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## Review of “Custer Died for Your Sins,”” By Vine Deloria, Jr.

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## BOOK REVIEW

Custer Died for Your Sins. By Vine Deloria, Jr. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969. Pp. 279. \$5.95.

Mr. Deloria has made an outstanding contribution with his writing to put the American Indian situation in perspective from an Indian point of view. All of us who are American Indians applaud this effort which brings into focus, as he indicates, what American Indians have been thinking or saying or both for a long time.

While Mr. Deloria dwells upon the apparent havoc wrought upon American Indian life by both governmental and private efforts, one must recognize also that these efforts provided an alternative for American Indian people when it was no longer possible for them to retain their institutions, for whatever reason. Neither should it be assumed from his descriptions that *everyone* acted from an ulterior motive, even though results of their actions may have been detrimental to American Indians as we now evaluate this period of history.

There are some areas which need further emphasis because I believe they had more of an impact on American Indians than one might gain from reading this work.

Demoralization did not take place to the same extent among the Tribes of the Southwest who were able to retain their estate in tribal status that it did among other tribes whose estate was divided among the individual members, which was an anathema to their very tribal existence. Tribes who retained their estate in tribal status have increased the size and value of their holdings while the opposite has been true of other Tribes. For this reason, one should not make comparisons between progress of different Indian peoples. Of course, the folly of the allotment system has since been documented.

Following the so-called Treaty period until the Merriam Report of 1928, which formed the basis for the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the entire effort of the Government with the popular support of the country, was "forced assimilation" of the American Indian people into the acceptable mold of that era. Mr. Deloria subscribes other motives but again the ideological concept was that we become one people—"their kind". Following the Indian Reorganization Act and since a change is taking place in this ideological concept, the American Indians are hopeful of finding their own destiny in a pluralistic society.

An even more important matter, in my opinion, is motivation of the American Indians for involvement in Indian affairs. Proponents of the community organization process quite often find themselves trapped in a situation where they have total involvement of American Indians without knowing precisely why the Indians are so involved. Not knowing, they quite often subscribe wrong motivations for this involvement. However, whatever their motivations are, they are the most logical in the minds of the involved American Indians. So, when you have an involved people, it is always helpful to know "why?"

The significant reason for lack of American Indian participation with the Blacks is one of difference in motivation. Blacks are motivated by their goal of equality while American Indians are not. American Indians feel that what they have as a people is better than what they would have as equals with the rest of society. Mr. Deloria refers to this as the "leave us alone" attitude of the American Indians.

There is considerable written about the young Indians who are emerging as leaders in the off-reservation areas. Because of customs and tradition, it will still be some time before this leadership is accepted to any great degree in the local Indian communities. How these young leaders conduct themselves will have a vital affect on their acceptance by the Indian community leadership. But, their impact cannot be minimized because the American Indian population is a very young population with 50% being under 17 years of age.

The effect of the 1968 Civil Rights Act on Indian Tribes will be serious and, in some areas, threaten the survival of Tribes. I agree with Mr. Deloria that civil rights are here to stay, but the implementation of the Civil Rights Act can either strengthen or destroy tribal governments. The threat is posed by eager civil rights enthusiasts who seek to impose upon tribal governments their own particular brand of civil rights without realizing the consequences of their action on tribalism. In many tribal situations, tribal interests or community interests transcend so-called individual civil rights to the extent necessary for tribal survival. This is acceptable to American Indians but not to some who are dedicated to save individuals from their Tribes.

I believe that Mr. Deloria should have written more detail about his recommended solution which, although having a great deal of merit, is oversimplified. After having written so many pages fixing blame, more should have been written about resolution of the problem by Indians. As an aside, it is recognized that fixing blame is everyone's "bag" these days. When I encountered this as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, I

said, "O.K. I will take all of the blame. Now, where do we go from here?". This question was usually answered by silence. At least, Mr. Deloria does set a course and it may well be that he had in mind trying to establish an ideology for American Indians and did not wish this point to be diffused by bringing in details of methodology.

I recommend the reading of this book as a vital contribution to the contemporary national scene. I enjoyed Mr. Deloria's book very much as I have always enjoyed our discussions together. He remains my very good friend as well as my unconvinced critic.

Robert L. Bennett\*

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