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Effects of Allotment on South Dakota Reservations

The history of allotment is long and complex. Throughout many decades of work, the United States government attempted to assimilate Native Americans throughout the country by using the allotment policy. By attempting to do so, the government strained relationships even further. This paper will discuss many of the ways the United States government failed to implement an effective policy to assimilate Native Americans. The allotment policy failed to assimilate Native Americans on South Dakota reservations.

Many historians have written widely on the subject and offer many perspectives on the history between the United States government and Native Americans. Historian Jill St. Germain is one particular author who focused on these relationships in her book *Broken Treaties: United States and Canadian with the Lakota and the Plain Cree, 1868-1885*. This book discusses both the American and Canadian relations with the plains Indians during the late 19th century. She puts people at the center of the narrative and challenges established historical interpretations of the treaty process.

Another historian that has written on the subject is Francis Paul Prucha in his book *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*. In this book, Prucha gives a detailed history of American Indian Policy dating back to the Revolutionary War. Prucha also focuses on how the United States government has used their power over Native Americans to put them in positions that would be in the best interests of the U.S. government rather than the best interests of the Native Americans. The biggest contribution of the books is probably how Prucha is able to show how

evangelical Protestantism and militant Americanism successively influenced American Indian Policy throughout the nineteenth century.

Another good history of the relationship between the United States government and Native Americans comes from Jeffrey Ostler in his book *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*. In this book, Ostler examines the history of the relations between Indian and non-Indian people. Ostler's main argument in this book is that America's commitment to an expansionist ideology of manifest destiny ultimately led to the armed conflicts throughout the 19th century. He uses an impressive amount of documents and secondary sources to help back his argument.

Lastly, there is Collin G. Calloway who wrote *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost*. In this book, Calloway gives a great look into the Native American perspective. By using sources from Indian records, Calloway gives a new perspective of westward expansion. While most history is written on the subject from the non-Indian perspective, Calloway gives a new and fresh way to look at the history of these relationships.

These historians offer a wide range of information on the history of the United States government and Native Americans. They each have something different to add to the story, but they all ultimately lead to a better understanding of the past. The authors of these books do a terrific job using primary sources and documents and putting them together to help the history make sense.

An examination of available evidence provides a clearer understanding of why allotment failed, and what the United States government could have done to prevent its failure. Although my evidence provides a clear picture of the United States government's

goals and perspective, it does fail to give a good understanding of allotment from the Native American perspective. To fully understand the history of allotment one needs to be able to read about it from both perspectives, and unfortunately my sources could not provide me with that opportunity. My primary documents, however, do give me a solid understanding of what the Indian agents thought about allotment policy and how they reported to the government. And when failures were noted, one can be sure it was truly failure, coming from the perspective of the government.

Why did allotment policy fail? There are two reasons that this paper will touch. The first reason is that the lure of immediate cash one could get from selling or leasing their land did not create the habit of ranching, which continued the differences between the Lakota and their white neighbors. Selling or leasing land was great way to get rich quick. The second reason is that cultural differences remained after 1887, specifically the communal nature of the indigenous population versus the individual property owner hoped for by the American government. It is an open question whether education policies could have altered such a fundamental cultural outlook; however, the attempt was not even made after 1887 because of the massive investment it would have required.

The first step in understanding why allotment failed is to understand exactly what allotment was and why the United States government implemented into their Native American policies. The United States government signed the General Allotment Act, or the Dawes Act, into law in 1887.¹ The Dawes Act was heavily pushed for by cattlemen and territorial residents who wanted to buy and lease these land for themselves. This act authorized the allotment of land in severalty to Indians for farming and ranching on

¹ Herbert T. Hoover, *The Sioux Agreement of 1889 and Its Aftermath* (Pierre, SD: South Dakota Historical Society, 1989), 65.

reservation lands.² It also allowed for the sale of surplus acreage to non-Indian farmers and ranchers.³ This sale of surplus acreage was a way of raising funds for use by Indians, but also as a way to place white farmers and ranchers nearby Indian allotments for Indian farmers to emulate.⁴ The act also put allotments under patents in trust, which meant for twenty-five years, Indians were to live and farm on these allotments before they were granted ownership.⁵

The goal of this act was to assimilate the Native Americans, and to teach them to value private property and to make them independent through subsistence farming. Herbert T. Hoover writes in his article, *The Sioux Agreement of 1889 and Its Aftermath*, that, “The end result envisioned was the dissolution of tribes, the disappearance of reservations, and the blend of Indian people into mainstream society as citizens.”⁶ Starting in 1890, the year after the Sioux Agreement of 1889, no allotments had been made on the Cheyenne River Reservation which was on the west side of the Missouri River. Though many of the people on the reservation were eager to receive their allotments, none would be made until 1900.⁷ This was due to the government delay of sending out a survey team to the reservation to survey the land that would eventually be allotted to the Native Americans.⁸

One of the smaller goals of allotment was to give Native American people their own sense of private land ownership. The act allotted one-fourth of a section of land to

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1900 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 371.

⁸ Ibid.

each head of every family, and one-eighth of a section of land to every person over the age of eighteen.⁹ These allotments were placed under a patent in trust in which they were to live and establish a home, and after twenty-five years they would become subject to laws, both civil and criminal, of the state they resided in.¹⁰ By doing so, the government hoped that each family would understand the sentiment of private land ownership and would come to appreciate it.

Another smaller goal of allotment was that of individual income. Each family was tasked with farming their allotments, which proved difficult on the reservations west of the Missouri River where the soil and climate was not suited for farming. Most families were capable of ranching and in the early years of the allotment period, each reservation was able to produce enough beef for the reservation, and some years were even able to sell to eastern markets.

One of the main goals of allotment was to achieve a self-sustainable income for each Native American family on the reservations. Unfortunately, that is a lot easier said than done. The next few paragraphs will discuss the different ways that the government and the Native Americans attempted to gain income from the allotments. From stock-raising to leasing of lands to working on infrastructure, the Native Americans and government were always looking for a chance to make money.

The Indian agent report from the Cheyenne River Agency in 1890 said that stock raising was good and that it would be the only means for them to arrive at self-support.¹¹

⁹ Dawes Act, Forty-Ninth Congress of the United States of America; At the Second Session. (1887)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1890 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), 42.

Unfortunately, since these Native Americans were living and ranching on lands that were ranched by non-Natives, relationships were tense. There were several instances where non-Natives would push cattle onto Native land or vice versa. This was a constant problem for people on these reservations. In 1891, an Indian agent from the Cheyenne River Agency wrote that, "The facts are Indians can not live and prosper with white men for neighbors, especially where stock raising is the only industry."¹² Another problem that came along with this was that many of these non-Natives did not even own the land that they were grazing on. This was a problem because, until 1901, no allotments were distributed, which meant the United States government would not enforce any consequence on these non-Native cattlemen.

Another opportunity for income presented itself in the early twentieth century when the United States government decided it would be a good idea for the Native Americans living on the reservations to begin to build their own infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.¹³ Although many of these Native Americans were not skilled laborers in the sense of building, they were good workers who appreciated having a job. As one can see, the ultimate goal of allotment was assimilation of the Native American people and the cession of lands from reservations for territorial settlers and the United States government.

Although the government was successful in creating a flourishing stock-raising industry on the reservations for a few decades, the goal of creating self-sustaining

¹² Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1890 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891), 387.

¹³ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1906 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 344.

incomes was never fully achieved. Many families would spend their money as soon as they got it and many times this was due to the lack of education about the value of property and sustainable incomes. Because of this, most families spent what they had and were pushed back into poverty.

A good way to get a grasp of the timeline of allotment is to look at the Annual Reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs which give detailed accounts of each reservation. Beginning in 1900, the allotments were slowly being given out every year. By the end of 1901, 419 total allotments had been given out.¹⁴ In 1902, an additional 328 allotments were given.¹⁵ In 1903, 334 were given out, with this year also being the first year that the leasing of allotments to non-Natives took place.

Many Native Americans supported the leasing of their lands, because it was an easy source of revenue.¹⁶ It did, however, lead to future impoverishment when families decided to sell their allotments rather than continuing to lease them. In 1904, 319 more allotments were given and by the end of the year, the entire eastern half of the Cheyenne River Reservation had been leased.¹⁷ The leases were bringing in total proceeds of about \$90,000 per annum.¹⁸ The head of each family was also allowed to range one hundred head of cattle in the vicinity of their own homes.¹⁹ The year 1904 seemed to be a year of progress toward assimilation with the Indian agent from the Cheyenne River Reservation

¹⁴ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1901 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 358.

¹⁵ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1902 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 327.

¹⁶ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1903 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 298.

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1904 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 322.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

saying that the people on the reservations were showing self-sufficiency by buying goods and materials for themselves and also being eager to work whenever the opportunity presented itself.²⁰ In this aspect, the Native Americans were beginning to become assimilated because they were now purchasing goods for themselves. They were participating in the economy, but were still reliant on government annuities. In 1905, another 404 allotments were given and by the end of this year, almost the entire reservation had been leased.²¹ By the end of 1906, nearly all allotments had been given out, totaling around 2,000 on the Cheyenne River reservation, but these allotments were not helping the government in their goal of assimilation.²²

Along with the problems of inheritance and lack of education came the problems of individual leasing of allotments. In 1926, a special staff lead by Lewis Merriam conducted a survey of the condition of the American Indians.²³ This survey focused on both the social and economic conditions of American Indians across the country, and the results were published in 1928 in the *Merriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration*.²⁴ This survey found that Native Americans across the country were in poor condition in both the social and economic aspects of their lives. Merriam describes the problem many Native Americans in the 1920s faced saying, “The members of an Indian family may own land in several different places, some of it through original allotments and some through inheritance. Because it is scattered and sometimes far

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1905 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 329.

²² Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1906 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 348.

²³ Lewis Merriam, *Merriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1928)

²⁴ Ibid.

removed from the place where the family wishes to dwell, they cannot use it. The present remedies are to sell the parts not used or to lease them.”²⁵ This once again goes back to the problem of land loss that the Native Americans on the reservations are still dealing with today.

One could argue that the biggest failure of assimilation came from the lack of education provided to Native Americans about American culture and society. Because of this lack of education, the people on the reservations did not understand or value private land ownership. They also did not value having a sustainable income and property of their own. Because these people did not value these things, they took less pride in their work, and they would often get rid of much of their land. These next few paragraphs will discuss the aftermath of the allotment period and the state of the Native Americans living on reservations in the late 1920s.

Into the 1920s, the condition of the Native Americans still had not improved like the government had hoped it would. On the Cheyenne River reservation, for example, the average annual income per capita was one-hundred eleven dollars.²⁶ The value of individually owned property was also extremely low with the average value per capita at \$1,123. These poor conditions were due to many different things, but Merriam put part of the blame on the allotting of lands to the Native American people. The problem, however, was not the allotting of land, but the lack of education prior to the allotment of land. Merriam wrote, “Too much reliance was placed on the sheer effect of individual

²⁵ Ibid., 476

²⁶ Ibid., 452.

land ownership and not enough was done to educate the Indians in the use of land.”²⁷ Merriam is saying that although the lands were allotted, the result of it was negative.

In 1887, the government had three aspects that they wanted to focus on when dealing with property of Native Americans. Those three aspects were (1) conservation and protection, (2) production of income, and (3) education of the Indian in the use and management of the property.²⁸ On most reservations, the first aspect was the most highly emphasized while the second and third took were more neglected.²⁹ The reason for this was because conservation and protection were the simplest tasks out of them all and could be done effectively with the least amount of people.³⁰ In reality, however, Merriam writes that emphasis should have been placed on the third aspect, education. He writes, “The primary duty is to educate the Indians in the use and management of their property. The duties of protection and utilization are secondary and should be performed only insofar as they are necessary to permit of effective work in economic education.”³¹ This means that had the Native Americans on the reservation been more educated, then the work would not have been needed as much for the conservation or production of income. These would have come as by-products of education.

One problem of allotment and the lack of education was the fact that many Native Americans did not base their choice of allotments off of agricultural needs as many non-Native landowners of the time would have.³² Instead they often chose land near water

²⁷ Ibid., 460.

²⁸ Ibid., 469.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 470

supplies, available firewood, or native wild food.³³ As a result of this, much of the land that was allotted to the Native Americans was extremely unproductive in agricultural terms, which made it hard to make a living off of farming.³⁴ Some people, however, did get good land, and this was land that many non-Native farmers wanted.³⁵ The allotment acts gave non-Natives several ways to get land away from the Native people. Merriam wrote that in 1928, “In many parts of the Indian country where land has been allotted, it is common to see the productive land that formerly belonged to the Indians owned or leased by whites and to find the Indians withdrawn to the remoter sections which afford comparatively little opportunity for effective development.”³⁶ Because of this, a small number of Natives who were declared competent to manage themselves now had no property.³⁷ Along with that, many younger and unborn Native Americans who were born after the allotments were made had lost their family’s lands before they ever even had a chance to live on the land or farm it.

Native American culture places a high value on communal living, so immediately giving each family their own parcel of land and expecting them to appreciate was a definite fault of the United States government. Merriam also says, “The result has been to put many Indians in possession of allotments of land and of other property before they had advanced sufficiently to feel any real responsibility for the conservation and development of such property.”³⁸ Had the Indians received proper education about the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 471.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 472.

³⁸ Ibid.

value of individual property and land ownership prior to receiving their allotments, they may have better understood and appreciated the land that they received.

Not only did the allotment system create problems for the Native American people, it also created a problem for the United States government. Merriam writes “The rapid change from tribal to individual ownership has also increased the labor as well as the complexity and difficulties of administration by the government. To deal with people in large groups and with property in a few great units is far simpler than to deal with people as individuals and with property in thousands of small units.”³⁹ Merriam is saying that because the government decided to parcel up the millions of acres of land on the reservations, they now had to keep track of each individual allotment, instead of a few large pieces of land. This meant more time and money would need to be spent to keep the reservations and allotment running.

One specific example of this negative effect is the problem of inheritance once a land owning Native American passed away, because once a relative passed away, then the family had to deal with the inheritance. Not only did this cause problems within the family, it also raised the cost of administration to deal with it.⁴⁰ Prior to the allotment of lands, this was not a problem because the tribes were communal and there was no private land ownership. After allotment, many more decisions had to be made. The land would either be partitioned to the heirs, or sold and then the proceeds would be partitioned.⁴¹ If the land was leased, like most allotments were, then the division of lease money had to be dealt with.⁴² Another common problem was whether to permit the land of a deceased

³⁹ Ibid., 461

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Native American to be sold to a non-Native person.⁴³ When the land was sold to a non-Native, then the generations that came after were now landless and would often use the proceeds of the sale of land quickly.⁴⁴ This goes back to the lack of education about the value of private property. These societies were used to a communal society where everyone shared everything. When they were given their own land, they did not understand the value of it, so instead they would just sell it to make money quickly. Merriam sums up the negatives of allotment very well saying, “The policy of allotment was not only expensive in initial application; it is highly expensive in its after effects. Its success has been materially impaired by the failure to provide the educational machinery for adults which was an essential element in the original plan.”⁴⁵

The history of allotment is a long and complicated one. Although it happened over 100 years ago, Native American people are still dealing with the effects to this day. Land was lost that Native Americans are still attempting to regain. Reservations were reduced in size. A lack of both education and careful decision making led to the failure of allotment and the failure to assimilate Native Americans into American society.

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⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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