

Self Determination Act of 1975

Signed into law on 4 January 1975, this legislation completed a fifteen-year period of policy reform with regard to American Indian tribes. Passage of this law made self-determination, rather than termination, the focus of government action, reversing a thirty-year effort to sever treaty relationships with and obligations to Indian tribes. The disastrous consequences of termination, combined with aggressive Indian activism, had encouraged a reexamination of government policy. During the 1960s, the War on Poverty's Community Action programs, with their philosophy of "maximum feasible participation of the poor," also encouraged a change in direction. Significant too were President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1968 congressional message on Indian affairs entitled "The Forgotten American" and Richard M. Nixon's official repudiation of termination in 1970.

A policy of self-determination committed the federal government to encouraging "maximum Indian participation in the Government and education of the Indian people." The 1975 legislation contained two provisions. Title I, the Indian Self-Determination Act, established procedures by which tribes could negotiate contracts with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to administer their own education and social service programs. It also provided direct grants to help tribes develop plans to assume responsibility for federal programs. Title II, the Indian Education Assistance Act, attempted to increase parental input in Indian education by guaranteeing Indian parents' involvement on school boards.

Subsequent amendments to the Self-Determination Act adopted in the 1980s and 1990s launched self-governance. Under this program, tribes would receive bloc grants from the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to cover a number of programs. In 2000, about half of the bureau's total obligations to tribes took the form of self-determination contracts or bloc grants. Additionally, seventy-six tribes had contracted for health clinics, diabetes programs, mobile health units, alcohol and drug abuse clinics, and Community Health Representative programs through the Indian Health Service. As amended, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act stands as one of the twentieth century's seminal pieces of federal Indian legislation.

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