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In May 2006, a motley group of academics, politicians, and activists presented at a symposium in Key West, laying the basis for an even more motley collection of writings. The resulting *Native Americans and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman* is a slim, uneven publication with moments of shrewd analysis but also with a combination of flaws not usually found together: tedious repetition and drifting focus. Still, credit goes to the contributors for shining a light on an aspect of Truman’s presidency often overshadowed by the monumental events, both at home and abroad, between World War II and Korea.

Editor Brian Hosmer characterises the thirty-third president as “sympathetic to Indian struggles” with a “determination to right old wrongs” but who based decisions on a “misunderstanding” of what Native tribes wanted (ix). These authors mostly share this broad assessment; yet, their consensus only partially fulfils Hosmer’s purpose of adding “new insights into the totality of the Truman legacy” (x). Hosmer’s introduction provides the tightest focus on Truman himself and how his policies differed from Roosevelt’s, providing those “new insights” that even the best of the contributors only repeat or marginally expand.

Truman largely rejected the paternalism of New Deal tribal policies, which had already cracked under pressure of wartime priorities. FDR had simultaneously advocated federal protection and self-government for tribal communities by reorganising reservations. Despite some beneficial work-relief programs and federal support for arts and crafts, many tribes rejected the befuddling notion of self-determination mandated from above. The emerging post-war politics of cultural conformity and anticommunism further clashed with policies that seemingly favoured one group over national unity.

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The ominous-sounding “termination” policy began under Truman, expanded under Eisenhower, and lingered until 1973. It tried to encourage Indian assimilation with mainstream culture by finally settling tribal claims against the government, relocating Indians from reservations to cities, and terminating Indian nations’ status as separate corporate bodies. The pithiest definition of termination here belongs to Harry Kersey, Jr., who calls it an era “in which the government sought to dismantle all associations with the tribes, regardless of laws or treaties” (112). It is, then, Truman’s “legacy” as the first president to sign termination legislation that is under evaluation.

This legacy principally rests on two laws, the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946 and the Navajo-Hopi Rehabilitation Act of 1950, and Truman’s appointment of Dillon Meyer to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs. While, in effect, the first law eventually awarded $657 million in compensation, the money often took years of litigation to claim. The second law provided over $88 million to tribes in New Mexico and Arizona for relief and education programs, which Truman understood as a road to economic modernisation and, thus, assimilation. The authors agree that Meyer’s relocation programs were a step backward for Native Americans. Without federal assistance for moving, most Indians ended up swapping poverty on the reservation for poverty in an urban ghetto, eschewing assimilation in the process. The strongest contributions (Hosmer’s, Kersey’s and Douglas Miller’s) explore these Truman-era topics directly.

However, most contributors base their judgment on the expansion of termination policies by Truman’s White House successors. This may be fair since Truman evidently never criticised their Indian policies publicly. Yet, it undermines both contingency and the personal focus on Truman by holding him accountable for each disastrous outcome of federal tribal policy after January 1953, as though his decisions were irreversible. Connecting Truman to every twist of federal Indian policy (to the casino era in Jessica Cattelino’s chapter!) becomes an obvious device to glue together disparate chapters that often fall outside the narrow agenda stated in the preface.

Some have only the flimsiest links to Truman. Ada Deer applauds “his remarks, his humanity, and his down-to-earth feeling” (97) before pivoting to Nixon-era legislation. Likewise, former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell calls Truman “one of my great heroes” and tells an anecdote about giving a constituent with an
unreasonable request “a Harry Truman answer” (88), but Campbell’s real subject is Indian sovereignty since termination.

Truman the man is almost entirely absent. Nowhere does anyone quote him off the record to show how his personal views affected Indian policy. Samuel Rushay, Jr. unearths rarely seen images of Truman meeting with various tribes, but his “graphic essay” goes no deeper than official photo-ops with a smiling president receiving a smoking pipe, beaded belt, Seminole shirt, and Navajo rug. These contributors too often cover the same laws and policy statements without offering the competing interpretations that would make such redundancies palatable. They differ only in how closely they stick to or drift from Truman’s legacy.