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Description

In this short film, NBC's Tom Pettit looks at the Apache tribe's defeat and relocation to eastern Arizona. Now they live in poverty with lower life expectancy than white Americans.

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Transcript

Relocation, Termination, and Education of the American Indian

TOM PETTIT, reporting:

In the magnificent isolation of some American Indian reservations a quiet revolution is underway. This is the Fort Apache Reservation of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. The Apaches once were fierce warriors; their famous names include Cochise and Geronimo. But late in the 19th century they were defeated, and herded onto their tribal territory in eastern Arizona where they have lived ever since. Like other reservation Indians they have lived in poverty, with less education and shorter life expectancy than white Americans. Even today the average Apache family income is about $1,100 per year. Historically federal Indian policy has been aimed at relocating Indians and eventually ending the reservation system. But today, there is a new challenge to the stereotype view of how to solve the Indian problem.

Senator HENRY JACKSON: The heart of the problem is the reservation system. There are those in America through the years who have insisted on preserving Indian culture; and the way you do it is to keep them on the reservation. I say is that the real challenge here is to bring the American Indian into the main stream of American life. At a time when we are worrying about the ghetto, when we’re trying to eliminate ghettos, we are preserving the reservation ghetto. I want to do something about it and its seems to me that we should start without delay a program of termination that will gradually remove these people from the Indian reservations throughout the United States.

Mr. VINE DELORIA, Jr. (Executive Director, National Congress of the American Indian): Well that’s a very good platitude. But where are you going to bring them into the mainstream in American life. Cities are packed with rural, uneducated people. And, you--you look in the want ads and see what job opportunities are available in the urban areas and there’s nothing that a reservation Indian could earn a living on. The simple fact is he’s going to the big cities and getting on welfare. And if the Senate would change its policy and if they’d give us some revolving loan, uh--adequate revolving loan funds we could develop the reservations.
PETTIT: Moving Indians off the reservation has never been a successful policy because of their strong attachment to the land itself.

Mr. ROBERT LAFOLETTE BENNETT (Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner): There was a commitment in the earlier days by the United States that they could have their land and enjoy it free from interference of other people and this has sort of broken down as the country has developed. And, in addition to losing the land as land, the Indian people have a very uh--a very uh--significant attachment to land different than anyone else--is because primarily its based upon the fact that land is a part of their religion, its more than a commodity that you buy and sell or raise crops on.

Mr. DELORIA: We feel our homelands are uh--where our ancestors are buried and it’s more than a commercial thing it’s a very religious and social and cultural thing with us.

PETTIT: A new Indian nationalism is developing, and its leaders are mostly young men.

Last year the White Mountain Apaches elected a new chief or tribal chairman, their youngest in history. Ronnie Lupe is 36 years old. He ran as a progressive with new ideas and defeated a man who had held power for more than a decade. Before taking office he was director of a neighborhood youth core program on the reservation. Other anti-poverty projects such as the preschool head-start program have been enormously popular on the Fort Apache and other reservations. Such programs have stimulated the old line Bureau of Indian Affairs into new thinking; and all over the country they have produced aggressive, young Indian leadership.

For the first time the winds of change seem genuine. Chairman Lupe, who himself grew up in a primitive wickup dwelling, has accelerated a program of building new houses with subsidies from the United States Public Housing Authority. Indians themselves are helping to build their own suburban style ranch houses. People here say that the building of new houses has created a surge of enthusiasm for modernization, for jobs, and for change. In the past, White Mountain economic development has emphasized the building of recreation facilities for vacationers. But a sawmill, which started out on shaky financial grounds, has begun to make money. The mill grosses over three million dollars a year. It provides full time jobs for over a hundred Apaches. Chairman Lupe would like to attract other industries, such as an electronics plant. He is one of the young leaders who want Indians to have a larger hand in running the reservations. In January, he went to Denver for a meeting with some other tribal leaders. This meeting, to discuss prospective federal legislation, was called by the National Congress of American Indians, NCAI. This meeting was inconclusive, but it showed the new aggressiveness and the old fear of legislation that might lead to termination of the registration system.

Mr. ROGER JOURDAIN (Red Lake Chippewa): They still condemn us for being alive, and having a--a voice left in this country. And this Armless Bill, is when I--I just read the first page, 101, was strictly a termination bill, that’s all it is pure and simple, nothing else. Alright, Congress should start terminating all their foreign services to--to the European countries. Start terminating everything, before they start terminating their recognition of the Indian people of this country.

Mr. ADRIAN FOOTE (Mandan): I’ve heard mention here that money goin’ over to foreign countries, and so on. I’m a veteran and I--I helped conquer a couple of these nations. And we sent billions of dollars giving their land back and sent billions of dollars back to them. Yet the Indian, we’ve had one heck of a
time getting a school or a dormitory or roads or money to do something for ourselves.

Mr. FRANK DUCHENAUX (Cheyenne River Sioux): I think that uh—the people that wrote the bill didn’t even believe in it them--themselves. They had to get a report out to the Interior and insolate affairs and so they drew up the proposed bill.

Mr. ALEX CHASING HAWK (Cheyenne River Sioux): Whatever we try to do right as today now uh--it quite expensive for me to come down here. The airplane ticket, I could have uh--saved that for my poor people back home which they need the money awful bad.

Mr. RONNIE LUPE (White Mountain Apache): Representing the southwest tribe which of course I carry a very big load ‘cuz I’m speaking for more or less the whole area. And I’m sure they will back me up with this statement: that we have to have a new draft, and give us time to study the whole thing; make recommendations. If it takes six months, a year, all well and good. Let us make the change our self, instead of someone making it for us.

Mr. J. DAN HOWARD (Standing Rock Sioux): We’ve gotta march together, I think we should even have a byline. Develop some kind of a byline we can stick to, some kind of a war cry. They said, “Hokahe” when they, that was the byline when they fought Custer. We need another one like that.

Mr. VINE DELORIA, Jr. (Executive Director, National congress of the American Indian): These guys get up in the Senate and they talk all about the great American Indian. And they got this bill in for American Indian Day, and then every inauguration they want us to put on feathers and come marchin’ down the street there. And yet, they won’t do anything to really help us preserve the authentic things. They always want the phony things in the culture. And you guys who were in that inauguration parade in ’64 you know that people went wild when the Indians came down the street.

PETTIT: Executive Director Deloria is only one-quarter Sioux Indian. But he is the driving force of the National Congress of American Indians in its campaign for influence.

This second-rate office building, near downtown Denver, houses the headquarters of the National Congress of American Indians. Vine Deloria, Jr. is 33. He once studied to become an Episcopal priest but two years ago became Executive Director of NCAI, built up its membership of Indian tribes, and developed his theory of red power. It is, he insists, a serious theory.

Mr. DELORIA: …and when we say red power we mean the right to run our reservations the way see fit. And we’d like to participate in American life our way; and the uh--mood of the Indian is, and I think it’s going to increase over this next year, that we’re simply going to withdraw from everything if we can’t run things our own way. We’re not supposed to have to go to a bureaucrat for approval to lease a land or--or to develop a road or to give an Indian a quarter acre for housing. We’re not supposed to do that. Those treaties are clear that within the reservation this is--this is the land of the Sioux Nation or the Iroquois Nation or the Apache Nation and we’re supposed to be able to run it inside.

PETTIT: What do you try to accomplish with bumper stickers like “Custer died for your sins” and those little cards you hand out?

Mr. DELORIA: I mean we’re only 500,000 people obviously we’re not a--we’re not a threat to anybody we’re not even a threat to ourselves. But there is an irony in it. I mean we have gotten a dirty deal there’s no doubt about it. And--and this “Custer died for your sins,” now, Custer personifies the attitude that
we’ve had to face whenever we’ve tried to enter the mainstream as Senator Jackson says. Its humorous
but there--there’s a very sad irony in here and uh--Indians smile and they agree to this thing and many
non-Indians think it’s a joke but there’s a very--there’s a very serious sadness behind our slogans.

PETTIT: In Washington the Bureau of Indian Affairs is beginning to recognize the demand for more
reservation independence and the need for new ideas. There has been a management shake-up.
Mr. BENNETT: We have brought into the bureau at the top level some very uh--prominent and capable
uh--people and we think that with this kind of leadership the uh--people in the bureau generally will
respond. They will respond to the kind of leadership they get.
Mr. CARL MARBURGER (Bureau of Indian Affairs): What I hope to do is to bring to the education of
Indian children the highest quality of education that can be brought. By this I mean that the federal system
should be the exemplary system. We should be able to demonstrate, with disadvantaged children, what
can be done, because, we have the resources of research, of consultants, of the finances of the federal
government. I think that the only uh—real educational experience we can provide at this point in time is
on the reservation, with the family, and with the total involvement of that community.

PETTIT: You’ve spoken of creating options for children on reservations. What do you mean by that?
What are you trying to do?
Mr. MARBURGER: Certainly many Indian young people, and many Indian adults, as they get their
education will want to move out for employment opportunities and others. But I think simultaneously we
have to also build that community within the reservation so that indeed there become opportunities there
for both employment and education for the total community.
Mr. BENNETT: I think we need to um--sort of shift gears and from--uh--instead of trying to manage the
lives and property of Indian people to--to more or less be an advisory capacity to them and let them make
their decisions.

PETTIT: Although Washington apparently recognizes the significance of the phrase red power, the term
has not yet caught on, at least on this reservation. But there is recognition here that with money and
progressive leadership change can occur. That the good things of the outside world can be brought in.
This is a lot different from trying to persuade all Indians to leave their land, a policy which has never
worked. Tom Pettit, NBC News on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona.