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Up against Giants: The National Indian Youth Council, the Navajo Nation, and Coal Gasification, 1974–77

BRADLEY GLENN SHREVE

It is perhaps ridiculous for Indian people to challenge a multi-billion dollar industrial operation, but if our right to an existence as a people is threatened by corporate greed, we have nothing to lose.

—National Indian Youth Council News Release, 1975¹

In the spring of 1977, members of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), along with the Coalition for Navajo Liberation, barraged the Secretary of the Interior and the chairman of the Navajo Nation with petitions calling for a halt to the proposed construction of several coal gasification plants on the Navajo Reservation in northwestern New Mexico. The petitions stated that the billion-dollar industrial venture would lead to “the inevitable genocide” of the local Navajo people whose culture and livelihood would “once again [be] trampled and ignored.” In the words of NIYC Executive Director Gerald Wilkinson, the issue was “quite literally a question of life and death.”²

The NIYC-led campaign to stop coal gasification began in 1974 and lasted through most of 1977. The story was an archetypal David and Goliath bout—a local, relatively powerless people pitted against massive corporate and governmental might. More specifically, NIYC activists represented the interests of “the grassroots people” who resided in the Burnham chapter of the Navajo Reservation, the region where the proposed plants would be constructed. Their struggle was against not only the multinationals seeking to build and profit from the plants, but also the governments of both the United States and the Navajo Nation, which ignored the interests of the Burnham residents in their legislative wrangling over gasification.

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The struggle makes clear that true political representation is not always found in tribal councils or elected governments. Often the interests of local grassroots people are best expressed through organizational activism. In the fight to stop gasification, NIYC sought to give a voice to a people who were more often than not ignored. And though activists cited environmental issues, such as water rights and potential health hazards, as reasons for resistance, it was the perceived threat to the local Navajo people that caused the most concern.³

Throughout its then brief yet tumultuous history, NIYC was a relatively moderate Indian activist organization. It certainly was more assertive than the older, somewhat “conservative” National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), but it was not as “radical” as the militant American Indian Movement (AIM). NIYC traced its roots back to January 1955, when Indian students from the University of New Mexico’s Kiva Club organized the first annual Indian Youth Council in Santa Fe. Sponsored by the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs, the meeting served as a venue for Indian high school and college students to “work toward the time when, adequately prepared, Indian youth can render effective service to tribe and home community.” The University of New Mexico, Arizona State College, and Brigham Young University hosted subsequent Indian Youth Councils.⁴

While these early regional gatherings brought Indians from the Southwest together, the American Indian Chicago Conference of 1961 was, in the words of sociologist Robert C. Day, “probably the most important single event in the emergence of tribal nationalism as a social movement.” At the conference, some 420 Indian activists from 67 different tribes from across the United States convened to discuss and debate issues affecting Native American communities. They produced a resolution entitled the “Declaration of Indian Purpose,” which demanded a greater voice in the decision-making process of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and called for the retention of traditional spiritual and cultural ideals. The conference also led to the formation of NIYC just months later.⁵

Founded in Gallup, New Mexico by several university students, including Herb Blatchford (Navajo), Clyde Warrior (Ponca), and Melvin Thom (Paiute), NIYC had a membership base that spanned across the country. In the council’s articles of incorporation, its founders stressed fellowship among Native Americans of different tribes while stating that the “future of the Indian people will ultimately rest in the hands of the younger people” who will seek to eliminate prejudice and discrimination, advance Indian education, improve work opportunities, uphold treaty rights, and protect Native American sovereignty.⁶

NIYC’s first major campaign was the fish-ins of 1964, which the organization launched to protest Washington State’s violation of federal treaties that guaranteed the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Nisqually Indians fishing rights along the Columbia River and its tributaries. Despite the threat of arrest, NIYC staffers stood alongside the indigenous local people of the region and refused to abandon traditional fishing sites. The organization’s direct action tactics—which were influenced by the African American lunch counter sit-ins

throughout the South—were hugely successful, bringing international recognition and attention to the plight of the local Indian people of Washington and to issues of Indian sovereignty.⁷

In the 1970s, NIYC expanded its membership base and claimed fifty-five chapters with approximately fifteen thousand members across the country, making it the largest national Indian organization next to NCAI. Its members continued to engage in direct action and in 1972 they joined AIM and an array of other Native American groups in the cross-country trek known as the Trail of Broken Treaties. NIYC's leadership was also adopting a variety of other tactics, including government lobbying and legal action. Most of the organization's campaigns in the 1970s revolved around resource exploitation and development on Indian lands. Throughout the West, corporate conglomerates sought to gain access to oil, coal, uranium, and a whole host of other resources on reservations. The Navajo Reservation was particularly well endowed and was one of the primary targets.⁸

In the early 1920s, as the nascent American auto industry began to expand, oil speculators honed in on the Navajo Reservation, which they believed had significant petroleum deposits. However, oil companies had to work out a contract with the tribe if they were to exploit the reserves. Encouraged by both government officials and oil speculators, Navajo leaders formed a tribal council to issue leases for drilling. As Peter Iverson notes, "It is certainly fair to conclude that the council was created not to protect or to assist Navajo sovereignty, but to provide a stamp to approve leases and other forms of exploitation."⁹

After World War II, the tribal council became concerned with other issues such as education and health care, but economic development and resource exploitation continued to play a central role. In 1957, Utah International (UI) proposed a lease to the council, enabling the corporation to strip mine for coal on twenty-four thousand acres of land in the San Juan River Basin near Shiprock, New Mexico. The lease stipulated that UI pay the Navajo Nation a flat royalty rate of fifteen cents per ton of coal mined. Unaware that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had set an escalating royalty rate of 12.5 percent of the price of coal, which would have resulted in a profit margin roughly four times that of the proposed lease, the Navajo tribal council agreed to UI's fixed rate. In 1959, another multinational, El Paso Natural Gas (EPNG), received a permit to explore for coal near Burnham and, nine years later, signed a 40,286-acre strip-mine lease. Similar to the agreement with UI, the Navajo Nation was to receive considerably less than BLM's fluctuating rate, agreeing to twenty cents per ton of coal.¹⁰

It was not until after they signed the lease with EPNG that tribal leaders began to take steps to strengthen their bargaining power. Under the leadership of Peter MacDonald, the Navajo Nation helped establish the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT). While the organization's main goal was to inform tribal governments of the intricacies of resource development, it also sought to encourage multinationals to exploit uranium, coal, oil, and natural gas reserves on Indian lands in hopes of bringing capital to economically depressed reservations. Indeed, CERT leaders consulted with representatives

of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on how best to exploit and profit from their resource endowments.¹¹

McDonald was especially savvy when it came to dealing with corporate conglomerates. The Navajo chairman worked for EPNG during the 1950s shortly after graduating from the University of Oklahoma. His experience with multinationals was followed by a distinguished stint as head of the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity in the 1960s, which former Navajo Chairman Raymond Nakai called “one of the most successful and imaginative anti-poverty programs on any reservation.” Though McDonald sought to balance resource exploitation with the social welfare of the Navajo people, critics charged CERT with being too single-minded about development and not paying enough attention to the consequences and environmental hazards that came along with it.¹²

If CERT’s “aggressive approach” to resource exploitation was a source of controversy among critics, its agreement to the proposed construction of six or more coal gasification plants near Burnham was simply unacceptable. Beginning in 1971, UI and the Western Coal Gasification Company (WESCO) announced plans to launch a joint gasification venture. Shortly thereafter, EPNG unveiled its own blueprint for several gasification projects. Based on technology developed in Nazi Germany during the 1930s, coal gasification was a commercially unproven process in the United States and, detractors charged, posed environmental and health risks. What was known about gasification was that each plant would use up to six million tons of coal and roughly 32.5 billion gallons of water every year. Furthermore, UI-WESCO and EPNG estimated that the plants would cost one billion dollars apiece, requiring the corporations to turn to the federal government for loans.¹³

As events seemed to be spiraling toward construction of the proposed plants, NIYC initiated a campaign against WESCO and EPNG. Activists argued that the levels of emissions from gasification plants in South Africa were found to be measurably toxic to people within a four-mile radius. They cited studies by the Scientists’ Institute for Public Information and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in their press statements, noting that the plants could release as much as 1,277 tons of lead into the atmosphere within a two-year period and that there was a known relationship between such emissions and cancer rates. The organization attacked WESCO and EPNG’s initial environmental statements as “an attempt at deception,” claiming that the companies were trying to whitewash gasification’s impact on public health. Activists also criticized the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior who they labeled as “irresponsible” and negligent for not recognizing the potential health risks and for not actively protecting the rights of the local people who would be directly affected by EPNG and WESCO’s plans.¹⁴

Besides public health, NIYC was also concerned about the project’s impact on Navajo water reserves that were vital for agriculture. With a limited and finite availability of water, activists noted that six gasification plants would use billions of gallons of water over the project’s twenty-five-year life span. Furthermore, they would pollute the remaining water supply with massive amounts of toxins, such as boron, lead, mercury, and arsenic,

leading to contaminated food produce and up to fifty-seven thousand acres of ruined grazing land.¹⁵

Then there was the threat that WESCO and EPNG posed to Indian sovereignty. The organization's staffers believed that gasification would "threaten the physical and cultural survival of Indian people everywhere," asserting that if the Navajo Nation—the largest Indian tribe in the United States—succumbed to corporate and governmental pressure, then other tribes may be forced to do likewise. Gasification posed such a threat that NIYC believed the "collective future [of] tribal people and the future of generations yet unborn" were in jeopardy. In particular, there was a fear of boomtowns that could bring in up to fifty thousand outsiders. And along with the boomtowns, came alcoholism, crime, prostitution, and migrants who had little respect for Navajo culture, laws, and customs.¹⁶

Diné from the western portion of the Navajo Nation were keenly aware of the crime, vice, and cultural conflict that came with boomtowns. Farmington, in northwestern New Mexico, had been a sleepy border town of 3,500 people until the discovery of oil and natural gas in the vicinity during the 1950s. As Kathleen Chamberlain noted in her book, *Under Sacred Ground*, this discovery profoundly shifted the area's economy and development. By 1960, Farmington was a city of 24,000. The newcomers were unfamiliar with the Navajo people and their customs, which led to tension, conflict, and even murder.¹⁷

In April 1974, on the eve of NIYC's antigasification campaign, white youths killed three Navajo elders and dumped their bodies in the canyon country outside of the city. Autopsies showed that the men had been beaten, tortured, and burned. Outraged, the local Navajo population organized a series of protest marches with the help of NIYC, AIM, and the University of New Mexico's Kiva Club. The demonstrations were hugely successful, as thousands of Native peoples from the four corners' area converged on Farmington to bring attention not just to the murders, but also to the boomtown's history of cultural insensitivity and racism. Protest leaders pointed out that the city's seventy-four-person police force employed only three Navajos, they blamed local merchants for the "scourge of white man's alcohol," and they successfully lobbied the US Commission on Civil Rights to hold public hearings on the recent murders and overall conditions in Farmington.¹⁸

The demonstrations galvanized the local Navajo people, leading to the formation of the Coalition for Navajo Liberation. This new organization drew the bulk of its membership from the Navajo Nation though many of its leaders had ties to other outfits such as NIYC and AIM. The coalition initially focused on calling attention to racism in border towns such as Farmington, but soon it broadened its agenda. By 1975, its leaders had aligned with NIYC to halt gasification, which they feared would triple the size of Farmington and, hence, triple the city's "social and personal horrors."¹⁹

Recognizing that they were "up against giants" in the fight to stop gasification, NIYC and coalition activists went about organizing and informing the "grassroots Navajo people" and the public at large. They stated their position and purpose in a news release from 1975:

We see our primary role as strengthening and reinforcing a grassroots Indian movement in their struggle against the combined interests of huge multi-national corporations and the most powerful government in the world. We do not view this as an exercise in futility, but as a last ditch effort by concerned Indian people [to] actively resist a sophisticated twentieth century invasion of our remaining land base. We must protect and defend our lands and peoples at all costs. We have no other choice.²⁰

Consequently, it was decided that the best approach would be to “make the issue a national issue” by gathering and disseminating information about WESCO and EPNG’s plans and building a public and political antigasification constituency. To do this, NIYC leaders resolved to initiate a letter-writing campaign and petition drive aimed at the Department of the Interior and the US Congress. They also sent letters and fact sheets to the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and even the *Dick Cavett Show*.²¹

More locally, NIYC sought to utilize radio stations in the four corners area; place advertisements and articles in the local Navajo newspaper and in major papers such as the *Albuquerque Journal* and the *New Mexican*; and to have the matter discussed on the weekly television program *The Navajo Nation Report*. Activists also launched a community education drive by canvassing throughout the eastern half of the Navajo Reservation, holding public meetings and teach-ins, conducting regional referendums in areas that would be affected by gasification, and distributing educational materials to combat WESCO and EPNG’s “slick and deceptively attractive propaganda.”²²

While NIYC directed much of its effort at informing the federal government and the Burnham Navajo people, the organization also targeted the Navajo tribal government. Indeed, Chairman MacDonald had a warm dialogue with WESCO and EPNG and had sent letters to the multinationals stating that the tribe would make no objections to their use of San Juan River water for gasification. Contending that MacDonald had usurped the powers of the tribal council by giving his tacit approval to the corporate enterprise, NIYC staffers issued a news release that indicted the chairman for refusing to communicate directly with local Burnham residents and for ignoring their opinion. They pointed out that most local Navajo community chapters had voted overwhelmingly against WESCO and EPNG’s proposals and they warned MacDonald that if he continued to act unilaterally there would be “the danger of a protracted war of attrition carried on by the grassroots people in open defiance to an unresponsive and insensitive tribal government that continually refuses to represent their interest properly.”²³

In early 1975, NIYC along with the Coalition for Navajo Liberation prepared a sixty-page report for MacDonald and the Navajo tribal council, outlining all of the environmental and health hazards that gasification posed. They suggested that the tribal government investigate the effects that the proposed plants would have on grazing lands and query WESCO and EPNG on their reclamation plans. The activists insisted that MacDonald hold public

hearings in areas that would be affected by the plants and that councilors make a conscious effort to find answers to the local people's concerns, arguing that the Navajo people had the right to "provide meaningful input and participation" in governmental decision making. MacDonald retorted that he wanted "all Navajos to have their questions answered" before WESCO and EPNG began construction. However, he went on to point out that gasification would bring jobs to the reservation and alleviate "the grinding poverty which has been so much an unwelcome part of Navajo life for so long."²⁴

Though MacDonald remained in strong support of gasification, the Navajo tribal council was much more receptive to NIYC's arguments. When EPNG's strip-mine lease came up for renewal in the fall of 1975, NIYC led a grassroots constituency that sat in on the tribal council's debate on the issue. Concerned Navajos traveled up to three hundred miles to attend the sessions and voice their opinions. The final vote revealed that the tribal council unanimously rejected the lease, 41-0. According to council members, the lease not only underpaid the Navajo Nation in royalties, but also did not give the tribal government power to accept or reject industrial projects such as gasification.²⁵

Despite the decision not to renew the lease, both WESCO and EPNG continued with their plans to build up to six gasification plants. In order to do so, however, they needed secure loan guarantees from the federal government. New Mexico Senators Joseph Montoya and Pete Domenici sponsored an amendment to the Energy Research and Development Administration Authorization Act that provided for six billion dollars in federal loans to the nation's synthetic fuels industry. While the measure did not specifically earmark funds for WESCO and EPNG, 80 percent of the monies were to be devoted to coal gasification. The bill also contained a bailout clause that absolved industries receiving funds from paying back the federal government if gasification proved financially unsustainable. NIYC criticized the bill as "corporate socialism" and contended that it was indicative of the federal government's "neo-colonial policy towards Indian tribes with a significant energy resource base."²⁶

On 3 December 1975, the Senate approved the bill and sent it on to the House of Representatives, where it faced considerable resistance. Wayne Hays of Ohio called the measure "the biggest Christmas gift to the biggest corporations in the country," while Ken Hechler of West Virginia referred to it as "an energy Vietnam." Most detractors were concerned with the financial risks that the bill posed and few mentioned or even cared about Indian sovereignty or NIYC's other points of opposition. Nevertheless, on 11 December, the House rejected the loan guarantee amendment by a vote of 263 to 140, with thirty abstentions.²⁷

Again, WESCO and EPNG were not deterred and announced that they would continue with plans to build the plants, as Domenici and Montoya resolved to introduce another loan guarantee bill when Congress reconvened in January. They recognized, however, that federal loan guarantees were meaningless if the Navajo tribal government opposed gasification. Domenici, WESCO, and EPNG therefore decided to organize a meeting in Farmington with the hope of swaying tribal councilors. NIYC activists criticized the senator for not opening the meeting to the public and for holding it outside the

reservation, noting that it was the Navajo people of Burnham who would be most directly affected. John Redhouse, an NIYC officer, summed up the organization's perspective in a press release:

On three different occasions the Burnham chapter has overwhelmingly passed resolutions rejecting the construction of any and all gasification plants in its area. . . . Yet Senator Domenici is still pushing for gasification despite the expressed wishes of the Navajo people. . . . Before sponsoring or supporting such a bill, Senator Domenici should first and foremost listen to the people who will be most directly affected by the gasification development. To do otherwise is to prevent local Navajo people from fully participating in an important decision-making process that will drastically affect their lives.²⁸

But even with the absence of local Navajo people, Domenici still had his work cut out for him. The Navajo council was skeptical of gasification and some leaders were downright hostile to WESCO and EPNG's proposal. Fred Johnson, a councilman from Shiprock, was among the most influential of detractors and "the most outspoken leader of the Navajo Nation." Reiterating NIYC's points of contention, Johnson argued that the federal government and corporate interests were using Indians as "guinea pigs for gasification" and that boomtowns and the influx of white migrant workers would irreparably affect Navajo culture.²⁹

On the day of the meeting, Fred Johnson's plane crashed while en route to Farmington. Conspiracy theories and accusations of foul play circulated among NIYC staffers and throughout the Navajo Nation. Matters were only aggravated when Domenici went ahead with the meeting in spite of Johnson's death and many councilors' calls for a postponement. The senator stated that he was unable to put the meeting off due to his cramped schedule, but that he would hold another in three to six weeks. Even though Johnson and several other tribal leaders were not present, it was business as usual—Domenici stressed that there had to be "a little firmer conviction" on the part of the Navajo to "be part of solving this [energy] crisis." At the same time, he recognized that the Navajo people would be the "final determinators" of whether WESCO and EPNG's plans were implemented.³⁰

If the decision to build the six plants was indeed up to the Navajo people, WESCO and EPNG would have been out of business. Most Navajos opposed gasification and those residing in the eastern portion of the reservation—those who the project would most directly affect—were of a near unanimous opinion on the issue. Not long after Domenici's meeting, the people of Burnham voted 228–0 against gasification; referendums in other chapters produced similar tallies. The local people concurred with NIYC's belief that the industrial venture posed a danger to their cultural and physical survival. Activists from the Coalition for Navajo Liberation petitioned Domenici and contended that the proposed plants were "[an act of] aggression" and "a threat to our way of life." Another opponent declared that they were "opposed to the destruction of a people, of a community, of a culture, in order to make a profit."³¹

But while the local Navajo people railed against gasification, the tribal government began acting in a decidedly different manner. EPNG once again proposed a new lease agreement to strip mine coal, which, in turn, would also provide land for gasification plants. To avoid the pitfalls of their last offer, the company sweetened the deal by offering to pay the Navajo Nation fifty-five cents instead of twenty cents per ton of coal and by including an escalator clause that would raise royalty payments when market prices went up. Ignoring Navajo public opinion and swayed by Chairman MacDonald's apologies for EPNG, the tribal council reversed its previous decision and accepted the offer in August of 1976. NIYC immediately released a volley of press releases condemning the tribal government's actions and arguing that both the council and the chairman had disregarded the "expressed wishes and desires of the local grassroots people who were most affected by the lease." The organization's staffers believed that the strip-mine lease was inextricably tied to gasification and pointed out that EPNG did not specify what the mined coal would be used for. Moreover, they contended that the agreement gave MacDonald and his advisory committee the power to alter the lease any way they saw fit.³²

In a desperate attempt to force the tribal council to reverse its decision, NIYC and the Coalition for Navajo Liberation orchestrated a sit-in at the council's governance chambers. For nearly seven hours, seventy-five activists took the seats of the councilmen, effectively shutting down the tribal government for the day. Amazingly, no one was arrested. However, the following day demonstrators were not as fortunate, as eighteen angry Shiprock and Burnham residents were summarily jailed after a heated confrontation with tribal police. Infuriated by the protests and NIYC's unyielding disparagement, Chairman MacDonald went on the offensive, stating that royalties from the EPNG lease would improve educational opportunities and decrease Navajo dependence on livestock. He accused his critics of being reactionary and out of step with the poor, positing that "those who oppose development, live comfortably in Farmington and Albuquerque."³³

Not only did MacDonald favor the new strip-mine lease, he also testified before the Senate Committee on Public Works claiming that coal gasification would greatly improve economic conditions for the Navajo Nation. The Navajo council, however, felt differently. Though councilors favored strip mining, they opposed gasification and were distraught over the chairman's unilateral action. They presented a statement to the Senate committee and to Congress, asserting that MacDonald had acted without authorization or approval and that he represented neither their position nor that of the Navajo people. The council also sent a similar petition to Olin Teague, the chairman of the corresponding House committee that was also conducting hearings on gasification. Forty-one of the seventy-four tribal councilors signed the petition, which requested that the committee respect "the prevailing attitude of the Navajo people and their leaders" by opposing the proposed bill.³⁴

As MacDonald and NIYC locked horns, the US Congress began debates on a new synthetic fuels amendment that would provide coal gasification projects with up to four billion dollars in federal loans. Like the previous measure, proponents of the synthetic fuels industry believed that it would

reduce dependence on foreign oil and put Americans to work. Opponents also reiterated many of their prior arguments. Richard L. Ottinger contended "it is a bad bill, setting a bad precedent for socialized free enterprise where the government takes all the risks and the companies make all the profits even on government funds." Some critics dwelled on the technological uncertainties of gasification, while others were simply not convinced that it could be cost-effective, believing that the industry would dampen incentive to develop cheaper renewable energy sources. Many detractors' financial fears were realized when the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a scathing report on the eve of the debates. GAO officials noted that "the total cost of output [was] not price competitive with foreign oil" and that the federal government should focus its efforts on conservation instead of synthetic fuels.³⁵

It seemed that congressional critics were opposed to the synthetic fuels amendment for every conceivable reason except for those pointed out by NIYC. Indeed, consideration of the potential territorial, political, cultural, and environmental impact on the local Navajo people was practically absent from the debate in both the Senate and the House. One of the few detractors to question gasification's effect on the Navajos was Representative Patsy Mink of Hawaii, who argued that the amount of water the proposed plants would use could "impede the ability of the tribe to sustain a viable and stable agricultural economy." Mink was ignored, but the opposition nevertheless handed EPNG and WESCO another defeat in their quest for federal loans. Once again the Senate approved the measure and the House voted it down, this time by a razor-thin margin of 193 to 192, with forty-four abstentions.³⁶

After the second synthetic fuels amendment went down in defeat, it seemed to many NIYC staffers that coal gasification was a dead duck. However, EPNG and WESCO continued lobbying the Navajo tribal government for approval of their proposed plants. At the same time, Senators Domenici and Jennings Randolph of West Virginia announced that they planned to submit yet another measure calling for federal funding of gasification, which critics labeled as "the bill with nine lives." However, when lawmakers introduced the bill in January 1977, it became apparent that the proposal was very different from its two predecessors. Rather than an outright loan guarantee for a specified amount of money, the bill gave the Energy Research and Development Administration the power to lend monies on a project-by-project basis. Moreover, any loan over fifty million would be subject to congressional approval.³⁷

The bill was a far cry from the previous measures, but NIYC still attacked it full force and argued that it would lead to "genocide of the highest order." The organization's staffers immediately initiated a petition campaign directed at the Secretary of the Interior, Cecil Andrus, asserting that gasification would undermine the "rights, dignity, and livelihoods" of the Navajo people. They encouraged NIYC members to send letters to Andrus's department and urge him to do everything in his power to stop the proposed bill. The Department of the Interior wrote back to NIYC in an attempt to reassure the organization that "no industrial development [will] take place without total involvement of the council." The letter went on to affirm the secretary's support for Indian sovereignty and the right of the Navajos to "manage their property and affairs."³⁸

There was no mention, however, of the Navajo people and so NIYC leaders remained vigilant. After focusing on Andrus, they turned their sights on Chairman MacDonald. Activists gathered the signatures of three hundred and twenty people from the Burnham area and demanded that the chairman respect the wishes of the local grassroots people. Furthermore, they insisted that the tribal government institute a legally binding moratorium on all negotiations relating to gasification and strip mining, and that the council hold a public referendum on the matter.³⁹

Next on the target list was the bill's main sponsor, Pete Domenici. NIYC staffers reminded the senator that he had promised to hold a meeting with concerned Burnham residents regarding gasification over a year ago, shortly after Fred Johnson's fatal plane crash. They alleged that he had been ignoring "the feelings and opinions of the local Navajo people who live in the affected area." On 1 June 1977, nearly seventeen months after his pledge, Domenici took ninety minutes out of his schedule to sit down with concerned citizens and lecture them on the merits of industrial development and gasification. And similar to the Department of the Interior, he also told them that it was ultimately the decision of the Navajo people: "The US Congress will not vote on a law to build on your land. Congress will let you decide whether you want that kind of development or not." Domenici's attempt to reassure his audience that Navajo sovereignty would be respected was not convincing; two and a half weeks later, NIYC sent a petition to the senator demanding that he alter his bill to bar synthetic fuel projects from applying for and receiving federal loan guarantees.⁴⁰

Domenici ignored NIYC's demands and successfully pushed his bill through both the House and Senate. The measure, however, was toothless—there was little chance that the House would accept a billion-dollar loan for gasification or for that matter any other massive synthetic fuels project. Nevertheless, NIYC leaders continued the campaign against gasification, remaining ever vigilant. At times they seemed even more militant in their opposition despite the diminished threat. Herb Blatchford, one of the organization's officers, contended that WESCO and EPNG remained a menace. Gasification would lead to migrant boomtowns, which, according to Blatchford, would create social disintegration including "prostitution, assaults, rapes, robberies, and murders." The situation would ultimately "destroy what cultural base [the Navajos] have left."⁴¹

In the end, there were no gasification plants or boomtowns built on or near the Navajo Reservation, but activists continued to fight for the local Navajo people. In 1978, forty to fifty Navajos led by the Coalition for Navajo Liberation and AIM took over and occupied an oil pumping unit in the Utah portion of the Navajo Reservation. As Robert S. McPherson and David A. Wolff show in their article, "Poverty, Politics, and Petroleum: The Utah Navajo and the Aneth Oil Field," activists sought to protect the rights of local Navajos who benefited very little from resource exploitation. They called for a renegotiation of oil leases so that local people would see the benefits of resource exploitation. Angered by what they saw as the mindless destruction and polluting that came with oil drilling, they hoped that

their occupation would make the Navajo tribal council more responsive to the needs of the local people than to the multinationals that threatened to destroy the land and the Navajo way of life. McPherson and Wolff maintain that the strategy worked, as the council became “more aware” of the local people in the northern part of the reservation.⁴²

Democracy, it is often stated, is government by the people through elected representatives. In theory, such government represents the wishes and interests of the populace. But that is theory; reality is often very different. In the case of the people of the Burnham chapter of the Navajo Nation, NIYC and the Coalition for Navajo Liberation believed that democratic government—whether it was the Navajo tribal council or the federal government—was largely ineffective. Indeed, those governments paid little attention to the local people’s concerns over gasification. It was up to the activists to give the people a voice.

How much influence NIYC had in stopping WESCO and EPNG is debatable. Certainly the organization raised the consciousness of the Navajo tribal government, but, on the other hand, it had little direct impact on the House of Representatives’ rejection of Domenici’s billion-dollar loan guarantees. What is striking about NIYC’s crusade was not the political influence the organization had, but rather its sheer determination and single-mindedness to stop what it perceived as a serious threat to the very survival of the grassroots Navajo people. To the casual observer, NIYC’s statements and actions may have seemed hardheaded, frenzied, or even paranoid. But such conclusions ignore the course of American history—a history where Indian lands have been seized for resources and mineral wealth, a history rife with whites trampling and ignoring the rights and concerns of Native peoples.

NOTES

1. NIYC News Release, 6 January 1975, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico [hereafter CSWR], Office files of the National Indian Youth Council [hereafter OFNIYC], box 25, folder 28.

2. Petition to the Secretary of the Interior, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Peter Katel, “Indian Youth Leader Against Coal Plants,” *The New Mexican*, 7 March 1976.

3. Several scholars, such as Vine Deloria Jr., Donald Grinde, and Bruce Johansen, have shown how fundamental cosmological or theological differences between Native Americans and Euro-Americans have led to very different relationships with the natural world. For the Indian, the earth is sacred and humans are inextricably tied to it, making the Indian—as one Crow elder put it—“a natural ecologist, environmentalist, and conservationist.” Euro-Americans, on the other hand, do not see the earth as “mother.” Rather, they see it as an object to be subdued, dominated, cultivated, and harnessed. Though this fundamental difference should not be understated, it was not NIYC’s primary line of reasoning for protesting coal gasification. US Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Indian Affairs, *American Indian Religious Freedom: Hearing before the Select Committee on Indian Affairs*, 95th Cong., 2nd sess., 24 and 27 February 1978, 28–29. See also, Donald Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen, *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental*

Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1995); and Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red* (New York: Laurel, 1973), 70–96.

4. “The Third Regional Indian Youth Council,” Council Program, 23–25 April 1959, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Santa Fe, NM. The author would like to thank Mara Yarbrough at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture for her assistance in obtaining documents on the Indian Youth Councils. For more on the Indian Youth Councils and the founding of NIYC, see Sterling Ray Fluharty, “For a Greater Indian America’: The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council,” (master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 2003).

5. Robert C. Day, “The Emergence of Activism as a Social Movement,” in *Native Americans Today: Sociological Perspectives*, eds. Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Robert C. Day (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 512; The American Indian Chicago Conference, “Declaration of Indian Purpose,” in *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, 2nd ed., eds. Alvin M. Josephy Jr., Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 13–15. Sol Tax, a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, organized the American Indian Chicago Conference (AICC). Tax’s intention was to bring together Indians from across the United States to discuss and debate the federal government’s Native American policy, most notably “termination,” which eliminated the sovereign tribal status of Native American peoples. At the time, the only national Indian organization was the NCAI. Tax and like-minded Native Americans felt that there was “a community of opinion” among Indians and that there had to be some sort of viable forum to bring out a national Indian consciousness. At the conference, younger participants met in a separate session and drew up a declaration of purpose to voice their particular concerns. NIYC incorporated much of the AICC declaration into its founding statement. Nancy O. Lurie, “The Voice of the American Indian: Report on the American Indian Chicago Conference,” *Current Anthropology* 2 (December 1961): 478 and 481; Alvin M. Josephy Jr., Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson, eds., *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 13–15.

6. Certificate of Incorporation of the National Indian Youth Council, 26 September 1962, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 1, folder 1.

7. Actors Marlon Brando, Dick Gregory, and Jane Fonda gave a significant boost to NIYC’s fish-in campaign and were probably the primary reason for attracting international media attention. Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 44–45. For a comprehensive firsthand study of the fish-ins, see *A Report Prepared for the American Friends Service Committee, Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Nisqually Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970). NIYC founder Clyde Warrior spent part of the summer in 1961 working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee where he was influenced by the organization’s direct action tactics. Day, “The Emergence of Activism,” in *Native Americans Today*, 514.

8. Phil Nicklaus, “Fundamental Question Faces Council: Concerns over Gasification Unresolved,” *Albuquerque Journal*, 5 June 1975; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 142.

9. Kathleen P. Chamberlain, *Under Sacred Ground: A History of Navajo Oil, 1922–1982* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 18, 23, and 33; Peter

Iverson with Monty Roessel, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 134. Kathleen Chamberlain argues that despite the pretense of democracy, Navajo tribal councilors were probably chosen by government agents or oil company executives. Nearly all were pro-oil and were more than conciliatory in accepting leases. Though this led to “underdevelopment and dependency,” according to Chamberlain, it ultimately gave the Navajo a much needed source of income. Further, it allowed the tribe to invest in education, infrastructure, and it led to some—though limited—employment opportunities. Chamberlain, *Under Sacred Ground*, 29 and 113–14.

10. Iverson, *Diné*, 189. For an account of resource exploitation on Indian lands, see Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998). It has been estimated that approximately 40 percent of all US uranium reserves and 30 percent of coal west of the Mississippi is on Indian lands. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country*, 150; Joseph G. Jorgensen and others, *Native Americans and Energy Development*, with a preface by Harris Arthur (Cambridge, MA: Anthropology Resource Center, 1978), 1. Phillip Reno, *Navajo Resources and Economic Development* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 115; Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country*, 169; *NIYC Report on El Paso Natural Gas*, 22 October 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Peter MacDonald, “Navajo Tribal Chairman Explains Mining Position,” *Wassaja* (January 1977): 5.

11. Beginning in the 1950s, the Navajo leadership adopted a general policy of achieving economic growth through resource development. Chairman Raymond Nakai embraced the policy in the 1960s and laid the groundwork for Peter MacDonald. Iverson, *Diné*, 242 and 263.

12. Peter MacDonald with Ted Schwarz, *The Last Warrior: Peter MacDonald and the Navajo Nation* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 97; Chamberlain, *Under Sacred Ground*, 103; Iverson, *Diné*, 246; Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country*, 150.

13. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country*, 150. WESCO was a joint venture between the Pacific Lighting Corporation and Transwestern Pipeline Co. “Ready for Big Scale Coal Gasification,” *Business Week*, 17 August 1974, 74–75. In 1971, WESCO announced plans for the construction of four gasification plants with UI providing the coal. Two years later, WESCO filed an application with the Federal Power Commission to sell and transport synthetic natural gas produced by the plants. Because EPNG had a strip-mine lease, it would use its own coal for the two proposed plants. *NIYC Report on EPNG*, 22 October 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Thomas Brom, “The Southwest: America’s New Appalachia,” *Ramparts* 13 (November 1974): 17–20. The gasification method developed in Germany was known as the Lurgi process. In short, coal was combined with water and heated to form “town gas.” Brom, “The Southwest,” 17–20; “Ready for Big Scale Coal Gasification,” 74.

14. Letter from Charles L. Hader to NIYC, 17 May 1974, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; “What You Can Do to Help Stop Coal Gasification,” n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Letter from Charles L. Hyder to Ernest Gerlach, 6 November 1974, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29.

15. NIYC believed that the proposed plants would threaten the 110,000-acre Navajo Irrigation Project, which was designed to provide a degree of agricultural self-sufficiency for the Navajo Nation. Irrigation planners also hoped that a food-processing industry would develop in the project’s wake. Coal Gasification Litigation

Project, 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28. NIYC letter to members, fall 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

16. NIYC spokespersons also stated that reservations were always the first targets of exploitation and wondered why it was that gasification in the United States was being initiated in the Navajo Nation when most coal reserves were on non-Indian lands. NIYC letter to donors, fall 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28. NIYC press release, 30 December 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; Coal Gasification Litigation Project, 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; The US Bureau of Reclamation estimated that non-Navajos would fill 45 percent of construction jobs and 95 percent of the permanent plant jobs. "What is Coal Gasification," speech by Gerald Wilkinson delivered to the Rosebud Sioux Reservation and in New York City, October 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

17. "Justice In Farmington?" *Akwesasne Notes* 7, no. 4 (1975): 30; Chamberlain, *Under Sacred Ground*, x.

18. New Mexico Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, "The Farmington Report: A Conflict of Cultures," (July 1975): 1, 4, 5, 12, 24, 30, and 46. The New Mexico Advisory Committee's report states, "Native Americans [of Farmington and surrounding San Juan County] in almost every area suffer from injustice and maltreatment." It went on to note Navajos had substandard housing, lagging education, a mean income three times lower than the general population, and health care that was at a "crisis stage." New Mexico Advisory Committee, "The Farmington Report," iii, 43, and 88. The report, however, was not without its critics. Farmington Mayor Marlo Webb called it a "collection of half-truths, innuendos, statements out of context, falsehoods, and unrealistic and illogical conclusions." Perhaps some of Webb's criticisms were due to the fact that Gerald Wilkinson of NIYC was on the Advisory Committee. "Justice in Farmington?" 28.

19. New Mexico Advisory Committee, "The Farmington Report," 5 and 21; "Justice in Farmington?" 28.

20. NIYC news release, 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

21. Letter to Janet Costo of the American Indian Historical Society, 8 April 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

22. NIYC estimated that the antigasification campaign would cost roughly twenty thousand dollars, which included media materials, community organizers' salaries, and a used van. Funding was provided by an array of eastern philanthropic organizations, such as the AKBAR Fund, the Carnegie Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Ford Foundation, the Field Foundation, the New World Foundation, and the Friends Committee on National Legislation. NIYC narrative, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; Individual letters to funding organizations, various dates, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

23. Letter to Janet Costo of the American Indian Historical Society, 8 April 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28. While most of the 101 Navajo chapters voted against gasification, the greatest opposition came from those regions that would be most directly affected, including the Burnham, Shiprock, Sheep Springs, and Nenahnezad chapters. NIYC narrative, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; Resolutions of the Sheep Springs, Nenahnezad, and Burnham chapters of the Navajo Nation, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29. NIYC news release, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

24. Questions for Navajo leaders about coal gasification proposals, 6 January 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; NIYC news release, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; Peter MacDonald to Wilkinson and Redhouse, 28 March 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

25. NIYC summary report: "Why the Navajo Tribe Tabled the El Paso Lease," 1 December 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28. Lynn A. Robbins, "Energy Development and the Navajo Nation," in Jorgensen, *Native Americans and Energy Development*, 45.

26. NIYC news release, 4 December 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28; "NIYC opposes bill to aid gasification," *Navajo Times*, 11 December 1975.

27. Opposition to the federal loan guarantees was more or less split down partisan lines, with Democrats generally opposing the amendment and Republicans favoring it. However, political party affiliation was irrelevant with New Mexico's congressional delegation, as both senators and representatives voted in favor of the amendment. *House Vote on Senate Amendment Providing Federal Loan Guarantees for Synthetic Fuels*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 121, pt. 31 (11 December 1975): 40167.

28. NIYC news release, 30 December 1975, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 28.

29. "Coal Gasification Plans Proceed Despite Snag," *Albuquerque Journal*, 28 December 1975; "Indian Youth Council Gives Gasification Stand," *Farmington Daily Times*, 8 January 1976; "Councilmen among Four on Aircraft," *Albuquerque Journal*, 8 January 1976; Jerry Kammer, "Navajo Asks Fair Resource Share," *Gallup Independent*, 6 January 1976.

30. NIYC took Johnson's death seriously, preparing a special informative packet on the councilman and calling on the FBI to conduct a full-scale investigation. Staffers also demanded that investigators present their findings to the Navajo Nation. The councilman did, however, have his share of enemies—there was his outspoken criticism of WESCO, EPNG, and Domenici, but he had also locked horns with the AFL-CIO in opposition to unions on the Navajo Reservation. Moreover, he was relentless in his condemnation of BIA Commissioner Morris Thompson, and he even had an adversarial relationship with AIM. Regardless, it was never discovered whether Johnson's death was a case of foul play. Bob Duke, "Navajo Director Transfer Hassle Rages: Charge BIA Wants 'Yes Men,'" *Albuquerque Tribune*, 6 January 1976; Jerry Kammer, "Councilman Sees Multi-Million Stake in Reservation Unionism," *Gallup Independent*, 5 January 1976; NIYC press release, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29; NIYC summary report, 23 February 1976, box 25, folder 29; Helen Sharer, "Loan Program Urged for Gasification," *Albuquerque Journal*, 8 January 1976; Donna Ogline, "Gasification Loan Guarantees Urged: Witnesses Tell Senator Reasons for Bill Support," *Farmington Daily Times*, 8 January 1976.

31. "Chairman Arrives Late For Burnham Meeting," newspaper clipping, 14 March 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; "Coalition Opposes Coal Gasification," *Gallup Independent*, 17 February 1976; Peter Katel, "Indian Youth Leader Against Coal Plants," *The New Mexican*, 7 March 1976.

32. Jorgensen, *Native Americans and Energy Development*, 1; MacDonald, "Navajo Tribal Chairman Explains Mining Position," 5; NIYC report, 22 October 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30.

33. Apparently, one councilman received death threats from an opponent(s) of the lease and gasification. Bill Donovan, "Burnham Councilman May Resign," *Gallup*

Independent, 27 August 1976. NIYC summary report, 31 August 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29; Bill Donovan, "Protest Delays Navajo Council," *Gallup Independent*, 25 August 1976; Bill Donovan, "18 Demonstrators Held," *Gallup Independent*, 26 August 1976. The demonstrators who were arrested were eventually acquitted of all charges.

34. See US Congress, Senate, Committee on Public Works, *Impact of Energy Development on Northwestern New Mexico: Hearings before the Committee on Public Works*, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., 12 March 1976; NIYC summary report, 2 July 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29; Jonas Mustach to Olin Teague, 28 May 1976, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 29.

35. US Congress, Senate, John O. Pastore of Rhode Island argues for S. 3105, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 122, pt. 17 (25 June 1976): 20648; US Congress, House, B. F. Sisk of California Favors Synthetic Fuels, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 122, pt. 25 (23 September 1976): 32071. Congressman Ottinger further elaborated on why he opposed the bill, maintaining "serious questions exist regarding any national commitment at the present time to uneconomic, high-cost, supply technologies which substantially exceed the cost of imported oil." Furthermore, according to Ottinger, synthetic fuels may lead oil-exporting countries to further raise energy prices. US Congress, House, Richard L. Ottinger of New York Voices Concern over House Resolution 1545, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 122, pt. 25 (23 September 1976): 32072. Bob Durd, "Report Critical of Synthetic Fuels," *Albuquerque Tribune*, 28 August 1976.

36. US Congress, House, Patsy T. Mink of Hawaii Argues Against H.R. 12112, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 122, pt. 25 (23 September 1976): 32081; *Vote on Amendment Providing Guaranteed Federal Loans to Synthetic Fuel Industry*, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 122, pt. 25 (23 September 1976): 32081-2.

37. Paul Wiek, "Coal Gasification Hopes Alive," *Albuquerque Journal*, 29 September 1976; US Congress, Senate, Section 19 of S. 1340, 95th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 123, pt. 15 (13 June 1977): 18686-90.

38. Herb Blatchford, "Coal City Ghetto," *Americans before Columbus*, (September 1977): 7; Letter to the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Interior, n.d., CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Letter from Ralph F. Keen to Howard W. L'Hommedieu, 29 April 1977, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30.

39. NIYC also urged the tribal council and MacDonald to hold public hearings before a referendum. NIYC petition, 9 February 1977, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30. The 320 signatures gathered represented a small proportion of the area's overall population. According to the New Mexico Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, seven thousand Navajos lived in the Burnham, Fruitland, Nenahnezad, Sanostee, and Two Grey Hills chapters. New Mexico Advisory Committee, "The Farmington Report," 118.

40. Letter to Pete Domenici, 28 March 1977, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30; Jim Largo, "Domenici Says Plant Decision up to Navajos," *Albuquerque Journal*, 2 June 1977; Letter to Senator Domenici, June 1977, CSWR, OFNIYC, box 25, folder 30.

41. In his article, Blatchford stated that social conditions on the Navajo Reservation would spiral downward if gasification plants and the resulting boomtowns were constructed. Explicit in his descriptions, he wrote that there would be "young girls bent over in agony and cramping from rape" on every corner; that the "rootless, landless people who are in a constant agony of their own making will inevitably turn

sacred lands into recreation sites. . . . Eating grounds will be on refuse, boating will be on cadavers of drowned bodies, historical sites will be devastated with condoms and tissues.” He contended that vagrancy and divorce would be widespread and that “suicides will be a common factor in the every day tempo.” Blatchford, “Coal City Ghetto,” 6–7.

42. Robert S. McPherson and David A. Wolff, “Poverty, Politics, and Petroleum: The Utah Navajo and the Aneth Oil Field,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1997): 455, 458, 460, 461, and 464.