

Nixon and the Chief: Quakers, the Return of Blue Lake and Nixon's Indian Mentor Wallace J. Newman



In remembrance of Edward Nixon 1930-2019

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President Richard M. Nixon would remark in relation to his domestic policy that it was “building outhouses in Peoria” when compared to his foreign policy objectives. However, one notable “outhouse” from this foreign policy president was the one Nixon and his administration built for the people who lived in what is today the United States of America before anyone else: American Indians. As a citizen of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and as a fan of Nixon’s Presidency, I was surprised to learn of the personal affection that President Nixon had for American Indians and the matching record of success that his presidency delivered. It was Nixon’s White House that ended the “Termination Era” of American Indian policy and replaced it with a new policy called “Self Determination” outlined in the *Special Message to the Congress on Indian Affairs* 1970 that is still in place to this day. It was Richard Nixon that signed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1970, the Indian Education Act of 1972, the Menominee Restoration Act of 1973 and created the Office of Indian Water Rights. Nixon and his White House team dealt with an even hand several highly charged events such as the Occupation of Alcatraz Island which started shortly before his presidency began, the Caravan of Broken Treaties and resulting takeover of the BIA building in Washington, DC to the armed insurrection at Wounded Knee in 1974 without massive bloodshed. However, it is Public Law 91-550 otherwise known as the “Return of Blue Lake Act” of 1970 that resulted in what Nixon aid Bobbie Kilberg recalled the president saying, “was one of the most wonderful events I have ever participated”.¹

In the Research Room:

Thanks to Dr. Michael Wilson, Chair of American Indian Studies and a Professor of English here at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I learned of the personal relationship that underpinned Nixon’s fondness of American Indians; his old ball coach Wallace “Chief” Newman. Newman was a Luiseno Indian from the La Jolla Band of Luiseno Indians and as I found out through research, an active tribal leader in his band and in the American Indian community in California. Chief Newman was the football

¹ Gordan, Mark J. *Bobbie Kilberg: The Return of Taos Pueblo's Sacred Blue Lake*. YouTube, YouTube, 28 Mar. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRAY-Jw96uw.

coach of Whittier College, a small Quaker institution, when a young Richard Nixon was a student there in the early 1930's. Newman left a lasting impact in the small Quaker town of Whittier, California and was a second father to the men who played under him.

Newman's career in Whittier and Nixon's willingness to support American Indian religious rights during his presidency were Quaker rooted. Nixon's Return of Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo which functioned as a pagan shrine showcased the presidents' Quakerism in the respect for other faiths while Chief Newman's college coaching career started and ended at Whittier despite a superior coaching record than his next two successors in George Allan and Don Coryell who would both go on to have distinguished NFL coaching careers. Through the Nixon archives at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California. I will to the best of my abilities tell this overlooked story from the Nixon years.

The Society of Friends and the Red Man:

Quakers have been in contact with American Indians since before the founding of the modern-day United States of America. The first major interactions between the two groups occurred under William Penn and the other early congregations of Quakers in the New World in what is today Pennsylvania. In 1706, Quaker Minister Thomas Chalkley wrote down his recollections of one these early interactions in his journal "She looked upon our coming to be more than natural, because we did not come to buy, or sell, or get Gain, but came in Love and Respect to them."² This meeting between the Quaker congregation and the American Indian tribe was a cordial and respectful dialogue about spiritual life. This mutual respect is inherent in Quaker testimonies about the equality of man and people coming to God of their own accord since Quakers at this time "wanted people to find their own inner connection with the divine, which Quakers referred to as the "Inner Light." [Robert] Barclay, [William] Penn, and

²Thompson, Kari Elizabeth Rose. *Inconsistent friends: Philadelphia Quakers and the development of Native American missions in the long eighteenth century*. PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) thesis, University of Iowa, 2013.<http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2645> p1

others anticipated that the Inner Light manifested itself differently for each person, and they believed this relationship was available for every person, including Native Americans."³

This allowed a peaceful coexistence between the two groups until the mid and late 17th century when Quakers became more zealous and wanted to convert American Indians in a manner like their Catholic and mainline protestant counterparts.⁴ Regardless, the Quakers still viewed American Indians as racially equal and it would be the descendants of these early Quaker communities that founded then Whittier Academy in 1887 and who Richard Nixon through his mother Hannah Milhous was descended from.

Meet Jose Domingo Newman:

Wallace “Chief” Newman was born Jose Domingo Newman in 1902 on the Luiseno Indian reservation in La Jolla, California. His mother was half Luiseno Indian and half Basque and his father was of English and German stock. The combination of Indian and Basque heritage from his mother would give the Chief a “swarthy” complexion that would cause him to be on the borderline for passing white which was why one of his aunts changed his name to “Wallace” from Jose while Newman was still a young boy. “She thought he would have a better chance in life as a “Wallace”.⁵ Chief Newman would grow up on the reservation and learn the Luiseno language from his Indian family members. At the age of 11, he would be sent to the Sherman Institute, an Indian boarding school in nearby Riverside, California. After high school, he attended a local junior college where while playing football for the junior college team he caught the eyes of top programs. “[Elmar] Henderson offered Chief a scholarship to go to USC. He accepted. He also received offers from Stanford and Georgetown.”⁶

Newman would become a team captain at USC and played in the 1923 Rose Bowl game against Penn State. It was at USC where he first gained the nickname “Chief” from Leo Calland which would last

³Thompson, p2

⁴ Thompson, p4

⁵ *The Chief: A Tribute to Wallace J. Newman*. Whittier, CA: Office of Development, Whittier College, 1980. p14

⁶Office of Development, p14

for the rest of his life. After an injury ruined his chances at going pro in baseball he turned to coaching and after several championship seasons on the high school level was hired as the head coach of Whittier's Football, Baseball and Basketball teams.

An unlikely Sports Story:

Due to the financial hardship brought about by the medical expenses occurred by the Nixon family while Nixon's older brother Herald was dying of tuberculosis, Richard Nixon was unable to accept a full scholarship offer from Harvard University. The future president would stay local for his undergraduate education and attend Whittier College. For Chief Newman to influence and befriend the future president, he first had to be hired by Whittier and it should not be overlooked that the Quaker college hired a non-white to coach a team of white players in the era of the "color barrier" in professional and college sports. From the firing of African American Hammond Pros Head Coach Fritz Pollard after the 1925 season until the Oakland Raiders hired Hispanic Tom Flores in 1979 there would be no minority head coaches in the NFL. The situation was not much better at the college level and Richard Nixon would come to believe that Chief Newman had been held back due to his race, a position strengthened when considering that Chief Newman's two immediate successors in George Allen and Don Coryell would use Whittier College as a stepping stone to highly successful coaching careers in the NFL. The ectomorphic Nixon was never good enough to make the team but not for a lack of trying as he gained the respect of both his coach and his teammates. Newman retired from coaching football after the 1951 season but would stay an active part of the Whittier community until his death in 1985. Outside of sports, Newman was an Indian leader in California. He served as President of the Mission Creek Band of Mission Indians after succeeding his uncle J. Martinez in 1957, and in that role testified before the California Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs in 1961. He was a conservative Republican and highly educated for the era, let alone an Indian, as he was a thesis short of graduating with a master's degree from USC in Kinesiology. He argued for termination before that committee due to the unique circumstances of Mission Creek as it was more a land holding corporation than a traditional tribe and that California was what is known as a Public Law

280 state which meant most federal jurisdiction had already been handed over to the state by this point in time.⁷

Chief Newman to the BIA?

After Richard Nixon won the 1968 Presidential election, Chief Newman who had campaigned for Nixon in all his political campaigns was considered for the position of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He was passed over despite the mutual interest, but documents contained within the federal employment application file at the Nixon archives revealed some of Newman's standing in Indian country. Indian leader Max C. Mazzetti, a fellow Luiseno Indian but one from a different band who was against termination fully endorsed Newman's candidacy for Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Writing to President Nixon that:

I recommend Mr. Wallace Newman, of Whittier, California for the high Office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. [I] Have attended many Indian meetings In Sacramento, and many of the Counties here in Southern California, always finding Mr. Newman getting his point across. Mr. Newman commands a high respect from his fellow Indians and other citizens from all the country.⁸

Another testament to Newman's standing among California Indians is that he was chosen by the American Indian Historical Society to serve on the Indian History Study Committee to review textbooks for the State of California.⁹ The Chief's only official role in the Nixon White House would be to serve on the President's Commission on Physical Fitness and Sports in 1970 and be invited to a few state dinners. However, his importance to Nixon as a friend and mentor cannot be overstated. Nixon wrote in his

⁷Testimony of Wallace Newman before the Subcommittee Indian Affairs. Journal of the Senate, Legislature of the State of California, December 31, 1961, 117-19. Accessed May 7, 2018.

<https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=rG6Z5q0UJegC&rdid=book-rG6Z5q0UJegC&rdot=1>.

⁸*Letter from Mac C. Mazzetti to President Richard Nixon: For Commissioner of Indian Affairs.* 1p. Letter. March 20th, 1969. Accessed through the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California.

⁹*Speaking Out: Rupert Costo and the American Indian Historical Society*, News From Native California 28 (Fall 2014): 27-32.

autobiography that the Chief taught him more than anyone beside his own father. Many of the other boys Newman taught said similar things "The Chief, to me, was like a Dad. I held him in awe and with the greatest of respect." wrote one.¹⁰ More than anything, the Chief 's character was what impressed generations of Whittier College men and a prime example of this took place during the Great Depression:

Two or three years after taking the Whittier job. The Great Depression was taking its toll. During one period of six months he received half salary for three months and no salary at all for three months. He had an opportunity to take another job. It not only paid him more, it would have paid him, But The Chief, whose former athletes recall his lectures on loyalty to family, friends and school, announced to Grace and their youngsters, "I'm not leaving Whittier College. It means too much to too many people. If everyone left there would be no Whittier College."¹¹

President Richard Nixon would later remark while signing the bill that returned Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo how Chief Newman had gotten everyone through the depression years:

I have often spoken of the fact that one of the men that influenced me the most in my college career happened to be my football coach, who was an American Indian. Not because he taught me to play football--I never made the team--but because he had character, strong, indomitable character, and in those Depression years he got into everybody that was on that squad.¹²

Chief Newman and Watergate:

The Chief never forgot nor abandoned his old bench warmer Richard Nixon either, even in the most turbulent days of the Watergate Scandal. The night Nixon resigned, Chief Newman was featured on ABC News defending his former player and longtime friend:

Newman: This man (Nixon) has... gotten himself involved... in the politics of the nation... and they roughed him up plenty. And when they roughed him up they roughed some of the rest of us up.. because we believe in the man. ABC News Reporter: You sound somewhat bitter, are you? Newman: I am bitter! I.. think we done a dirty trick to a man. A good man. Certainly, here is a good family man.... One of the nicest families that had been in that White House in years, 50 years. And he is coming out of it... with a lot of people thinking he is a stinker.¹³

¹⁰Office of Development, p31

¹¹ Office of Development, p31

¹²*Richard Nixon: Remarks on Signing Bill Restoring the Blue Lake Lands in New Mexico to the Taos Pueblo Indians.* - December 15, 1970." The American Presidency Project. Accessed August 13, 2018. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2848>.

¹³*ABC News: Nixon Resignation, Part VII of VIII.* United States of America: ABC News, 1974. TV News. Accessed through the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California.

It is hard not to argue that those are the words of a man blinded by personal loyalty who is overlooking the facts of the Watergate scandal. However, it is that personal loyalty that Richard Nixon, the man, needed to have from the Chief to pick himself up after resigning the presidency. "Newman was among the few personal friends that Nixon called around him following his resignation from the presidency. Following his resignation Nixon sought out Newman's wisdom and advice on how to fight back from the depression that had overwhelmed him"¹⁴. Nixon and the Chief would remain friends the rest of their lives and Nixon would take part of a book tribute put together in 1980 by Whittier, a few years before Chief Newman's death in 1985, by adding a hand-written letter thanking the Chief and wishing him well.

American Indian Policy and the Return of Blue Lake:

So, when it was time for President Nixon to act on the behalf Newman's people, he did just that. It was not all Nixon. The day to day gains made by American Indians during his term were done by White House officials attorney Leonard Garment, a liberal democrat but also a loyal Nixon man who went back to Nixon's exile in New York City corporate law and his executive assistant Bradley H. Patterson among others. The Senate side also featured many supporters of American Indians issues including a reformed, hard termination supporter in Senator Scoop Jackson of Washington and his aid Forrest Gerard, a Blackfeet Indian. However, it was Nixon personally that fought off a last-minute attempt by Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico to prevent the return of Blue Lake. The return of Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo showcases both the influence of Quakerism and of Chief Newman on Richard Nixon. The Blue Lake is sacred to Taos Pueblo religion and the tribe had fought for over 60 years to regain their holy site which was central to them:

¹⁴Johnson, Troy R. *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-determination and the Rise of Indian Activism*. Urbana (Ill.): University of Illinois Press, 1996. p44

The most fateful event occurred in 1906 when Theodore Roosevelt took the Blue Lake.... Blue Lake, was vital to the correct functioning of Taos religion since Blue Lake was but one of many "shrines" in the area and all were necessary. Second, the total ecology of the area must be undisturbed because of the use made of many plants and other environmental features in religious ritual. Ecological imbalance could lead to their disappearance and hence, imperfection in correct religious performance.¹⁵

A Taos Chieftan in the Navajo Times put it this way:

We don't have gold temples in this lake, but we have a sign of the living God to whom we pray- the living threes, the evergreen and spruce, and the beautiful flowers, and the lake itself. Without energy provided by God we are helpless. Religion is the most important thing to our life. That is the reason why Blue Lake is so important to us.¹⁶

The Taos Pueblo through years of hard work and with the help of Senator George McGovern among others had neared towards the finish line. However, Bobbie Kilberg, a young Nixon White House fellow recounted how the return was almost undone:

"A message cannot and will not be released to the press or to anybody and I said why not [and BeLieu] said because Senator Clinton Anderson opposes the return of Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo people and he is threatening to vote against the anti-ballistic missile treaty if the president continues his support of this legislation. So, John Ehrlichman and Ken BeLieu and I went down. And.... I caught the president's eye and I could have sworn he winked at me and Richard Nixon didn't wink at people but I thought he was happy and the door closed. And I said okay what happened and John had this big grin on his face and Ken look like a mack truck had run over him and John said well the president said that he's going to continue his support for Blue Lake he doesn't care what Clinton Anderson says and if Clinton Anderson wants to vote against the ABM Treaty let him go do that and let him go four-letter word himself."¹⁷

President Nixon would state at the signing of the bill that returned Blue Lake:

"Those of us who know something about the background of the first Americans realize that long before any organized religion came to the United States, for 700 years the Taos Pueblo Indians worshiped in this place. We restore this place of worship to them for all the years to come."¹⁸

After the signing, Bobbie Kilberg recalled a conversation she had with the president which gives an insight into how Nixon viewed his actions that day:

¹⁵Bodine, John J. Blue Lake: A Struggle for Indian Rights. American Indian Law Review 1, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 23. doi:10.2307/20067803. p25 & p30

¹⁶"An Opportunity." *Navajo Times* (Window Rock, Arizona), April 20, 1967. Accessed at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California

¹⁷Kilberg, Bobbie: *The Return of Taos Pueblo's Sacred Blue Lake*

¹⁸Richard Nixon: *Remarks on Signing Bill Restoring the Blue Lake Lands in New Mexico to the Taos Pueblo Indians*. - December 15, 1970.

“I knew that the ceremony had gone on very long and he had another event and as a young White House staffer you don't usually get to spend a lot of time with the president, but he turned around and he looked at me said walk with me to my car to the motorcade so I was walking with them and I said you know Mr. President you know I know the ceremony ran long.... and he just turned around and looked at me and put his arm on my shoulder and said Bobbie, this was the most one of the most wonderful events I have ever participated in. What we did here today was so right and so important and I'm so proud of what we did and I only wish it could have gone on longer”¹⁹

Legacy and conclusion:

In 2013, the Taos Pueblo held a ceremonial powwow in honor of Richard Nixon's 100th birthday. Edward Nixon, Richard Nixon's last living brother was in attendance to accept a drum on behalf of the Nixon family. Nixon's return of Blue Lake and American Indian policy went unnoticed to most Americans at the time but to the Taos Pueblo and other American Indians it meant a great deal. Chief Newman touched the life of our 37th President deeply and during his Presidency Richard Nixon and his pro Indian White House team would not forget the American Indians of the United States of America to which Newman belonged. From dealing with the American Indian crises of the era in the Alcatraz takeover, Trail of Broken Treaties and Wounded Knee Occupation with restraint and understanding to ending termination and righting historical and contemporary wrongs in returning Blue Lake, restoring the Menominee Tribe and signing the American Indian Education Act of 1972. The Nixon Presidency would inaugurate the current era of American Indian Policy in part because of the difference one man made in a Quaker boy's life at a small Quaker College in Whittier, California.

¹⁹Kilberg, Bobbie: *The Return of Taos Pueblo's Sacred Blue Lake*

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Photo of Nixon and Newman from 1931 Whittier College Yearbook Acropolis

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