



C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa. *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xv + 228 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3576-0.

Reviewed by Mikaëla M. Adams (University of Mississippi)

Published on H-AmIndian (October, 2013)

Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe

Viable Alternatives: Exploring Paths Not Taken in Post-Civil War Federal Indian Policy

In *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War*, C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa illuminates the contested nature of federal Indian policy from Reconstruction to the Gilded Age. Complicating standard declensionist narratives of the period, Genetin-Pilawa argues that the intellectual development of federal Indian policy did “not resemble a singular, linear path leading directly toward allotment but rather a crooked path with curves and bends” (p. 3). Although mainstream reformers saw tribal land allotment and the coercive assimilation of Native people as the inevitable solution to the nation’s so-called Indian problem, other historical characters envisioned viable alternatives—ones that recognized tribal sovereignty and allowed time for Indian peoples to interact with non-Natives on their own terms. By highlighting these alternative possibilities and illustrating the great efforts that mainstream reformers made to repress them, Genetin-Pilawa reveals the contingent nature of American colonial governance.

Drawing inspiration from the field of American political development and postcolonial thought, Genetin-Pilawa foregrounds his narrative with a discussion of Indian-state relations in the nineteenth century. He identifies the key contradiction in federal Indian policy: although the United States recognized the autonomous existence of tribal nations in treaties, the Constitution, and court decisions, it simultaneously regarded Indians as “dependent subjects” (p. 15). To resolve this contradiction, nineteenth-century policymakers gradually chipped away at tribal sovereignty by “confining” Indians in time, politics, and the law. Removal treaties and the reservation system assaulted the external sovereignty of tribal nations, while the gradual extension of U.S. jurisdiction over Indian lands eroded internal tribal systems of governance.

As Genetin-Pilawa shows in a case study of the Tonawanda Seneca and their fight against the Ogden

Land Company, Native people did their best to navigate this expanding colonial system. As they resisted dispossession, however, Indian communities frequently found themselves enmeshed in bitter intra-tribal battles over “how to best respond to removal pressures” (p. 29). In the case of the Seneca, Ely S. Parker emerged as an important tribal leader who searched for “a viable alternative that would minimize internal strife and allow the Seneca people to retain as much autonomous control as possible in the face of the evolving assault on tribal sovereignty in the state and nation” (p. 49). Parker later drew on his experience in creating alternatives for his own people when he became the first indigenous commissioner of the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) under the administration of Ulysses S. Grant.

In the following chapters, Genetin-Pilawa identifies two major “constitutive moments” in the post-Civil War period when alternative visions for federal Indian policy emerged as real possibilities. The first of these moments occurred as Americans struggled to make sense of their Civil War sacrifices during Reconstruction. Wartime atrocities in the West had revealed the inefficiency and corruption of federal Indian affairs and policymakers were ripe for change. As commissioner of the OIA, Parker viewed these years as an “opportunity for a potential recasting of the relationship between Indian people and the United States” (p. 3). By examining Parker’s correspondence, reports, and policy initiatives, Genetin-Pilawa reveals that, unlike mainstream reformers, Parker “placed a high value on enforcing treaties,” he “wanted to provide Indigenous nations with as much time as possible to incorporate themselves into the broader United States by their own means,” and he fully believed in “Native people’s capacities” (p. 72). Elite eastern philanthropists like William Welsh and members of the Board of Indian Commissioners, however, insisted that the government had the power to coerce Indians to assimilate,

and they resented efforts to delay this process. By using corruption charges to undermine Parker and his allies, mainstream reformers successfully repressed his alternative vision and instead pushed the country toward further efforts to dispossess, assimilate, and confine indigenous people.

The second constitutive moment arose in the late 1870s and early 1880s as populist activism, labor strife, and reform efforts stimulated debate on the role of the state in social and economic life. During these years, Thomas A. Bland, the editor of a monthly periodical titled *The Council Fire* and founder of the National Indian Defense Association (NIDA), took a vocal role in opposing the proposals of elite reformers who thought they knew what was best for indigenous people. A supporter of working-class and agrarian causes, Bland believed that it was the role of the state “to compensate for the shortcomings of a capitalist economy and level the economic playing field” (p. 120). When it came to Indian affairs, he rejected forced assimilation and instead focused on “using the federal government to provide resources and opportunities for Indigenous nations while simultaneously protecting the integrity of communally held land” (p. 113). In contrast to his alternative view, mainstream reformers like Herbert Welsh (the nephew of William Welsh) and members of the Indian Rights Association (IRA) “hoped to use the federal government to create a society that fit their vision of a proper polity with economically motivated, religious devout, and politically homogenous citizens” (p. 116). To this end, they saw coercive assimilation and the allotment of tribal lands as ways to drive Indians into the market economy and prepare them for U.S. citizenship while simultaneously promoting the economic interests of industrial leaders with ties to western resource extraction and transportation development. Seeing the NIDA’s alternative vision as a threat, the IRA used Washington lobbyists and newspaper exposés to discredit Bland and his allies. Ultimately, the mainstream reformers won the battle. The General Allotment Act passed in 1887 and “a program of coercive assimilation coupled with dispossession would guide the OIA for most of the next fifty years” (p. 155). Nevertheless, the tradition of dissent introduced by activists like

Parker and Bland revealed that no path was inevitable.

In his epilogue, Genetin-Pilawa touches briefly on a third constitutive moment that emerged during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unlike its alternative policy precursors, John Collier’s Indian New Deal successfully challenged mainstream federal Indian policy by ending allotment, restoring “surplus” land, providing funds for new lands, and protecting Indian communities and cultures. For Genetin-Pilawa, Collier’s victory demonstrates “the ways that the tradition of dissent against policies of Indian confinement that were introduced in the 1860s culminated in the institutionalization of an alternative agenda seventy years later” (p. 12). Mainstream reformers may have won late nineteenth-century policy debates, but American settler colonialism remained contingent and contested.

Genetin-Pilawa’s meticulously organized and well-argued monograph makes a number of key historiographical interventions. He challenges scholars to rethink the politics of late nineteenth-century federal Indian policy and to recognize that there was nothing inevitable about the decisions ultimately made. Activists like Parker and Bland presented viable alternatives that received wide consideration before they were forcibly repressed by mainstream reformers. Genetin-Pilawa also provides valuable insight into the history of tribal sovereignty in the United States. By highlighting the actions of groups like the IRA to oppose alternative policy options, he reveals that the erosion of sovereignty and the confinement of Indians were tragically—active choices rather than the unintended consequences of well-meaning reform efforts. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, his work sheds light on the role Indian policy played in larger questions of late nineteenth-century state development. Far from being a marginal debate, federal Indian policy engaged prominent politicians across the country—at stake was the very nature of the newly empowered federal government. As Genetin-Pilawa effectively shows, scholars cannot ignore the role played by federal Indian policy in late nineteenth-century U.S. political history. Indeed, “the Native American experience in this era is critical to our broader historical understanding” (p. 163).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Mikaëla M. Adams. Review of Genetin-Pilawa, C. Joseph, *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39619>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.