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## A Review of *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians* by Frederick E. Hoxie

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*A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920.* By Frederick E. Hoxie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. xvi + 350 pp. \$25.95.

Frederick Hoxie's argument in *A Final Promise* is that there were two distinct phases to the government's assimilation program between 1880 and 1920, divided roughly at 1900. The first was an idealistic, internally consistent policy of fully incorporating the Indians into the American way of life as small landowners with citizenship rights and the equivalent of a common school education—equals among equals, in short. The second phase saw a diminution of expectations and a growing perception, consistent with the segregationist forces active throughout American society, of the Indians as a permanent, backward minority in need of continuing government controls. Their land ownership would be partial, whites managing their resources through leasing arrangements. Trade schools would prepare them for a menial role in life. Even their citizenship would be different, since they would remain wards of the government. The reform vision of the 1880s had yielded to a new "realism" untouched by optimism.

In developing his argument, Hoxie examines a wide range of materials and says much about popular perceptions of the Indian. On the policy level, his discussion of the erosion of Indian land rights after 1900 is particularly valuable, shedding new light on Francis E. Leupp's administration as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. But I am unpersuaded by Hoxie's revisionist argument as a whole. It

rests on a comparison that puts Hoxie in the position of defending the first phase of assimilation in order to attack the second. In the 1880s, he writes, social scientists were mostly social evolutionists who accepted the Indian's capacity to rise to civilization as a law of life; by the 1920s, the scientists were in theoretical disarray, running the gamut from racial to cultural determinists, and pessimistic about the Indians' ability to fully assimilate. To make his case, Hoxie deals in strong contrasts: anthropologists in the 1880s "played a vital role" (p. 143) in formulating the assimilation policy; by the 1920s, they had "switched sides" (p. 145). In fact, such doyens of late nineteenth-century American anthropology as Lewis Henry Morgan and John Wesley Powell opposed the assimilation policy as implemented precisely because they were social evolutionists who believed that human progress was an infinitely slow process that could not be hurried to meet reformer expectations. Their views were closer to those of the gradualists of the twentieth century than of the assimilationists of their day.

But more troubling is the overall implication of Hoxie's argument: total assimilation was "better" than partial assimilation. Assimilation per se is the issue. Reformers and administrators in the period 1880-1900 were committed to the elimination of a distinctive native cultural presence in America; so were their successors after 1900, though Hoxie points out the irony that their partial version of assimilation encouraged the survival of Indian cultures. To praise the earlier reformers for more benign intentions and greater sincerity is to praise Carlisle's Richard Pratt for agreeing that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, therefore kill the Indian and save the man. Despite Hoxie's defense of full assimilation in contrast to its later, exclusionist version, historians will probably remain equally uneasy with both phases of the policy.

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