering society tells itself. Still, Native scholars have led the way in reinterpreting metanarratives of progress, benevolence, modernity, and tragedy,[7] crafting counternarratives against colonial historiographies, and creating distinct timelines and relationships on their own terms.[8] Many draw on a settler colonial perspective that questions central myths of free democracy, liberal welfare states, and modernity.[9] Such stances can "unfreeze" Natives — and other marginalized groups — from cultural baggage of colonial domination.[10]

I will first briefly discuss discourse analysis as a method and its interrelationship with ideology. Then, I'll describe the historical context of the Meriam Report, focusing on the

[3] Also called the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.
[4] Throughout this paper I will use the term "Indian" when quoting or referencing the work of historical figures. Recognizing the varied history and preferences for terminology, I use the terms Native Americans and Indigenous interchangeably.
[5] David Wallace Adams. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*. (University Press of Kansas, 2020).
[6] Rebecca Swartz. *Education and Empire: Children, Race and Humanitarianism in the British Settler Colonies, 1833–1880*. (Springer, 2019).
[7] See for example Meredith L. McCoy and Matthew Villeneuve. "Reconceiving Schooling: Centering Indigenous Experimentation in Indian Education History." *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2020): 487-519; Kirby Brown, "American Indian Modernities and New Modernist Studies' 'Indian Problem'." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 59, no. 3 (2017): 287-318; Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, "Origin and Development of the American Indian Boarding School System." In *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*. Edited by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc. (University of Nebraska Press, 2006): 1-34; Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*. (University Press of Kansas, 2004); K. Tsianina Lomawaima. *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
[8] McCoy and Villeneuve. "Reconceiving Schooling;" Susan A. Miller. "Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography." *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 2 (2008): 9-28; and Brown, "American Indian Modernities"
[9] Patrick Wolfe. *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*. (London: Cassell, 1999).
[10] Frederick E. Hoxie. "Retrieving the Red Continent: Settler Colonialism and the History of American Indians in the US." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 6 (2008): 1153-1167.

changing discursive construct of the "Indian Problem." Next, I'll analyze the structure of the report and select passages from the education section to highlight discursive techniques used in the text. I'll close by connecting the Meriam Report with modern discourses about education that continue the colonial project.

The Meriam Report as a Discursive Act (I)

The Meriam Report first caught my attention because of its disturbing portrayal of Native American education. Described as "the most significant investigation into the field of Indian affairs,"[11] the report included detailed descriptions of abuse, food budgets for children as low as eleven cents per day, inept and negligent educators, and conditions of incredible poverty. What struck me most was the near absence of Native perspectives. This was a document fully written in the voice of the federal government. With that in mind, I came to see the report as a discursive act of an institution developing the grounds for its own authority.

This is a perspective opened up by discourse analysis. There are many variations on the concept of discourse that share a fluid understanding of interaction between language, symbols, images, and other signs as well as the underlying social relationships from which such products emerge.[12] I use Fairclough's interpretation of discourse as a combination of vocabulary, grammar, structure, and actions that collectively convey meanings based in cultural frames from which they are produced.[13] Language doesn't emerge from a vacuum; it is the product of social positions and institutional roles that produce language in different forms. Like the values that guide institutions, discourse is part of the symbolic environment that influences human relations.

Fairclough describes how discourse can be analyzed at three different levels. The first level is that of text and includes the actual words, phrases, and grammatical structure. At the second level are "discursive acts," which go beyond text to include the actions and images that accompany how language is made visible and disseminated. How a text is produced, distributed, and ultimately consumed all matter for the meanings that are conveyed. For example, the text of the Meriam Report represents not only the thousands of human hours of fieldwork involved in its production, but, as I will argue, the relationships of power implied in work being done in a distant "field" by a team of "specialists" representing a government department.

Fairclough uses the term "social practices" for the third level, the all-encompassing domain from which the languages of a certain community are created. Various discursive acts — the specific actions that produce language in a given context — reflect social power dynamics; they are produced within frameworks that shape what we are capable of experiencing and understanding. Foucault called such frameworks "orders of discourse;"[14] I prefer the term ideology. Discourse and ideology exist in a confusing and uneasy relationship; if ideologies are

[11] Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, *Indian Education: A National Tragedy - A National Challenge*. S. Rep. No. 91-501. (1969), 12.
[12] Rebecca Rogers. "Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis in Educational Research." In *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education*. Edited by Rebecca Rogers. (Routledge, 2004): 1-20.
[13] Norman Fairclough. *Discourse and Social Change*. (Polity, 1993). Fairclough adopts a Critical perspective, thus referring to his approach as critical discourse analysis. I share a similar interest in power relations, and the constitutive nature of language. Though I do not claim to be neutral, neither do I elect to use the term Critical as I see the analysis open to multiple interpretations.
[14] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

meaningful systems of belief, then discourse is their symbolic and linguistic manifestation.[15]

Because discourse can produce a network of shared but contingent truths, ideas, and identities, discourse takes on greater significance when backed by the authority of institutions.[16] I explore these concepts in the Meriam Report by asking what is the significance of the structure, tone, and language use in the document? What can we tell about the values shaping the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse? What identities, relationships, and shared realities does the document create? Through probing such questions, I contend that the Meriam Report draws on ideologies that persist in education and parallels stories about education told in the present day. For these reasons, I begin by discussing the historical context in which the Meriam Report was produced.

Background and Context of the Meriam Report

The Meriam Report arrived at an important transition in Native American education from a period of forced boarding schools and battles over compulsory education to the beginning of the expansion of mass public education.[17] In some ways, its publication created divergent histories of Native education in the United States and Canada.[18] Still, it was less a major turning point in Native American policy than a new type of institutional report that layered different discursive practices over old notions of the role of White America in its relationship with its Indigenous population. It was a new type of document, created by a new type of institution, written at a time of growth in American educational bureaucracy.[19]

Understanding the historical context of the Meriam Report gives a sense of the ideological field in which it was created. The 1920s brought increased awareness of the plight of Native Americans, a flourishing of muckraking journalism, and a new faith in the growing administrative state. The United States was approaching almost fifty years into an explicit policy of Indigenous assimilation and there was growing pressure to change. We can reinterpret these developments within the frame of settler colonialism, the idea that nations like the United States were undertaking imperial projects of land appropriation that necessitated the removal or elimination of Indigenous populations.[20]

The prominence of this drive is captured in the persistent recurrence of a singular phrase: "The Indian Problem." This phrase had been in use since the arrival of European colonists in North America. It was employed to describe different issues that arose as White settlers encountered Natives — from warfare to government corruption to treaties — and flexibly accommodated a variety of responses.[21] Pairing "Indian" and "problem" discursively linked

[15] Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt. "Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology…" *British Journal of Sociology* (1993): 473-499; Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places,* 9.
[16] Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change;* see also Teun A. Van Dijk. "Ideology and Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 11, no. 2 (2006): 115-140; James Paul Gee. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. (Routledge, 2014).
[17] Adams, *Education and Extinction.*
[18] Andrew Woolford. *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2015). 80-87
[19] David B. Tyack. *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. (Harvard University Press, 1974).
[20] Patrick Wolfe, "After the Frontier: Separation and Absorption in US Indian policy." *Settler Colonial Studies,* 1, no. 1 (2011).
[21] Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment,* 47-48; Robert Hays, *Editorializing "The Indian Problem,"* (Southern

Indians to any number of challenges that Whites encountered as they sought to gain more land. The discursive link of the Indigenous to the problematic continued with the Meriam Report as its driving metaphor, a metaphor that characterized and reconfirmed White views on how to treat Native peoples. This phrasing symbolically created a background of trouble with Natives as the subject and origin of a problem that demanded resolution. Like in other settler colonial states, one response was to employ concepts like *terra nullius* and the "Doctrine of Discovery" to resolve moral questions arising from taking the land of others.[22] At other times, the response was simply war. From Andrew Jackson through the Southwest and the wars on the plains, armed conflict was often the answer to the "problem".[23]

Military action, which was expensive and cost White lives, and was becoming increasingly difficult to justify morally.[24] By the 1870s, most Natives had been subdued and confined by tentative treaties, and the US Government backed away from further campaigns. Turning instead to a collection of new technologies that allowed more precise map-making as well as record-keeping of land titles, and other legal instruments. These culminated in the land allotment policies of the Dawes Act, which restricted Natives to small parcels of land and freed the remainder for Whites — even land that had been granted under treaties.[25] The policies severed Natives from land they had freely used for generations. Serving as a "mighty pulverizing engine for breaking up the tribal mass,"[26] policy and legislation further provided the rationalizations for White appropriation of land. With allotment policies, as Patrick Wolfe has written, the "Indian problem was discursively reconstituted as administrative rather than political."[27]

The "Indian Problem" evoked a strong humanitarian response expressed in conferences, conventions, religious organizations, and policy reports; in these efforts, education became a consensus solution. One reason for this was that education was connected to a desire to turn Natives into agriculturalists, who would own their own plots of land and actively participate in the market economy. This was based on a specific notion of civilization that education was meant to convey. As Secretary of Interior Carl Schurz wrote in the 1870s, education was a way to "introduce to the growing generation civilized ideas, wants, and aspirations."[28] Driving the idea of bringing civilization to the Native population, however, was a desire to fundamentally transform Native Americans into Whites through a fully assimilative education. This desire was grounded in religious Universalism that held all people were truly equal, and that with excellent education Natives could overcome their savagery and become full members of modern

Illinois University Press, 2007).

[22] Allan Greer, "Settler Colonialism and Empire in Early America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 383-390; Edward Cavanagh, "Possession and Dispossession in Corporate New France, 1600–1663: Debunking a 'Juridical History' and Revisiting *terra nullius*." *Law and History Review* 32, no. 1 (2014): 97-125; Andrew Fitzmaurice. "The Genealogy of *terra nullius*." *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2007): 1-15.

[23] Peter Cozzens. *The Earth is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West*. (Atlantic Books, 2016).

[24] Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*; Jacqueline Fear-Segal. *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

[25] Ward Churchill. *Kill the Indian, save the man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*. (City Lights, 2004). Also, see Wolfe, "After the Frontier," 33; Philp, *John Collier's Crusade*; Francis Paul Prucha. *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*. Vol. 2. (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). 580-598.

[26] Theodore Roosevelt, "First Annual Message," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/206187

[27] Wolfe, "After the frontier," 33.

[28] Prucha, *The Great Father*, 595.

civilization. "Education is the Indian's only salvation," wrote Thomas Jefferson Morgan, leader of the influential Lake Mohonk Conferences. For Morgan: "Education is to be the medium through which the rising generation of Indians are to be brought into fraternal and harmonious relationship with their white fellow-citizens, and with them enjoy the sweets of refined homes, the delight of social intercourse, the emoluments of commerce and trade, the advantages of travel, together with the pleasures that come from literature, science, and philosophy, and the solace and stimulus afforded by true religion."[29]

Efforts at Native assimilation through education intensified at the end of the nineteenth century. Dozens of new schools for Natives were opened nationwide, including a handful far removed from reservations. Bureaucrats became convinced of the power of education,[30] and Native student enrolments rose dramatically along with increased budget allocations and the government take-over of many formerly religious schools.[31] The effort was brutal. Lt. Col. Richard Henry Pratt, who opened and ran the Carlisle Boarding School, considered education another front in the war on Natives. An army officer, he managed his school with a military spirit; his credo was "Kill the Indian, save the man," and his autobiography was revealingly titled *Battlefield and Classroom*. Force was essential to schooling: the government would withhold rations for families who refused to send their children to school, strict surveillance and discipline were prevalent, children were frequently abused and tortured in school, and those who tried to run away faced cruel punishments if caught.[32] Yet faith in education persisted because of the underlying humanitarian and civilizing myths of schooling, leading Fear-Segal to write "the ethnocidal task of the schools was sanitized by being narrated within the ideological frame of national expansion or 'manifest destiny.'"[33]

The word "Indian" is a problematic word in our modern times for many reasons, and although it was commonly used for generations, it carries important connotations. First is an ambiguity about whether the Indian is perceived as *causing* the problem or whether they *are* the problem. Years of raids, resistance, refusal to attend schools, and Native pride are all constructed as obstacles to education and civilization, problems that must be addressed. A second consideration is how the term constructed a mythical, exoticized Other, reinforced in songs, stories, images, and other cultural artifacts. An enduring difference was repeatedly created through the use of the term "Indian" and all the related cultural artifacts that made declarations about "Indian" characteristics, mentalities, and practices, with the subtext being that the Indian himself was the problem simply by nature of being Indian.[34]

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[29] *Proceedings of the Lake Mohonk Conference*, (1889), 16-17, quoted in Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club,* 75.
[30] DeJong writes: "The solution to the 'Indian problem,' at least in the minds of federal policymakers, Indian Office administrators, and Indian reformers, [was] a highly formalized and ritualized education designed … to stamp out all things Indigenous." See David H. DeJong "'Unless they are kept alive:' Federal Indian Schools and Student Health, 1878-1918." *American Indian Quarterly* (2007): 257.
[31] Adams, *Education for Extinction,* 41-58; Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club.*
[32] See for example, Adams, *Education for Extinction,* 41-58; Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club.* Also, Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light*; Churchill. *Kill the Indian, save the man*.
[33] Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club,* vi.
[34] See for example Elizabeth S. Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*. (Routledge, 2018). 2-5; James A. Clifton, ed., *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*. (Routledge, 2017); Robert F. Berkhofer. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. (Vintage, 1979).

There existed another ideological belief that the very existence of Native Americans was a problem that needed to be solved through the simple logic of elimination via assimilation. What in the past had been accomplished through war was transferred to the institution of education where Native Americans as a race could be eliminated by learning to be White.[35] For example, in a 1910 pamphlet titled *The Indian and His Problem*, the former commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis Leupp wrote: "If we can watch our body of dependent Indians shrink even by one member at a time, we may congratulate ourselves that the complete solution is only a question of patience."[36] For assimilation to be effective, the end product had to be the elimination of Natives.

Informed by new scientific theories of racial inferiority, the nature of the "Indian Problem" changed again as ideas began to shift in the early twentieth century. Because Native Americans were believed to be incapable of ever fully integrating into society,[37] efforts to educate Native Americans became less assimilationist and more directed towards channeling students into unskilled sectors of the economy. Enrolment in boarding schools dropped, education budgets shrank, and neglect and abuse increased as the curriculum in schools shifted to more vocational and manual skilling appropriate for specific economic jobs.[38] Rates of contagions soared and, combined with abuses, created shocking mortality rates in some schools as high as 20 percent.[39]

Humanitarians and activists took note of corruption on reservations and the betrayal of Native rights.[40] In 1915, a new commissioner of Indian Affairs wrote: "There is something fundamental here: We cannot solve the Indian problem without Indians. We cannot educate their children unless they are kept alive."[41] Pressure mounted and by the early 1920s, Secretary Hubert Work of the Department of Interior appointed an advisory council to study the issue. Called the Commission of One Hundred, it was meant to be "a landmark in the history of the Government's effort to handle the Indian question."[42] Their report, published in 1923 and titled *The Indian Problem: Resolution of the Committee of One Hundred*, was co-opted by conservatives on the council who watered down its findings. The committee had members who believed firmly in assimilation through quality education and others who openly advocated for the US government to rid itself of the Indian Problem by ending its support of Native Americans altogether.[43] The disdain in the press was withering, and, with faith in the Indian Affairs deteriorating,[44] Secretary Work appointed more reviews and reports. In 1926, recognizing the lack of trust in its recommendations, the Board of Indian Commissioners wrote to Secretary Work: "[A] report from a non-Government, disinterested organization, with a field force of experts, would carry

[35] Wolfe, "After the frontier," 21-26.
[36] Francis Ellington Leupp. *The Indian and His Problem*. (C. Scribner's Sons, 1910).
[37] Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
[38] DeJong, "'Unless they are kept alive'"
[39] DeJong, "'Unless they are kept alive;'" Adams, *Education for Extinction*; Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club*
[40] For example, see "The Tragedy of the Indian," *Scientific American*, 134, 1, (January, 1926), 5-7; John Collier, "America's Treatment of Her Indians." *Current History and Forum*, 18, no. 5 (1923). 771; Rose C. Feld. "U.S. Trying to Salvage 240,000 Indian Wards." *The New York Times,* (March 16, 1924). See also Downes, "A Crusade for Indian Reform," Philp, *John Collier's Crusade*.
[41] Quoted in DeJong, "'Unless they are kept alive,'" 256
[42] Prucha, *The Great Father*, 805.
[43] For example, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Burke was quoted in 1923 as saying "I believe in making the Indian take his chance, just the same as white folks do.... Don't fool yourself. The Indian makes good when he has the chance." see Downes, "A Crusade for Indian Reform", 385.
[44] See Prucha, *The Great Father*, 809-811; Bertolet, *After the Meriam Report*, 115.

great weight not only with Congress but also with the general public."[45]

Secretary Work convinced the Institute of Government Research, a non-partisan research organization, to conduct a detailed and privately-funded survey study, which would be carried out in "a thoroughly impartial and scientific spirit."[46] It was to be an objective study led by experts, and including a former US Census statistician and Harvard graduate, Lewis Meriam. The "Indian Problem" had been remade, this time the object of careful, scientific, and institutional attention, an object onto which the administrative apparatus of the US government could apply its most modern techniques. Thus, the discursive grounds were laid for the Meriam Report, a document whose official title is no coincidence: *The Problem of Indian Administration.*

The Meriam Report as a Discursive Act (II)

Lewis Meriam began work on the report in 1926 by assembling a team of specialists in fields like economics, health, family life, and education. Beginning in October, 1926, the team traveled the West and conducted nine months of fieldwork in various reservations. They started in Norman, Oklahoma and then visited thirty different sites and reservations as they traveled to the Pacific Northwest, down through California and the Southwest, before ending the following May at the Rosebud agency in South Dakota. In the summer the team drafted their reports, with Meriam editing their work in the Fall before publication in early 1928.[47]

The final product is striking. To analyze the discourse of this document is to look at the actual text as well as its structure, tone, and presentation. Tables of neatly arranged statistics are everywhere. The massive, 857-page report is divided into sections based on the work of various specialists, and neatly arranged tables of statistics appear throughout. The first page describes the Institute of Government Research and lists its officers and trustees. The report opens with a gracious letter of introduction from Institute Director W.F. Willoughby, which clearly marks the solution-oriented objective of the report: "The object of the Institute was not to say whether the Indian Service has done well with the funds at its disposal but rather to look to the future and insofar as possible to indicate what remains to be done to adjust the Indians to the prevailing civilization."[48]

These elements form a style of "moderate tone and scientific impartiality"[49] with frequent references to figures, actual observations from fieldwork, and absence of blame for past actions. These stylistic choices were critical. For the report to be palatable to a wide range of people, it had to avoid major offense to anyone. One historian remarked the Meriam Report was a "masterpiece of reform propaganda…[its] high-minded scientific accuracy was never seriously questioned. Its non-controversial tone commanded the respect of both supporters and critics of the Indian Bureau."[50] This stance helped avoid rancor even as it opened with a memorably stark

[45] *Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners*, (1926), 13, quoted in Downes, "A Crusade for Indian Reform," 342.
[46] Letter from Secretary of the Interior to Institute for Government Research in 1926. Quoted in Bertolet, *After the Meriam Report,* 116. The Institute for Government Research would later become part of the Brookings Institute. The report was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.
[47] Donald L Parman and Lewis Meriam. "Lewis Meriam's Letters during the Survey of Indian Affairs 1926-1927 (Part I)." *Arizona and the West 24*, no. 3 (1982): 253-280.
[48] Lewis Meriam. *The Problem of Indian Administration. Report of a Survey Made at the Request of Honorable Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior*. (Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), vii.
[49] Prucha, *The Great Father*, 810.
[50] Downes, "A Crusade for Indian Reform," 342.

line: "An overwhelming majority of the Indians are poor, even extremely poor, and they are not adjusted to the economic and social system of the dominant white civilization."[51]

Also contained in the sentence is a reminder of the superiority of White society, signaled in the use of the word "dominant" and further underscored by positioning Natives as the subjects who bore the burden of adjustment. "The whole Indian problem is essentially an educational one"[52] the report states at a later point, a phrase that discursively positions education as the key vehicle for such adjustment. The ideology of progress and assimilation can be clearly seen in the discourse about education, and I now turn to a closer look at the section devoted to education.

Ideologies of Progress and Assimilation in Discourse of Education

Analyzing the discourse of the education section of the Meriam Report shows how better training, higher qualifications, and larger budgets were central themes in the posed solutions to the Indian Problem. The appearance of these themes will seem familiar to scholars of educational policy from several eras of the last century, and their presence in this specific document is a fascinating artifact of a nascent educational institution conveying full faith in their ability to lead progress. Professor Carson Ryan of Swarthmore College authored the section on education. Ryan, a graduate of Harvard and Columbia, had held several different advisory and editorial positions, and had "participated in many educational surveys".[53] Several pages are devoted to describing the impressive credentials of each specialist — the word used to describe the authors — with Ryan's entry extending in dense block text beyond a page in length.

The education section is organized into several sub-sections with headings such as "Need for an Educational Census," "School Organization in the Indian Service," and "Teaching Methods." There are righteous attacks on boarding school management, the paltry funding allotted for food and housing,[54] and abusive child labor. One subsection is titled "Can the Indian be 'educated'?" and theories of racial difference, studies of IQ, and interviews with "full-bloods" are all drawn upon to argue that, yes, "The Indian is essentially capable of education."[55] The pursuit of this question foregrounds an unresolved tension between the persistent insistence on racial difference, upheld through emphases on blood quanta and intelligence profiles of racial groups, and the belief in humanitarian equality: "Whether certain Indian characteristics of today are racial or merely the natural result of experiences — and the probabilities are strongly in favor of the latter assumption — it is the task of education to help the Indian, not by assuming that he is fundamentally different, but that he is a human being very much like the rest of us, with a cultural background quite worthwhile for its own sake and as a basis for changes needed in adjusting to modern life…"[56]

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[51] Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, 3.
[52] *Ibid*., 348.
[53] *Ibid*., 84.
[54] *Ibid*., 11. One of the most shocking findings of the report was that some boarding schools were trying to feed and board students for a mere 11 cents per day. "The survey staff finds itself obliged to say frankly and unequivocally that the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate."
[55] *Ibid*., 352. The report notes that "...in a study of over a thousand full-blood children of the southwestern and plains tribes…the ratio between the Indian mental age and that of the whites was 100 to 114, or that the whites were 14 per cent better than the Indians."
[56] *Ibid.*, 354.

This passage ambivalently affirms the existence of a class of "Indian characteristics," one that is very different but "very much like the rest of us," while also reinforcing the responsibility of White expertise to be applied to the task of education. In fulfilling the responsibility to "help the Indian," Natives are positioned as dependent. Because Natives are expected to ultimately "adjust to modern life," the superiority of the dominant civilization is reinforced, secure in an image of national goodness.

These themes recur in various forms throughout this section of the report. Consider the following passage:

> The impression a visitor almost inevitably gets upon entering the classroom of an Indian school is that here is a survival of methods and schoolroom organization belonging … to a former period. The nailed-down desks, in rows; the old-type "recitation"; the unnatural formality between teacher and pupil, the use of mechanistic words and devices, as "class rise!," "class pass!"; the lack of enriching materials, such as reading books and out-of-doors material, all suggest a type of school-keeping that still exists, of course, but has been greatly modified in most modern school systems, if not abandoned altogether, as the result of what has been made known in the past twenty-five years about learning and behavior.[57]

The structure of this paragraph is one frequently repeated: an improper or obsolete method is contrasted with the expert knowledge held by specialists. Here, the outdated techniques of teaching are highlighted in the images of nailed-down desks and recitation. Native American education is depicted as a system of deficits, one of antiquated materials that are not up to modern standards. "Modern" is a linguistic symbol signaling new knowledge of human learning and behavior generated by twenty-five years of scientific study. The metaphor of progress is fully evoked, according to which reservation schools are lagging behind the ascendant mainstream schools in their organization, supplies, and administration.

Such themes are present again in this passage focused on facilities:

> Old buildings, often kept in use long after they should have been pulled down…; crowded dormitories; conditions of sanitation that are usually perhaps as good as they can be under the circumstances, but certainly below accepted standards; boilers and machinery out-of-date and in some instances unsafe, to the point of having long since been condemned, but never replaced; many medical officers who are of low standards of training and relatively unacquainted with the methods of modern medicine, to say nothing of health education for children; lack of milk sufficient to give children anything like the official "standard" of a quart per child per day, almost none of the fresh fruits and vegetables that are recommended as necessary in the menus taught to the children in the classroom; the serious malnutrition, due to the lack of food and use of wrong foods; schoolrooms seldom showing knowledge of modern principles of lighting and ventilating.[58]

Once again, archaic elements are highlighted; facilities are "out-of-date," "condemned," or "unsafe," as Native schools are found severely lacking. Again, there is a reference to the latest knowledge, this time referred to as the "accepted standards" and applied to buildings, school

[57] *Ibid*., 378-379
[58] *Ibid*., 392

medical officers, and health education. A veil of ignorance is cast over the Native schools as scientifically determined standards for nutrition are unmet where children are given insufficient quantities of food. Modern principles are invoked yet again, this time with reference to lighting and ventilation.

One final excerpt shows these same themes recurring, this time in reference to the bureaucratic organization of the Native school system:

> The principle of the salary schedule should be applied to the Indian education service, so that professionally qualified teachers and other members of the educational staff … can count upon salary increases for capable work…the greatest difficulty is not the low entrance salary so much as the fact that advancement is almost unknown. …it is the regular thing to find everywhere in the Indian Service elementary teachers of many years' experience receiving the same $1,200 paid to the beginning teacher. Nothing could be so destructive of morale as this. The Indian school service is almost alone among modern educational systems in not having a definite salary schedule. The Research Division of the National Education Association, which has made a special study of the matter, is authority for the statement that practically all large cities and approximately 70 per cent of all communities over 2,500 population have salary schedules.[59]

The modern/obsolete dynamic is used again; here, the modernist principle concerns salary structures rather than building codes or instructional techniques. The findings of a prominent Research Division cement the authority of the salary schedule principle backed by statistics from a recent study. The numbers themselves are another type of symbol conveying the legitimacy of the principle. Once again, the Indian Service is isolated from the benefits of most modern school systems with massive consequences for morale. In one hundred pages of the education section, numerous passages follow this discursive pattern: a problem inherent in Native schools is highlighted, modern principles of education and administration are evoked, and a norm-referenced solution is recommended. Whether better ventilation, up-to-date textbooks, or policy towards remuneration, there is assumed to be a correct, scientifically determined, and legitimate way of management, and As Ryan writes at one point, Native schools are found "at variance with modern views of education and social work."[60]

The structure of the text — identifying a problem and contrasting it with modern principles — shows the way to a logical solution: a strengthened and enlarged bureaucratic apparatus that mimicked the culture and techniques of dominant society. More qualified personnel were needed, working conditions had to be strengthened, and funding increased. In short, "...principles that have been found to be successful in educational administration on a large scale should be applied,"[61] a phrase that frames the education of Native Americans as an identifiable and knowable strand of the "Indian Problem" that could be solved by bureaucratic expansion. The detailed study, precise tabulations, and rational comparisons with new ideas about education, all expressed in a particular discursive format, not only reflected the ideologies of progress through modern administrative principles but also created a new ideological context that made possible

[59] *Ibid.*, 365.
[60] *Ibid.,* 403.
[61] *Ibid*., 423.

the swelling of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In effect, the words of the report expanded the bureaucracy devoted to Native American education, which was justified by the ideas of progress.

The Institutional Narratives of a Conquering Nation

The existence of the Meriam Report is remarkable. It was the product of an immense commitment of time, resources, and effort, fueled by values and ideas of progress. The report, from its production of the text to its subsequent use in testimonies, congressional hearings, and debates on policy, became a discursive representation of an ideology that believed Native Americans could be reformed through advanced principles of modern administration. This was a colonial ideology, one that spoke of the power of progress while maintaining a social hierarchy grounded in racial characteristics. It held in tension the faith in modern progress and humanitarianism alongside colonial beliefs in the essential difference of ethnic and racial others.

The publication had a significant impact on the administration of Native affairs. The national press responded favorably to the humanitarian spirit and practical solutions, even while calling for measured reforms. The new Hoover Administration responded to the report with increases in the budget for Indian Services, including desperately needed funding for school nutrition and clothing. The workforce of the Indian administration increased by 300% as two thousand new employees were hired and salaries increased by 25%.[62] Carson Ryan, the author of the section on education, was appointed Director of Indian Education and subsequently brought reforms to boarding school administration, curriculum, the treatment of students, and teacher qualifications.[63] Sixteen boarding schools were closed in the subsequent years and the enrolment of Native children shifted to the dozens of newly opened day schools.[64] It became an important touchstone in the passing of the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, and in the fifteen years that followed Congress referred to the document frequently in its deliberations on Native American policy.[65]

While considered a turning point by some, others have characterized the report and the resulting changes as acts of political survival rather than meaningful change. The Department of Interior commissioned the report only after years of unrelenting journalistic and political pressure, a "defensive response of a government bureaucracy under attack from its own constituents."[66] Lewis Meriam himself was a thorough bureaucrat and the technical, studiously objective report reflects his career background. However, Prucha's analysis reveals that there were no new policies or innovative ideas, only a doubling down on existing efforts.[67] The proposed solution to administrative neglect was more administration.

Using the perspective of discourse analysis helps move beyond questions about the success or failure of the report. Instead, the Meriam Report can be seen as an artifact of the ideological

[62] Philp, *John Collier's Crusade,* 96; Donald T. Critchlow, "Lewis Meriam, Expertise, and Indian Reform." *The Historian* 43, no. 3 (1981): 325-343.
[63] Bertolet, "After the Meriam Report"
[64] S. Rep. No. 91-501, 13.
[65] Prucha claims that over 20,000 pages of reports on Indian affairs were generated during this period following the publication of the Meriam Report. Prucha, *The Great Father,* 810-812.
[66] Critchlow, "Lewis Meriam, Expertise, and Indian Reform," 324.
[67] Prucha, *The Great Father,* 810-812. Berkhofer describes the report in this way: "If this report employed new phrases to express its goals and new social engineering to discuss the Indian problem, the ultimate ends resembled those traditionally espoused for Indians." See Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 182.

context in which it was created, a window into contemporary beliefs both about Native populations and more importantly about the nation itself. Even while spurring incremental changes, the document reflects deeper narratives about the power of the institution of education to create a righteous and moral nation with stewardship over its Indigenous peoples. In the years since its publication, I have come to view the Meriam Report as less a policy document than a discursive representation of a nation committed to righting the wrongs of the past and using education to drive forward into a better future. In this way, it's a fully imperial document created by a colonial nation consolidating its power.

I make this statement by connecting the report to the various constructions of "The Indian Problem" that have framed colonial efforts towards Native Americans. The Meriam Report was a new type of solution posed to the problem, or a set of familiar solutions posed in a new way to a familiar problem. It was also the product of a modern bureaucracy seeking to apply its expertise to an old challenge. Education was the fulcrum for this response. I selected three passages to examine, but I could have chosen from dozens of examples where training, qualified teachers, or precise methods were recommended for use with Native children and adults to prepare them for civilization. But looking even deeper than the recommended solutions, the Meriam Report reveals a discursive structure that tells a story about the efforts of the United States' government and dominant White society directing its superiority towards a moral good. I want to close by highlighting three themes in that story related to progress, assimilation, and benevolence. Together, these themes are strands in the fabric of national myth-making that uphold the legitimacy of a conquering society.

Progress is everywhere in the text of the report. The word 'modern' is used 52 times in the education section alone. Time and again the text speaks of the modern principles, standards, and proven techniques used in the most forward-thinking school districts. Repeatedly, the report urges better training, more stringent qualifications for teachers, and the implementation of an organized administrative apparatus. The solution was to bring rational thinking to the issue, succinctly described here:

> In the long run the nation will settle the Indian problem or not by its willingness to take hold of the issue in a responsible and business-like way. It is business-like to apply to the task in hand the best methods that can be found. At the time the Indian work began there were no accepted principles of education and social work that could be used, but in the past forty or fifty years a body of experience in both education and social work has developed that can and should be applied in order to speed up the solution of the Indian problem.[68]

Implicit in this theme is the faith that with the right techniques, those already in use in the idealized realms of affluent neighborhoods and successful businesses, the Indian Problem would disappear. The "Indian Problem" clearly stands out as a discrete issue, and it can be solved by the new knowledge acquired in the experiences of a growing nation. Other issues — those of historical violence, neglect, racism, land appropriation, and more — are less avoided than erased from the framing of the problem. Part of this erasure was political; the report was written with the goal of being accepted by a wide range of interests in Congress. Another possibility is that, rather than active erasure, the ideological fields from which the authors operated contained a blindness to other truths about the conditions of Native Americans. From the bureaucratic

[68] Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, 429.

background of the authors to the actual fieldwork, the report was birthed in a context where White America was bringing a valuable commodity to Native Americans: modern civilization. Here is Meriam, writing a letter to Washington D.C. during the course of the field work, describing a visit to a school on the Tulalip reservation near Seattle: "The teacher [Nina M. Hurlbut] was a highly trained woman and had taken a special course under Madame Montessori herself. How under the sun the Indian Service succeeds in getting a teacher like that for $100 a month it is difficult to understand, unless one gives great credit to the missionary spirit."[69]

This observation brings out the ideology of progress underlying the project as Meriam comments on the power of a "highly trained" teacher, a cutting-edge curriculum in the form of the new Montessori method, and the importance of attractive salaries. As Tyack writes of the era, a new class of "administrative progressives" evangelized about the power of schools: "The schoolhouse was to America what the cathedral was to the Middle Ages."[70] Among educators and bureaucrats, schools represented salvation, recalling Thomas Jefferson Morgan at the Lake Mohonk Conferences four decades earlier.

Assimilation is a second theme, continuing a long tradition of rhetoric about absorbing Native Americans into mainstream society. The Meriam Report was supposed to be a step towards cultural pluralism; it condemned the land allotment policy, showed a level of respect for Native values, culture, and history. It advocated for self-government and a route to self-determination that became opened with the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934.

Self-determination, however, was conceptualized within narrow confines that replicated White ways of legislative government. Many tribes rejected the terms altogether.[71] Discussions about self-determination also brought to the forefront the issue of blood quanta, a quasi-scientific idea about the essence of Indianness as represented by the image of elemental blood mixing in the veins of people. Discursive roots for this thinking are apparent throughout the Meriam Report. Various tables and statistics divide and tabulate Native populations by their tribes. "Full-bloods" and "mixed-bloods" are contrasted in the text to show that some classes of Natives will require more work to be educated. For example, here is a passage describing the possibility of enrolling Native American students in mainstream public schools: "To hand over the task of Indian schooling to the public school without providing public health nurse service, family visiting, and some oversight of housing, feeding, and clothing, results unfortunately for the Indian child, *especially the fullblood*. He becomes irregular in school attendance, loses interest, feels that he is inferior, leaves school as soon as possible; or, in some cases, he is regarded by the white parents as a disease menace…"[72] Indianness is constructed to be a barrier to assimilation, and to be full-blooded is an even more formidable barrier. To be Indian is to carry a propensity to be disengaged, a school dropout, or simply a menace.

Blood quanta as a definition of Indianness furthered the project to know Native populations through better accounting, tracking, and surveillance.[73] These ideas arose as new racial sciences displaced old beliefs in universal humanity to construct a gradient of difference between Whites and others.[74] Assimilation was upheld as a goal, but it existed in tension with the belief that the

[69] Parman and Meriam, "Lewis Meriam's Letters," 269.
[70] Tyack, *The One Best System*, 16.
[71] Wolfe, "After the Frontier"; Berkhofer. *The White Man's Indian,* 185-193.
[72] Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, 418, emphasis added.
[73] Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 26.
[74] See Hoxie, *A Final Promise* or Swartz, *Education and Empire*.

essence of Indians would persist through their blood, a mythical Indian-hood to be saved through White education yet never fully integrated into White society.[75] The Meriam Report is both a product and producer of this project, employing new phrases and structures steeped in discourses of modernity, progress, and civilization, that claimed a respect for Native difference while still believing in the Otherness of Native Americans. Or, perhaps more precisely, the report claimed a respect for Native Americans *because* of a belief in their difference. "Cultural pluralism," wrote the historian Richard Berkhofer, Jr., "seemed but the icing upon the cake of assimilation.[76]

This leads to a final theme of benevolence grafted onto the myth of Indianness. The Meriam Report continued a long discursive tradition of casting Indigenous people as deficient; whether savage, childlike, innocent, or simply uncivilized, multiple cultural fictions have been written of inferior Natives. Many of which have supported narratives of benevolence. Discursively confining Natives to perpetual childhood justified colonial interventions in schooling.[77] Indeed, several authors have argued that the very process of saving Natives is necessary in the production of both Whiteness and the legitimation of White superiority.[78]

Benevolence can be interpreted as a mechanism of soothing cultural guilt. As I've shown in the excerpts from the report, there exist recurring themes of duty, obligation, responsibility, and atonement, a point made explicit in the closing paragraph of the executive summary: "The people of the United States have the opportunity, if they will, to write the closing chapters of the history of the relationship of the national government and the Indians. The early chapters contain little of which the country may be proud. It would be something of a national atonement to the Indians if the closing chapters should disclose the national government supplying the Indians with an Indian service which would be a model for all governments concerned with the development and advancement of a retarded race."[79]

The passage clearly speaks of redemption while unambiguously positioning Natives as a backward people. What stands out most is the metaphor of unwritten final chapters in the nation's history. To write this history, the act of education — its design, provision, and administration — are all vital to this story. The Meriam Report in its entirety aspires to be the opening lines of those final chapters, a symbol of a compassionate nation.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, colonial administrators crafted similar narratives of progress, assimilation, and benevolence to establish the institution of education.[80] That dynamic has continued into post-colonial times as nations have built institutional structures on the myths of education as part of rightful claims to authority.[81] More recently, global discourses have put education to work in service of ideas such as development, poverty reduction, and partnership.[82] These contemporary narratives update the social relationship

[75] Bird, *Dressing in Feathers,* 2-5; See also Homi K. Bhahba, *The Location of Culture*. (Routledge, 2012); 122-126, where he describes colonial efforts to make Natives "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite."
[76] Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*,182
[77] See Sarah De Leeuw, "'If anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young': Colonial Constructions of Aboriginal Children and the Geographies of Indian Residential Schooling in British Columbia, Canada." *Children's Geographies* 7, no. 2 (2009), especially 129-131.
[78] See Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*; Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*; and Clifton, *The Invented Indian*.
[79] Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration,*51.
[80] Swartz, *Education and Empire.*
[81] John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 340-363.
[82] For example, see Iveta Silova and William C. Brehm. "From Myths to Models: The (Re)Production of World

created by documents like the Meriam Report where a benevolent government — or an international community — brings cutting-edge techniques to uplift the masses of a new Other. Such narratives also place the Meriam Report in a wider context of transnational efforts to uphold a social order that subdues or eliminates Native populations through assimilation. The institution of education is neither neutral nor inevitable; it is a contingent human organization built upon ideologies of progress and dominance and expressed in the discourse of hundreds of narratives like the Meriam Report. Such ideologies focus the power of education on uplifting the less fortunate, and along the way serve as the background for nation-building.

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