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Reviews

Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations. By Charles Wilkinson. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005. 541 pages. \$26.95 cloth.

Blood Struggle is clearly intended to be an important work. Charles Wilkinson, its author, is a preeminent scholar of federal Indian law. He has decades of experience working on behalf of Indians. In *Blood Struggle*, he has removed his lawyer's hat and donned the robes of a historian. Wilkinson's aim is to tell the story of how the tribes converted themselves from administered "reservations" to self-governing "homelands." This, he alerts us, is a story not of what federal officials have done but of what the tribal leaders have accomplished. He focuses on how tribal leaders learned to operate within the political and legal systems that for so long had dominated and subjugated the tribes. Through interviews with tribal leaders, transcripts of public hearings, and secondary literature, Wilkinson has constructed a narrative of how they used that knowledge to overcome their subjugation and how they built the institutions of government needed for true self-governance.

Wilkinson writes that the movement's success "would have to be achieved in many hundreds of reservations, legislatures, courts and administrative offices" (112). *Blood Struggle's* intriguing structure captures this multifaceted story. Accounts of individuals and their tribes are woven together to create the larger picture of national change. Each illustrative story is headed by a map of the reservations involved. The maps are simple but visually arresting. In a sense they form the spine of the book, powerfully signaling the centrality of the tribes. The overall narrative, meanwhile, is divided into four main sections in chronological order—each of which features core themes associated with the period covered—while the illustrative stories within it move back and forth in time. Wilkinson knows how to wield a pen; his writing is engaging. Even so, given the many eddies and swirls, navigating the flow of the narrative can be demanding. There is just too much to absorb if one attempts to read the text straight through.

This is a book, in other words, with heft. It is a very deliberate testament, compellingly told, to a remarkable achievement by American Indians. The first of the four sections, "Abyss," covers the 1950s, when the tribes faced

federal Indian policies that sought to put an end to tribalism. The individual narratives feature Roger Jourdain and the Red Lake Band of Chippewa, the Oglala Sioux, the Quinault, the Nez Perce, the Menominee, and the Klamath. "Last Stand," the second section, covers the 1960s and the activism of that period. Wilkinson downplays the Red Power movement that was then such a prominent face of Indian affairs; it is crammed into just one part of a relatively short chapter. He chooses instead to turn to the tribal leaders, the "cadre of determined tribal chairmen" (125), who for the most part, he notes, "had a different style" (130). Wilkinson portrays these leaders as conservative and patient, yet also astute, fiercely dedicated, and unwavering in their attempts to retain the lands and the legal status of the reservations. He also stresses the accomplishment of young, college-educated American Indians, who created a comprehensive political agenda centered on legal protection for Indian treaties and tribal sovereignty. Throughout the book, Wilkinson singles out individual players and celebrates their achievements. In this section, Hank Adams, Darcy McNickle, and Vine Deloria are discussed. The Office of Economic Opportunity in the 1960s, too, is given its due in the struggle to bypass the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The third section, "Foundations for Self-Determination," depicts the ongoing development of the modern Indian movement. In Wilkinson's view, it had crystallized into something solid and enduring only by 1975, the year that the American Indian Self-Determination Act became law. Finally, the fourth section, "Reviving the Homelands" turns to the sovereignty-building and the institutional development of the tribes over the last two decades.

Blood Struggle fills an important gap in the historical record, which has given perhaps too much prominence to the exploits of activists and federal officials. Yet, for all its detail—and it is truly rich in detail, as well as drama—this account has some surprising and even confusing gaps of its own. One striking and curious aspect of the personal and tribal stories, for instance, is how little *Blood Struggle* conveys of the interactions between the tribal leaders—many of whom, such as Roger Jourdain and Cato Valandra, hunkered down to negotiate the best deals they could for their tribes and reservations—and the high-risk, high-profile, charge-and-be-damned approach of the American Indian Movement and other activists. Wilkinson's history omits almost every vestige of internal controversy in the movement. Absent, too, is a discussion of how tribal leaders handled disagreements to reach—or not reach—consensus. How, for instance was co-optation managed? Wilkinson does not probe. Instead he drains from his depiction of the movement the very sense of urgency and high-stakes struggle for survival conveyed by the title *Blood Struggle*.

What else is missing? An analysis of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Congress and the courts are the key federal players according to Wilkinson, who barely gives a nod to the executive branch. The BIA's colonialistic power is a looming, mostly off-stage presence, its details unspecified, indistinct. Wilkinson's emphasis on the Congress and the courts perhaps explains another curious omission: key individuals in the struggle for change. For example, he fails to mention Jim Wilson, the Oglala Sioux who, from the "Indian desk" of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), so effectively

nurtured new opportunities for change. Wilkinson writes glowingly of the impact of the OEO. He notes that it injected into Indian Country a new confidence and determination “not seen since the creation of the reservation system” (193). Wilson’s inspired combination of funding and opportunities that helped a new Indian leadership to emerge was a key factor in the OEO’s success. In a book that so heavily emphasizes the role of individuals, Wilson’s absence is odd.

Another extraordinary omission is Navajo tribal chairman Peter MacDonald. Controversies swirled around MacDonald’s leadership of the Navajo. In the 1990s he was jailed by the tribal and then federal governments for actions he took as chairman. Nevertheless, in the earlier years, MacDonald was an articulate and courageous tribal leader on the forefront of the movement for change during the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, when many tribal leaders were still pinned down by the powerful BIA, MacDonald acted with an open defiance that few could match. OEO-based activists and leaders, such as Ernie Stevens and Browning Pipestem, who worked with the OEO, the BIA, and the tribes, are also left out of this story of struggle. True, they were federal officials. But they were also tribal figures who spent decades working for change.

And that in turn raises the question: Why did Wilkinson so adamantly choose to exclude federal officials whose contributions were a key part of the struggle? Or, for that matter, why were crucial white allies also left out? Tom Tureen’s work on the Maine land claims is covered in long and glowing detail. But Edgar Cahn, who brought Tureen into the field, is not mentioned. His work with Indian activists, which produced *Our Brother’s Keeper: The Indian in White America*, a book that helped to galvanize activists on and off reservations throughout the country, is also missing. And how can it be that “the movement” solidified only *after* the passage of the American Indian Self-Determination Act—surely a significant achievement in itself?

As a writer, it is of course Wilkinson’s privilege to pick and choose what he wishes to emphasize. These are nonetheless strange gaps. The length of the book, the detail, the care with which individuals are honored, Wilkinson’s reputation as a legal scholar and prominent ally of the Indians, the fulsome praise from Steward Udall, Vine Deloria, Alvin Josephy, and others on the book’s jacket—all of these elements give the impression that this is a book meant to anchor the historical record. As I wrote above, this work was intended to be an important book. The reader is left all the more puzzled and, quite frankly, disturbed by what has not been included. Barely mentioned are firebrand leaders who put their lives at risk. Disregarded are the fierce internal divisions in Indian Country that spoke to the opportunities and dangers of political action. Left out, too, is the passionate confusion that inevitably accompanies struggle. The executive branch is relegated somewhat inexplicably to relative insignificance. For all its eloquence, drama, and rich detail, the story of tribal sovereignty that Wilkinson depicts in *Blood Struggle* feels unsettlingly partial and incomplete. The struggle is surprisingly bloodless.

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