TERMINATION REDUX?
Seminole Citizenship and Economy from Truman to Gaming

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Truman-era federal Indian policy grappled with a thorny question: Was the existence of tribal government compatible with American citizenship for indigenous individuals? That is, did the extension of American citizenship to American Indians, which had been codified with passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, presume a concomitant diminishment of tribal government power? Policymakers’ and activists’ positions on these matters were shaped not only by their postwar views on the role of government in American life more generally, but also by their conceptualization of the relationship between economic well-being and Indianness. Today, when tribal casinos dominate news headlines about American Indians, political matters of economy, Indianness, and citizenship are as pressing as ever. In fact, debates about tribal gaming sometimes bear an uncanny, but not coincidental, resemblance to Truman-era tussles over termination.

This paper outlines some of the double binds of economy and governance that have faced American Indians, with a focus on Florida Seminoles. In debates over both termination and gaming, American Indians struggled against two related and pervasive American assumptions, one about sovereignty and the other about citizenship. The first assumption finds indigenous wealth to be incompatible with the sovereign governmental authority of tribal nations, either because wealth renders sovereignty unnecessary or because it is a sign that indigenous peoples are not different enough to be treated as separate peoples and polities. The second assumption finds indigenous wealth to be incompatible with the differentiated political status whereby American Indian individuals are citizens both of the United States and also of their own tribal nations. I will trace these American log-
to most other tribal operations, the majority of which are located on rural reservations.

Casinos have dramatically affected the lives of approximately 3,500 Seminole citizens who live on or near six South Florida reservations, not to mention the thousands of non-Seminole residents who work for the casinos or the many businesses that contract with them. The tribal budget grew rapidly from less than $2 million in 1979 to over $400 million by the mid-2000s, with over 95 percent of recent budgets coming from gaming revenues. The elected tribal council distributes gaming revenues to various governmental programs and to each individual tribal member in the form of per capita dividends. With gaming, Seminoles have undertaken a single-generation transformation from widespread poverty to overall economic security.

The use of gaming revenues include tribal social services such as health clinics and universal health insurance, lifelong education scholarships and two reservation schools, tribal law enforcement, and housing. Tribal control over social services has enabled Seminoles to design their own programs in new ways: gaming has not simply increased the number or the coverage of services, but it additionally has altered their very shape and meaning. Seminoles also have devoted large sums to cultural production and preservation. Cultural programs include the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, youth and adult cultural education programs, fairs and festivals, and language training. One example is Seminole Broadcasting (WSBC), the tribal television station that covers community-related events (including the conference on which this volume is based), produces documentaries, and serves as a repository for cultural knowledge.

The tribal government also allocates gaming revenues toward economic diversification. Seminoles had long faced serious obstacles to economic security, including tribal and individual debt, structural barriers to credit (because reservation land is inalienable and collateral is hard to come by), unemployment, and fiscal exposure to federal funding cuts. Like other American Indians, Seminoles worry that gaming will be halted by congressional action or market saturation, so economic diversification is a priority. In the gaming era, tribal businesses have ranged from citrus groves to real estate, an overseas cattle herd to investments in other tribes' casinos, ecotourism to gas stations. Meanwhile, the dramatic expansion of the tribal bureaucracy has brought new job opportunities to tribal citizens.

Finally, Seminoles use gaming revenues to protect their tribal sovereignty, whether through legal battles, lobbying, or political contributions. That Seminole economic prosperity has reinforced tribal sovereignty would have confounded the expectations of many Truman-era federal Indian policy experts, who presumed that indigenous wealth would lead to assimilation and individualization. In order to understand the current politics of tribal gaming against the historical backdrop of termination, we now turn to the Truman era.

THE ECONOMIC LOGICS OF TERMINATION

The effects of Truman-era federal Indian law and policy were mostly indirect for Florida Seminoles. Seminoles filed a 1947 claim under the Indian Claims Commission, a move that brought much-needed settlement funds but that also strained relations with Oklahoma Seminoles and other Florida Indians who would refuse settlement and come to be known as Miccosukees and Independent Seminoles. The 1947 dedication of the Everglades National Park was the most immediately significant act by the Truman administration, for the park's creation ejected Indian families living within park boundaries and greatly reduced the indigenous land base. As for termination, one could be excused for assuming that Seminoles had no reason to worry that they would be included among the tribes whose government-to-government relationship with the United States would be severed. After all, during the 1940s most Seminoles maintained only loose relations with federal officials, they had only recently begun to move onto reservations, and they were resolutely distinctive in their ways of life. Nor had Seminoles participated in national-level policy debates over whether and how American Indians should be encouraged to embrace American citizenship.

Nonetheless, and much to the surprise of almost everyone, Florida Seminoles were included on the list of tribes slated for termination by House Concurrent Resolution 108. Historian Harry Kersey Jr. has analyzed the reasons for their inclusion elsewhere. Seminoles largely opposed termination. Ultimately, they avoided termination and in 1957 reorganized their government to secure federal recognition. As with many other tribes, Seminoles responded to the threat of termination by asserting their self-determination.

A critical aspect of termination was economy, and economy figured prominently in hearings about Seminole termination. One of the ideas that guided termination was that "advanced" tribes with sufficient economic resources should no longer have a collective, political relationship with the United States. Rather, individual citizenship and assimilation were encouraged, while federal supervision and tribal governance both were cast as obstacles to the full realization of American citizenship. As early as 1947, Truman's acting commissioner of Indian affairs, William Zimmerman Jr., testified during a Senate hearing that he thought it was
time to terminate federal services to more “advanced” tribes. Zimmerman listed criteria for severing federal ties with Indian tribes, and these included “economic capacity.” By the time termination policy became law in 1953, increased attention was paid to tribal assets as a criterion for determining which tribes should be terminated.\(^8\)

Why was the economic status of a tribe an important criterion (albeit not the only one) for termination? The place of economy in termination reveals a fundamental confusion in federal Indian policy during the Truman and Eisenhower years, a confusion that persists in today’s debates over gaming. Many in Washington misrecognized the government-to-government relationship between each American Indian tribe and the United States to be primarily a relation of service provision and wardship. The 1953 bill focused on eliminating “federal supervision and control,” and the goal was “to make the Indians within the territorial limits of the United States subject to the same laws and entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities as are applicable to other citizens of the United States, to end their status as wards of the United States, and to grant them all of the rights and prerogatives pertaining to American citizenship.”\(^9\) Termination confused tribal governance with federal supervision, and U.S. citizenship with cultural assimilation and market participation.

Need-based views of the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ (BIA) role in American Indians’ everyday lives led to legitimate criticism of governmental control. However, in their postwar focus on the evils of state paternalism, many observers ignored the importance of tribal sovereignty (i.e., the governmental authority of the tribes) and the federal trust obligation as the foundations of tribal-federal relations. Federal Indian affairs are not simply a matter of providing services to poor people. Rather, they entail government-to-government relations, based in treaties and other sources of political authority, whereby the United States recognizes the governmental status of the various tribes. Termination politics failed to separate these issues: on the one hand, a necessary critique of the BIA’s control over indigenous peoples’ lives; and on the other hand, the more basic question of whether American Indian tribes should continue to be recognized as polities by the federal government.

This confusion, in part, reflected many Americans’ distinctly cultural ideas about economy, about what it meant to be an economic actor and how this related to indigeneity and to whiteness. Indigenous economic success, in the eyes of many whites, was itself evidence of assimilation to “American” ways. It was, hence, a mode and sign of whiteness. One corollary of the idea that economic power equaled assimilation was that “real” Indians were poor. The racism of this logic might seem obvious in hindsight, until we recognize that similar assumptions pervade American debates about whether wealth from tribal gaming reflects—or causes—indigenous cultural loss. It is telling that even many witnesses opposing Seminole termination couched their arguments in terms of Seminoles’ inability to manage their own economic lives, and even historian James Covington cast termination in terms of economic self-management rather than sovereignty: “It was fortunate that the members of Congress changed their minds concerning the Seminoles, for the tribe, like the majority of American Indians, needed more time to manage their economic affairs before federal services were terminated.”\(^10\)

With assimilation, it was further presumed, came the demise of tribalism. The association of market participation and wealth, on the one hand, with U.S. citizenship and the decline of indigenous self-governance, on the other hand, were not new, but rather had antecedents in federal Indian policy and popular perceptions. One effect of this economic logic should be noted: it foreclosed the possibility that American Indians can become wealthy while retaining indigenous forms of governance. Various federal Indian policies have been structured on the self-fulfilling assumption that wealth and market participation not only undermine individual indigenous identity, but also collective governance. During the Seminole termination hearings there was some ambiguity as to whether collective governance could survive termination, when lawmakers suggested that it might be possible to create a post-termination private corporation to hold Seminoles’ lands collectively. Interior officials insisted, however, that in the federal government’s eyes, Seminoles henceforth would be treated as individual citizens, not a tribal entity, regardless of whether they joined together privately to form a corporation.\(^11\)

Interestingly, some U.S. senators viewed Seminoles’ prior economic and administrative independence from the federal government—their relatively autonomous and culturally distinctive lives in the Everglades—as evidence of their fit for termination. Although Seminoles were relatively poor they did not receive extensive federal support, and some lawmakers interpreted Seminole independence as signaling their embrace of individualism.\(^12\) Seminole witnesses often disagreed, even those who simply wanted the federal government to go away and leave them alone. Buffalo Tiger testified that his off-reservation group sought neither money nor supervision but instead just aimed to hold onto lands where they could live and hunt. He was asked whether, in that case, each person wanted an individual plot of land. Tiger replied: “No; they don’t want it that way. They don’t want it. They want the tribal council should have the land so that all of us can live on it and all hunt on it. They don’t want chopped up.”\(^13\) That is, he refused the termination logic whereby “liberation” from federal supervision equaled
individualization, and he upheld the importance of collective governance. Disagreements over whether Seminoles and other tribes were “capable” of managing their own economic affairs channeled termination hearings away from the basic political question of whether the United States should recognize the indigenous governments as such. Also obscured by the economic emphasis was colonialism. During the Seminole hearings only Henry Cypress, a Seminole witness, brought up the federal government’s obligation to Indians as based on colonial expropriation: “As far as we know, when we look back in the history, your forefathers fighting for the country, and you got it now, and we got a little piece of land on the reservation. Therefore, the Government supervision to help us should continue.”  
Cypress offered an alternative economic logic to individualized economic citizenship: one of obligation and reciprocity that attends to the history of colonialism.

Laura Mac Osceola, a translator and subsequent member of the Seminole Constitutional Committee, argued her opposition to termination within its economic logics, casting her reasoning in need-based terms. She emphasized that Seminoles were not ready for termination. Yet her confidence in Seminoles’ future economic power was clear in her response to a Congressman’s query about whether Seminoles had made progress: “Yes. In twenty-five years they won’t need your help. We will be giving you help.” Today some Seminoles—especially Osceola’s son, Max Jr., who is an elected tribal councilman and frequent tribal spokesperson—recall her testimony with pride, noting that twenty-five years later Seminoles became the first American Indian tribal government to launch tribal gaming.

TERMINATION REDUX?

Much has changed for Seminoles and other American Indian peoples since the Truman era. Most spectacular has been the economic and political impact of tribal gaming. Yet however different the casino era might seem from termination, a closer look suggests that the economic logics of termination are still in play.

Just as indigenous economic “success” (i.e., market integration) was for many termination-era observers a mark of assimilation, so too does casino-based wealth expose American Indians to the concern—or suspicion—that they are “losing their culture.” The 1999 final report of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, a body established by Congress, found that “a common theme among many opposed to Indian gambling is a concern that gambling may undermine the ‘cultural integrity’ of Indian communities.” A representative of a leading group opposing casinos and tribal sovereignty, Upstate Citizens for Equality, claimed that tribes hide behind the idea that “they need sovereignty to preserve their culture,” when instead they “use it to build casinos.” He added that corrupt governments among gaming tribes are “a bigger enemy of Indian culture than anybody,” and “Indians don’t need sovereignty, or a whole federal bureau, to maintain their culture.” Recent popular culture portrayals, for example in Harry Shearer’s novel Not Enough Indians or the television animated series Family Guy, traffic in the humor of either fake Indians seeking gaming windfalls (Shearer) or Indians who have lost any connection to a distinct cultural life amidst the search for casino wealth (Family Guy). It is not simply that many Americans believe that casinos will lead to indigenous cultural loss or the disintegration of indigenous polities. Rather, many take casinos to be signs that tribes with gaming aren’t all that different from other American communities in the first place, and that they are the same in unsavory ways to boot. The corollary is that the sovereignty and self-determination of wealthy gaming tribes (and other tribal nations by association?) rest on shaky ground.

In the gaming era, just as during termination, a “rich Indian” is an oxymoron in American public culture. The seeming contradiction of indigenous wealth is built upon assumptions in three areas: culture, money, and indigency. First is the problematic notion that culture is a static thing that is always at risk of being lost. Second is the persistent idea in modern Western thought that money abstracts social relations and has a corrosive effect on cultural distinctiveness. Third is the above-mentioned identification of American Indian peoples with poverty, such that indigenous authenticity is associated with being poor while wealth is associated with whiteness and being “American.”

This bundle of associations has consequences and constitutes a nexus of neocolonialism. For example, recent Supreme Court rulings have suggested that indigenous commercial success undermines tribal sovereign immunity. Legal theorist T. Alexander Kleinikoff observed that gaming wealth threatens sovereignty because some lawmakers hold that “the increasing wealth and sophistication of the tribes argue for their assimilation and the ending of special Indian programs. To adopt the language of the late nineteenth century, Indians no longer need the guardianship of the federal government.” Or as Native American Times columnist Tom Giago put it, “The feeling among the non-Indian was that if Indians are making so much money they can now fend for themselves. In the new mindset casino Indians ceased to be Indians.” Proposals occasionally pop up in Congress to subject federal Indian programs to “means testing,” whereby federal obligations would be assessed by fiscal “need,” and wealthier tribes would no longer have access to treaty-based resources. As in the
termination era, economic success threatens indigeneity and sovereignty. Meanwhile, state-recognized tribes that seek federal recognition, such as six tribes in Virginia and Lumbees in North Carolina, are increasingly being forced to accept the legislative stipulation that they will not operate tribal casinos.

Seminole face new, wealth-linked skepticism about whether they “deserve” the sovereignty-based rights upon which tribal gaming was established. After the tribe announced the purchase of Hard Rock International in 2006, for example, Internet news boards including Yahoo! and CBS News were abuzz with user comments that Seminoles did not deserve “special rights” because they were rich. Jack Gordon, an attorney representing a woman who unsuccessfully tried to sue Seminoles over a casino slip-and-fall injury, told a reporter: “When they [Seminoles] got sovereign immunity, no one envisioned they’d be taking wheelbarrows of cash away the way they are now.” He implied that Seminole sovereign immunity was outdated and ill-fitted for modern tribal wealth.

As numerous older Seminoles have reported, no one used to bother them when they were poor, wresting alligators and selling trinkets to tourists, but once they became wealthy their government and their lives came under the public microscope. Michele Thomas recalled one episode of “rich Indian” jealousy, when the Brighton Reservation Parent Advisory Committee entered a float in a local town’s Christmas parade and a female spectator shouted: “Aren’t you guys those rich Seminoles with the casinos? Give me some of that money.” These days, added Thomas, “all we are when we’re in public is a rich Indian.” Whereas many Seminole vehicles once proudly sported tribally-issued Seminole Indian state license plates, many tribal citizens now buy “regular” Florida plates after a few cases of keying, hostile verbal responses to the plates by some non-Indians, and a widening fear that Seminole-identified vehicles are targeted for road rage by resentful Floridians. It would be tempting to view these tensions only through the prism of stereotypes and shifting race relations. However, gaming disputes across the United States have shown that the specter of tribal gaming wealth also fuels anti-sovereignty movements. The political status of Florida Seminoles and other American Indian tribes, and their recognition as sovereigns, is once again threatened by the economic logics of termination.

**Seminole Citizenship in the Casino Era**

Across the United States, tribal gaming has raised questions about whether the full realization of American citizenship for indigenous peoples is consistent with the exercise of sovereign powers by tribal governments. In the 60 Minutes special “Wampum Wonderland,” for example, Preston, Connecticut, selectman Robert Congdon found tribal gaming rights to contradict the basic values of American citizenship and nationhood: “Whatever happened to one nation under God, indivisible? I have a real problem with this country being set up where there are different rights for different groups, different privileges, different immunities. This is one nation, under God, indivisible.” Anti-sovereignty groups like the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance have opposed gaming. As this group’s name suggests, their arguments often rest on a theory of “equal citizenship” that allows no space for tribal sovereignty within the American federalist system. Indigenous peoples often make collective claims based on sovereignty and self-determination. In many settler states, even federalist ones, these claims generally are treated as a “problem” for citizenship. Just as with wealth, gaming-related disputes over citizenship echo termination. For termination advocates, the achievement of full U.S. citizenship for American Indian individuals conflicted with robust tribal governance. House Concurrent Resolution 108 (67 Stat. 3122), known as the Termination Bill, aimed “to grant [Indians] all of the rights and prerogatives pertaining to American citizenship,” and this in turn required that Indians “assume their full responsibilities as American citizens.” Donald Fidico notes that advocates generally saw termination as promoting civic egalitarianism, whereas many indigenous people viewed it as anti-Indian. As Kenneth Philip has shown, during the 1940s and 1950s many American Indians and their allies insisted that Native people could simultaneously achieve individual first-class American citizenship and maintain the institutions and powers of tribal governments. They did not necessarily see a contradiction between American citizenship and tribal governance.

Seminole termination hearings showed many proponents and opponents alike to associate U.S. citizenship for American Indians with assimilation, often with economic overtones. For example, an important local advocacy group, The Friends of the Seminoles, issued the following statement endorsing Seminoles’ request to delay termination for twenty-five years: “This time is necessary for the education and experience of the youth of the Seminole Nation so that they may learn the English language and the white man’s ways, and be fitted to take their rightful place in our American way of life and as useful citizens of Florida.” Here, citizenship entailed assimilation to the “white man’s ways,” implicitly through economic contributions (as “useful citizens”), but this required interim federal support. Others considered full citizenship to follow from termination, for example when a local congressman stated his opposition: “I know that the
Seminoles themselves do not want the responsibilities of citizenship thrust upon them at this time. After Mike Osceola testified as a rare Seminole supporter of term nation, one enthusiastic senator suggested that Osceola therefore stood in favor of Seminoles’ assimilating with the white people of Florida. But Osceola replied: “I don’t know just what particular reference you have, ‘assimilating.’ Not necessarily. They [Seminoles] can live on their own camps or wherever they want to live…” Osceola advocated U.S. citizenship, but not necessarily assimilation, and he did not assume that one led to the other.

Far from seeing their tribal governance dwindle with the full exercise of American citizenship, Seminoles have witnessed a dramatic expansion of tribal governance since their 1957 reorganization, especially in the gaming era. In 2007, Seminoles celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of reorganization with a daylong celebration for thousands, a press conference, and the theme of survival despite hardship. The present-day tribal bureaucracy is sprawling, with thousands of employees filling overcrowded administration buildings in Hollywood, the tribal seat, and on the other reservations. Most employed Seminoles work for the tribal government, and political participation is robust. Multiple candidates generally run for any elected position, sometimes ten or twelve. Most candidates sponsor at least one campaign dinner, drawing crowds for buffet meals, entertainment, and brief speeches. Voter turnout is high, reliably over 65 percent and as high as 87 percent, and elected officials are well known. By contrast, relatively few Seminoles participate in local, state, or federal elections (some have estimated turnout at less than 10 percent).

Voting alone does not measure citizenship, and Seminoles have increased other forms of civic participation that extend beyond the tribal nation. Most notable is Seminole service in the United States military during and since the Vietnam era. Veterans Day events are well attended, with veterans expressing pride both in their service to the United States and in the legacy of Seminole military prowess against the United States. Annual July 4th fireworks and American flags display U.S. patriotism alongside Seminole flags and Indian Day celebrations. The tribe also makes political contributions to state and federal candidates. Locally, tribal officials increasingly serve as local parade marshals, on regional tourism boards, and as otherwise prominent civic figures. Seminoles have made a special effort to assert their belonging in the context of gaming disputes with the State of Florida. In 1997, the tribe took out an advertisement in local newspapers that began with a question: “Which Floridians employed over 2,200 other Floridians, paid over $3.5 million in federal payroll taxes and purchased more than $24 million worth of Florida goods and services last year?” The answer: “The same Floridians who operate citrus groves, manage one of America’s largest cattle herds and have acted as stewards of the Everglades for over 200 years.” It concludes with bold print surrounding the tribal seal: “100% Seminole. 100% Floridian.”

Seminoles enact overlapping forms of citizenship (across the tribal nation, the nation-state, the state, and the local) that sometimes conflict but often reinforce one another. Gaming wealth has in many ways strengthened tribal governance, even as it has also afforded Seminoles new avenues of civic participation at multiple levels. Seminoles once again have defied the civic and economic logics of termination.

**CONCLUSION**

On Seminole reservations, the Truman years and termination seem far in the past. Tribal governance is robust, albeit addressing dilemmas such as how to keep pace with economic expansion and how to distribute and reinvest casino revenues. Economic conditions have improved dramatically in a single generation, and children do not know the grinding poverty that confronted their elders. Yet as Seminoles celebrated the anniversary of the 1957 tribal reorganization, they faced many of the same questions posed to their ancestors. What are the cultural and political effects of wealth, of poverty? How can American Indians be citizens of the United States while also asserting a unique and differentiated political status as citizens of sovereign indigenous nations? How can Seminoles overcome outside threats to tribal sovereignty, threats that often are built upon a “need-based” conception of indigenous rights? The persistence of Truman-era questions in the gaming era suggests that both tribal sovereignty and American democracy remain unfinished business.

**Notes**

1. Mason, Indian Gaming and Light and Band, Indian Gaming and Tribal Sovereignty.
3. Cattelino, “Florida Seminole Housing and the Social Meaning of Sovereignty.”
4. Kesey, Assumption of Sovereignty, 76.
5. Wilkinson, Blood Struggle, 86.
7. Philip, Termination Revisited, 71.
8. Ibid., 158.
12. Ibid., 1054.