

Paul C. Rosier. *Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation, 1912-1954*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. xiii + 346 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-3941-8.



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The Birth of Democracy and the Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation

Paul C. Rosier has written a well-researched, sophisticated political history of the Blackfeet in the early to mid-twentieth century. Shifting tribal history away from the nineteenth-century Indian Wars, he presents a portrait of people finding ways to contend with the paternalistic federal government. By using the tools provided by the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), Rosier maintains that the tribe carved out a significant voice for itself in the face of termination, unscrupulous oil companies, and internal strife. Scholars interested in the development of civil rights or in twentieth-century American Indian history will find much to consider here.

Rosier centers his story on the creation of political institutions to help shape policy on the Blackfeet Reservation. In the 1910s and 1920s, the tribe lacked effective political mechanisms to articulate the will of the people. Not that they spoke with one voice; issues concerning land disposal, oil and grazing leases, and dispensation of tribal funds often lead to heated debate, with groups of

ten dividing along class lines as much as along blood quantum. Office of Indian Affairs and Department of the Interior policies complicated the pre-IRA picture, as these federal government agencies clung to policies geared toward breaking down tribal control of resources in favor of individual control. Though the Blackfeet created a Tribal Business Council (BTBC) in 1915, it became clear by the 1930s that the tribe needed to create an entity that could mediate the varying interests present on the reservation.

Enter the New Deal. Rosier suggests that acceptance of the IRA in 1934 benefited the tribe by giving it the authority to create its own constitution and tribal council. The overwhelming approval of an IRA constitution (though many Blackfeet later tried to overturn it) indicated a willingness to assume more, though not total, control over tribal affairs. According to Rosier, acceptance of the IRA gave the Blackfeet the structure it needed to resolve inter-tribal disputes and make strides toward self-determination.

Though the tribe experienced growth in agriculture, ranching, and oil leasing, the distribution

of the benefits of this growth put the new government under increasing stress. Inequitable distribution of tribal money (mainly in the form of loans and cattle) caused only a minority of Blackfeet to prosper, adding to class tension on the reservation. Despite income disparities, Rosier argues for the IRA as a positive force for the Blackfeet. Without it, Congress or the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA)—two organizations notorious for ineffective, incompetent administration of Indian country—would have distributed tribal revenues. Further, the IRA gave full-bloods a voice in tribal politics denied them before 1934. For Rosier, the IRA-inspired tribal government became an effective alternative of federal supervision.

Yet it also gave the Blackfeet an outlet to oppose the end of all supervision. The tribe used their tribal government to fight the end of all governmental supervision, manifested in the 1950s termination policy of Indian Affairs head Dillon Myer. Though some Blackfeet supported the outright termination of all federal control, many thought the tribal government would not be up to the task of taking care of tribal members. Nepotism and improper handling of tribal funds marred the image of the council, feeding the idea that federal oversight, with more input from the Blackfeet, would be a better way to govern the reservation. Ultimately, Myer's attempts to terminate the federal responsibility to the Blackfeet failed, mainly because of his refusal to negotiate over a staged withdrawal of federal responsibility. According to Rosier, termination could only be total or not at all for Myer; for most Blackfeet, especially full-bloods, working within the current system offered the greatest good for the greatest number.

Rosier offers a thoughtful, well-detailed outline of changes in Blackfeet political culture in the twentieth century. His evidence supports the assertion that the IRA benefited the Blackfeet, going against other interpretations of the impact of the Indian New Deal. Rosier also convincingly argues

that the influence of the Indian New Deal is densely connected to the termination era, and does not start to attenuate with the ouster of John Collier from the BIA in 1945. However, I wonder about the effects of Blackfeet culture on the development of Blackfeet political culture. Did political institutions from before the reservation era simply disappear by 1912, and have no influence on the democratic forms created during the span of the book? Tribal rebirth was cultural as well; perhaps a deeper consideration of that dimension could have benefited the book.

That criticism aside, *Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation* is a masterful, sensitive book. In telling the story of how the Blackfeet created institutions to reconcile reservation interests as well as contend with the vagaries of federal oversight, Paul C. Rosier makes an important addition to twentieth-century American Indian history. He should be commended for this work.

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