

Dissenting Voices in America's  
Rise to Power

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The most articulate skeptics of allotment were found in what was, by standards of the era, a minority of oddballs. The National Indian Defense Association, led by Dr. Thomas Bland, opposed coerced acculturation. It could not possibly serve Indian well-being, he explained in essays for *The Council Fire*. Indians should be left alone to develop in their own way and shape their own destiny in cultural freedom. Their communal relationships and other values were not devoid of admirable qualities; many were worth preserving or developing further.<sup>95</sup>

Bland's multiculturalist notions surfaced briefly in congressional discussion. House and Senate dissenters doubted whether Indians with their communalist outlook and vague understanding of personal property could comprehend the capitalist economy about to be imposed. The ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan was cited as authority. He had warned that the result of allotment "would . . . be that in a very short time [the Indian] would divest himself of every foot of land and fall into poverty." Aware that allotment experiments in the past had pauperized tribes, some congressmen wondered about the good faith of land reformers.<sup>96</sup> The minority report of the House Committee on Indian Affairs charged in a 1880 debate on severalty:

The real [purpose of this policy] is to get at the Indian lands and open them up to settlement. The provisions for the apparent benefit of the [Indian] are but the pretext to get his lands and occupy them . . . If this were done in the name of greed it would be bad enough; but to do it in the name of humanity, and under the cloak of an ardent desire to promote the Indian's welfare by making him like ourselves, whether he will or not, is infinitely worse.<sup>97</sup>

Congress's most unbudging opponent of Dawes's severalty plan was Senator Teller. He called it "fraught with evil."<sup>98</sup> Before his Washington life, he had soldiered as an officer in the Colorado militia. He had helped smooth the path for Colorado statehood in 1876. Western development, especially mines and railroads, was for him an abiding cause. He had been a lawyer admired for encyclopedic knowledge of mining regulations. He had worked as counsel for the Union Pacific. He spent thirty years in Washington in the upper chamber (as Republican and Democrat)

beginning in 1876. He interrupted this legislative career to assume the Interior portfolio during Chester Arthur's presidency, 1881–1885.

His overall outlook was unexceptional for a Coloradan of his day. Teller came to identify wholly with the pro-silver chorus. He did not believe in racial equality: "I say that the Caucasian race . . . is superior in mental force, intellectual vigor, and morals to any other branch of the human family."<sup>99</sup> He was testy with criticisms of the way westerners dealt with Indians. He never subjected his fellow Methodist, Chivington, to close scrutiny.

Teller possessed enough of the maverick not to succumb to every prevailing prejudice. Nor did he hate. He objected to the slave South. But he favored a mild Reconstruction after the Civil War. He doubted African capabilities. But he welcomed black emancipation. He entertained more generous ideas about Indians than most whites of his region. The Nez Perce saga compared in his estimation with that of Xenophon and his 10,000 soldiers traipsing through Persia. Of the war fought by Chief Joseph's people, Teller commented: "I believe no set of men ever went to war in the history of war[fare] who had a better cause for war than the Nez Perce Indians."<sup>100</sup> In contrast with Plumb, Teller favored provisions for Indian education; he enhanced its funding while Interior secretary. He visited Carlisle and was friendly with Pratt. Teller enjoyed the confidence of Helen Hunt Jackson. He won the praise of Frederick Douglass, himself a champion of Indian rights.<sup>101</sup>

Teller's skepticism of the allotment idea sprang from knowledge of Indian economies more sophisticated than that of reformers of Dawes's stripe. They would disturb, said Teller. They would create havoc. They would ensure further harm to a damaged people. Better to label severalty "a bill to despoil the Indians of their lands and to make them vagabonds on the face of the earth." They had not asked for severalty. Few understood it.<sup>102</sup> He foretold in Senate chambers:

When thirty or forty years shall have passed and these Indians shall have parted with their title, they will curse the hand that was raised professedly in their defense to secure this kind of legislation and if the people who are clamoring for it understood Indian character, and Indian laws, and Indian morals, and Indian religion, they would not be here clamoring for this at all.<sup>103</sup>

Neither Dawes nor Cleveland was oblivious to the pitfalls of dividing and privatizing the reservations. Were allotment accomplished abruptly or prematurely, Dawes cautioned a Mohonk assembly, before tribes were educated in arcane property law and rudimentary English, they would fall prey to land jumpers and speculators. Protections in the law, though, such as prohibitions on selling allotments before twenty-five years,

apparently reassured Dawes, as did his conviction about the need to make Indians into propertied individuals.<sup>104</sup> He subscribed wholly to these words of Merrill Gates, president of Amherst College, when in 1896 he expressed at Lake Mohonk this faith in capital accumulation:

We have, to begin with, the absolute need of awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. To bring him out of savagery into civilization we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to *awaken in him wants*. In his dull savagery he must be touched by the wings of the divine angel of discontent. Then he begins to look forward, to reach out. The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force. The wish for a home of his own awakens him to new efforts. Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers – and trousers with *a pocket in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars!* . . . The truth is, that there can be no strongly developed personality without the teaching of property – material property, and property in thoughts and convictions that are one's own. By acquiring property, man puts forth his personality and lays hold of matter by his own thought and will . . . The Savior's teaching is full of illustrations of the right use of property . . . There is an immense moral training that comes from the use of property.<sup>105</sup>

Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth* (1889) contained no clearer statement of Gilded Age devotion to enlightened materialism or its elevating effect.<sup>106</sup> The concerns of Bland or Teller, from such loftiness, seemed mere quibbling. Dawes with Cleveland's help had kept Grant's faith: the United States could create a respectable niche for the land's original occupants. By cajoling and edification, they would be swept into thrilling America.