

In Honor of Vine Deloria, Jr.

(1913-2005)

Vine Deloria, Jr., one of the foremost authors, scholars, intellectuals, and civil rights leaders of our time, died on November 13, 2005 in Golden, Colorado. He was 72. The Vine Deloria, Jr. Indigenous Studies Symposium is being held to honor his life and continue his work.

A member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, Deloria first burst onto the national scene in 1969 with the publication of his best-selling *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. In the years that followed, he published nearly 25 books, hundreds of articles, and held a multitude of positions from which – in his own words – he “sought to plant the seeds of ideas and raise doubts about what we believe.” For nearly forty years Deloria stood as the most widely recognized and respected spokesperson for Native America. Indeed, for many people he *was* Native America.

Deloria served in the U.S Marines from 1954 to 1956. He received his BS in science from Iowa State University in 1956, a Masters degree in theology from the Lutheran seminary in 1963, and a law degree from the University of Colorado, Boulder in 1970.

From 1964 through 1967, Deloria served as the Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCIA) – the leading Native American advocacy organization in the United States. During those years he revitalized NCIA into an effective weapon in the ongoing struggle of Native Americans to achieve equal rights, and for the federal government to recognize the sovereign status of tribes. Deloria followed *Custer* – a book that had become the “bible” of the Indian civil rights movement, with the publication of a series of other works including *We Talk, You Listen* (1970), *Of Utmost Good Faith* (1971), and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* (1974). Collectively, these publications enlightened the public as to the centuries of racial and social injustice that Native Americans had endured, and also served to establish Deloria as Indian Country’s leading intellectual. The ideas and writings of Deloria played a major role in the passage of important reform legislation including the Indian Education Act (1972), Indian Self-Determination Act (1975), and the American Indian Religious Freedoms Act (1978).

In addition to his intellectual contributions, Deloria was also a major force in the Native civil rights movement and an activist in the purest sense. His testimony as an expert witness in the four trials that followed the American Indian Movement’s takeover of Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1973 helped win the inclusion of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty into these hearings – a major legal and strategic accomplishment in that it brought historical treaty rights into a contemporary legal proceeding. He also worked with and served as a board member for various other national civil rights organizations. In sum,

Deloria was to Native people a social reformer who was in every way the equal of a Cesar Chavez or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

But Deloria understood that sovereignty and self-determination meant little unless an informed cadre of Native people existed to implement and protect these rights. Consequently, he entered the next phase of his career, that of an educator. In the fall of 1970, Deloria accepted his first faculty position with the College of Ethnic Studies at Western Washington University in Bellingham. He taught there for a year and half. Later he took other teaching positions including with the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA for four quarters, followed by brief visiting appointments at the Pacific School of Religion, the New School of Religion, and Colorado College. In 1978 he accepted a tenured appointment as professor of law and political science at the University of Arizona where he created two Master's degree programs - one in American Indian policy, the other – the first of its kind in the United States – in American Indian studies. In 1990 he left Arizona to accept another professorship at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in American Indian studies and history, with adjunct appointments in law, political science, and religious studies. He retired from full-time teaching in 2000. For the next five winters, however, Deloria remained professionally active by returning to Tucson to teach a course in treaties at the University of Arizona's College of Law.

As a university professor, Deloria continued his research and writing in the area of Native American policy and law. In doing so, he provided a much needed intellectual understanding of the concept of tribal sovereignty. Two books which he co-authored with Clifford M. Lytle, *American Indians, American Justice* (1983) and *The Nations Within* (1984), and later a third book, *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations* (1999 co-authored with David E. Wilkins), are used as standard works in Indian law and policy classes throughout the United States. Another of Deloria's achievements in this area was the retrieval and compilation of documents – including many long lost and forgotten treaties – that were most critical to the understanding and study of American Indian law and policy. This work culminated with the monumental *Documents of American Indian Diplomacy* (1999 with Raymond DeMallie) and *The Indian Reorganization Act: Congresses and Bills* (2002). Most of our current understanding and interpretation of treaties, the concept of tribal sovereignty, and respected roles and responsibilities of the tribes and the federal sector in a “government to government” relationship, we owe to the work of Deloria.

Deloria was widely recognized as being the foremost leading authority on tribal religion and an outspoken champion of Native religious freedom. In 1973 he published *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* – a book that cemented his reputation as one of the most important religious theorists of our time. In 1974 *Time* magazine named him as one of the 11 most important “shapers and movers” of the Christian faith – a “theological superstar of the future.” In 1999 he also published with James Treat, *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* – a collection of many of his works on this topic. Other important essays on religion – and other topics – that appeared earlier in various other often obscure journals and magazines, were published together as a collection entitled

Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader (1999, edited by Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta).

Deloria realized that no person is truly free if he or she is denied the right to fully carry out the tenets of their religious beliefs. When it became clear that the American Indian Religious Freedom Act had failed to protect tribal sacred places and certain religious practices in the late 1980s, Deloria again stepped forward. His advocacy and writings played a major role in the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 and amendments to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1994.

In recent years Deloria championed a different type of freedom – intellectual freedom. Deloria was a longtime and passionate advocate of Native traditional knowledge. Throughout his life he encouraged young Native people to see the validity and importance in the wisdom of their tribal past. He also believed that traditional knowledge offered an alternative means to address many of the issues that have long plagued the general society and argued persuasively that western philosophy and science are not the ultimate sources of truth in regard to understanding the mysteries of our universe. Beginning in 1992, Deloria sponsored a series of conferences – eight have thus far been held – designed to foster traditional knowledge and to build a network of people – spiritual leaders, elders and scholars – who could share this knowledge. His own writings in this area, including *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (1979), *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995), *Evolution, Creationism, and Other Modern Myths* (2002), and a final book released posthumously in the spring of 2006, *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of Medicine Men* - do not tell people *what* to think, but instead encourages them to find their own way intellectually rather than to simply accept and follow established dogma.

Deloria's leadership and contributions to the area of American Indian education are also immeasurable. In addition to his advocacy for reform in laws and policies, his writings form the foundation for many of the innovative ideas being advanced today in Native schools throughout the United States and Canada. The massive five volume set which he edited in 1974, *Indian Education Confronts the Seventies*, remains the most comprehensive analysis of historical and political developments in the field of American Indian education. He also published numerous other important education articles in various journals. But by far his most important work in the area of Native education are a series of eight essays he wrote that first appeared *Winds of Change* magazine – a publication of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) – from June 1989 through Autumn 1992. These essays proved so popular that AISES later published them together as a book, *Indian Education in America* (1991). Ten years later, Fulcrum Press published these essays again, this time with seven accompanying essays by Daniel R. Wildcat of Haskell Indian Nations University, as a volume entitled *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (2001). Collectively, these essays – in the opinion of this author – represent the most indispensable writings ever published in the field of Native education. They offer the one thing that has so long been missing from Native education – a comprehensive philosophical base from which to build a sound

educational future for Native students at all scholastic levels. These essays are *must* readings for anyone involved at any level in Native education.

Deloria had a long and special relationship with the Native people of the Pacific Northwest. As noted earlier, he began his college teaching career at Western Washington University. It was during his tenure there that he became a legal advocate on behalf of tribal fishing rights. His work in this area helped paved the way for the passage of the Boldt decision in 1974, the landmark case that affirmed Indian treaty fishing rights. Deloria's involvement with tribal fishing rights also led to his writing still yet another book, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: From the Coming of the Whiteman to the Present Day*, in 1977. His friendship with countless tribal people in the Northwest – and his love for salmon – made him a frequent visitor to the region. In 2002, for example, he chose Frank's Landing, Washington, as the location to hold one of his traditional knowledge conferences, the topic of which was "Giants and Little People." He was also a frequent guest on the Laura Lee radio talk show based in Bellevue, Washington. One of the products of this collaboration with Lee was the release of a two-cassette audio collection entitled *Exploring the Indigenous World View: Conversations with Vine Deloria, Jr.* (2003).

One of Deloria's final public appearances was as the plenary speaker at the Robert K. Thomas Symposium held last summer at Northwest Indian College. At this symposium he also participated in a three-hour roundtable discussion commemorating the Boldt decision. After this event, Deloria expressed his desire to hold yearly symposiums at Northwest Indian College that focused on key topics that he believed were vital to Native people and for society in general. This was the genesis for what is now the Vine Deloria, Jr. Indigenous Studies Symposium.

Vine's personal life was as broad and as varied as was his academic career. He was an ardent fan of the Denver Broncos professional football team – or the "Buncos" as he often called them when they were losing – a lover of old dogs, old movies, and even older country music. His brief but direct telephone message greeting of "It's your dime Buckeroo!" will never be forgotten by those who loved him. In the intellectual arena he was infamous for his wit, humor, and irreverent, sometimes cynical and sarcastic, but always insightful comments. To an outside observer he must have seemed like a force of nature - when Vine walked into a room he tended to dominate the space with his charisma and the power of his gregarious personality. But this most public of figures was also an intensely private family man – a devoted husband to his wife of 47 years, Barbara, and loving father to his three children, Philip, Daniel, and Jeanne.

In closing, Vine Deloria, Jr. cast a long shadow over an intellectual, cultural and political landscape that extended far beyond the borders of the United States and Canada. With the passing of Deloria Indian Country lost its brightest light, a warrior and visionary who changed forever how people throughout North America, and indeed, throughout the world, view and deal with Indigenous people, and perhaps more importantly, how Indigenous people view themselves and their own role in mainstream history and contemporary society. Deloria was truly a national treasure, the likes of which we may

never see again, and although he will be painfully missed, his life's work and legacy will live on in the countless number of people – Native and non-native alike – who he touched during his all too short stay on this Earth.

Steve Pavlik, Co-coordinator
Vine Deloria, Jr. Indigenous Studies Symposium

Reference:

Treat, James (1999). "Introduction: An American Critique of Religion," In *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, Vine Deloria, Jr. (New York, Routledge Press: 1-21).

Note: This biography was adapted from an earlier article published by the author in the *Western Social Science News*, Volume 38, Number 2, Spring 2006, pages 1;6. **Steve Pavlik** is also co-editor (With Daniel R. Wildcat of Haskell Indian Nations University) of *Destroying Dogma: Vine Deloria, Jr. and His Influence on American Society*, Fulcrum Press, 2006.