In the early twentieth century, U.S. government officials pursued a policy of creating programs to meet what they believed were the needs of Native Americans. At this time, most Native Americans lived on reservations throughout the United States so the government allocated funds intended to ensure that Native Americans’ basic food, health, and educational needs were met. These services were overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or BIA, or the Office of Indian Affairs – OIA. However, it became clear that these provisions were grossly inadequate.

Merriam Report, Indian Reorganization Act, and Cultural Pluralism: In 1928, the Merriam Report was released. This report made clear that Native Americans in the early twentieth century were beset with a wide variety of social and economic problems including extreme poverty, high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, suicide, infant mortality and other health-related issues, and low levels of education. In an effort to address these problems, the Indian Reorganization Act, or IRA, was passed in 1934.

Under the leadership of Commissioner John Collier, this program was intended to provide medical, educational, and economic help for Native Americans while embracing the ideal of cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is the concept that minority groups can participate fully in the dominant society, yet maintain their cultural differences.

But, the issues facing twentieth century Native Americans were so great and so pervasive that the IRA would not be sufficient to provide the assistance they needed. By the 1940s, the U.S. government began to consider a policy of “termination” intended to sever all ties between the tribes and the government and to pursue a policy of dismantling the reservations and requiring full assimilation of Native Americans into American life in American towns and cities. This policy would save the government untold millions of dollars as it would no longer be responsible for the welfare of Native Americans. The “safety net” of the reservation would cease to exist as they had known it. The goal of termination was to treat Native Americans like every other minority group in America. They would need to leave the reservations and try to make new lives for themselves without large-scale government assistance.

Options for Native Americans: But were Native Americans willing or ready for this transition? Had they been given the tools necessary to make this adjustment? How many of them actually wished to leave reservations to make new lives in the cities?

On the reservations they experienced a life of cultural immersion where everyone around them was a part of their group, where a type of communal living existed, and where they could continue their cultural practices and traditions. So, although life on reservations was a life of poverty and most certainly not ideal, it was what they knew. In cities, they would experience cultural dispersion where they would live amongst many different groups of people and their
children would attend schools that were culturally and ethnically diverse. In this environment, it would be difficult to retain and pass down their cultural practices.

Furthermore, on reservations, Native Americans identified themselves as distinctly Cherokee, or Apache, or Shawnee, etc., but Americans saw them simply as a monolithic group of Indians – curiosities left over from a distant and exotic American past.

Additionally, the skills and talents that were marketable on the reservations such as artistic or musical endeavors would be of little or no use in cities. And, there were other difficult adjustments that would need to be made. Typically, Native American groups were given reservations in areas of the country that were isolated and rural. They were not used to the impersonal and chaotic nature of large cities. The problems that they faced on the reservations such as high rates of dropping out of school, alcoholism, criminal activity, illness, depression, and poverty, would only be exacerbated by their relocation to cities.
Also important was the idea expressed by many vocal Native Americans that forcing them to assimilate was un-American because, ideally, a traditional right of an American was to determine his or her own course in life. Therefore, Native Americans who wished to assimilate should be encouraged to do so, but those who did not want to leave reservations and who did not wish to assimilate should never be forced to do so. Were Native Americans to be treated as Americans or not? And, what did “being American” mean for twentieth-century Native Americans?

Ultimately, mandated termination never materialized to the extent that Native Americans had feared. Although funding was greatly reduced, to a certain extent, reservation life remained protected and Native Americans were able to choose whether or not to migrate to cities. However, it was apparent that the attitudes in Congress had undergone a subtle shift. If Native Americans were to gain access to the tools that could help them build the American Dream for themselves, they were going to need to organize and demand fair and equal treatment much as southern African Americans had done during the twentieth century.

**National Congress of American Indians (NCAI):** To this end, a group of 80 Native Americans from 50 different tribes founded the National Congress of American Indians, the NCAI, in 1944. The purpose of this Pan-Indian group was to serve as the voice of all Native Americans, both traditionalist, those who wanted to keep the old ways, and assimilationist, those who wanted to integrate into American life. This group was important because it would present a Native American point of view rather than white interpretations of Native Americans’ issues. Also, it bridged the gap between individual tribes and channeled their efforts toward a united purpose. Together, they would be stronger and wield more influence.

Some of the issues about which the NCAI and other similar groups were concerned were compensation for the loss of their ancestral tribal lands, ensuring that all Native Americans had voting rights, and lobbying against termination and for continued federal support for Native American social, economic, and educational programs. They were also concerned that no Native American had been appointed to the position of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. As shown in the image on the left, white men were exclusively in charge of policy that affected Native Americans. The continued practice of not allowing Native Americans to have a say in their future caused Native Americans to continue to distrust the U.S. government. This also meant that the government continued to enact policy that did not address what Native Americans perceived to be their most pressing needs.

![Image](image-url)
Indian Relocation Program: One such example was the Indian Relocation Program which created a propaganda campaign to encourage Native Americans to move to cities as shown in the image below. Passed in 1951, this program paid for Native Americans to leave reservations and provided temporary assistance which was not nearly adequate to support creating new lives and adjusting to the stresses of urban living. The Native American communal way of life as practiced on reservations did not translate well to life in the city. In short, this program was no more successful than any of the other programs put in place by the government without Native American consent. Despite the time and money invested, most Native Americans who had migrated to cities returned to reservations.