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Vine Deloria Jr. and Indigenous Americans

David E. Wilkins

Vine Deloria Jr., a Standing Rock Sioux citizen, widely considered the leading indigenous intellectual of the past century, walked on in November 2005. Deloria spent most of his adult life in an unrelenting, prodigious, and largely successful effort to provide those most grounded of Native individuals and their governments with the intellectual, theoretical, philosophical, and substantive arguments necessary to support their inherent personal and national sovereignty. Importantly, however, his voluminous work also sought to improve the nation-to-nation and intergovernmental relationships of and between First Nations, and between First Nations and non-Native governments at all levels. In fact, he was hailed in 1974 by *Time* magazine as a "Theological Superstar of the Future," and he received numerous awards from both Indian and non-Indian organizations throughout his life, including, most recently in January 2005, the American Indian Visionary Award from the leading Indian newspaper *Indian Country Today*.

Deloria, I firmly believe, is the most prolific indigenous writer in history. He was author, coauthor, editor, and coeditor of more than two dozen books, more than two hundred articles and essays, and he delivered an untold number of keynotes, speeches, interviews, and congressional testimonials. More impressive than his incredible output was the stunning diversity of intellectual disciplines he has traversed with aplomb: law, religion and theology, history, natural and social science,

literary criticism, education, anthropology, paleontology, philosophy, political science, and others.

Deloria also held many important positions outside the academy. He headed the National Congress of American Indians in the 1960s, the leading intertribal interest organization, and he has served on numerous boards. He also played a leading role in developing several vital organizations such as the Institute for the Development of Indian Law, which he founded, and others that seek to improve the quality of life for Native and non-Native folk.

But Deloria, to me, was much more than the sum of all his important scholarly, professional, and public accomplishments. Our paths first crossed in a sustained way in 1980 when, based on the recommendation of Helen Maynor Schierbeck, a fellow Lumbee, he recruited me to a new M.A. degree program that he had developed at the University of Arizona. This was a two-year terminal degree in political science that focused on training Native students in the quirks and whims of federal Indian policy and law.

I was part of a small cohort of Native students, thrilled at the possibility of studying with a man we affectionately, and with some trepidation, referred to as "the Godfather" of Indian politics, law, and policy. We called ourselves "Vine's Disciples," not because we viewed him as a religious figure but because we knew that in having the privilege and opportunity of studying with the individual we all considered the most gifted of our time we would receive profound lessons in what was required of us as we sought to become active agents in defense of our respective nations' sovereignty and self-determination.

Those of us who finished this intellectually rich and demanding program left feeling prepared to engage our nations on multiple fronts and knew that we had been armed with research and writing skills that would enable us to be effective agents of change for our peoples. My relationship with Vine and his talented and generous wife, Barbara, only deepened over the last quarter century. Although he continued to be my principal academic mentor, we became good friends, and I was fortunate to have the honor of coauthoring one book with him.

It is, of course, impossible to summarize in such a short space the incredible influence Vine had on me, my nation, the Lumbee, Native nations throughout the land and the world, and the larger society. But what an influence he was and will remain for me and many others. Vine once said that his approach to scholarship had been largely "ad hoc" or "spur-of-the-moment political tracts." But in another work he more accurately noted that, if one read his scholarship in the context of his life, it was possible to "see a persistent effort to lay down certain kinds of strategies for political action which are consistent from start to finish" and "they would be alerted that it is in the actions of my life that theories and ideologies are worked out."

We see this most clearly in what I term the Delorian trilogy: his powerful articulation of *tribal sovereignty*, his distinctive conceptualization and defense of the essential doctrine of tribal *self-determination*, and his cogent discussion and analysis of the importance and sacredness of *space and place* for indigenous nations. Of the diverse tribal nations, interest groups, and academics that are familiar with his work, most credit Deloria with providing the intellectual and substantive ideological framework that led to the renaissance of Native America that vigorously began in the 1960s and that continues to this day.

In reflecting on his own work and in particular his research and thoughts on these three ideas, Deloria once stated, "these concepts form the major framework of the federal relationship with Indian tribes." This is certainly the case, and much of the fortunes of First Nations today are linked to their ability to effectively implement and fundamentally relate to the notions of their own inherent sovereignty, their fundamental right of self-determination, and the relationship Native communities have with a sacred territory.

Vine's powerful trilogy of ideas, along with the many other equally profound, timely, and important recommendations that he propounded for Native nations, the states and federal government, and the larger society, provide an indigenous roadmap that, if put into practice, could rectify many of our ongoing problems. His visionary talent and the ideas he proposed across a wide range of fields have the capacity to stabilize and clarify the cultural identities of tribal nations and non-Indian communities, help firm up the political and legal standing of tribes and other oppressed minority groups, and lead to a greater degree of ecological respect that would benefit all of America.

Such recommendations would include, but not be limited to, the following: formal federal acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty, revival of the treaty-making process, disavowal of Congressional plenary (read: absolute) power, continued consolidation and restoration of tribal lands, affirmation of the political rights of bona fide but still nonrecognized tribal groups, establishment of a permanent Court of Indian Affairs, support for the international status of First Nations, modification of the trust doctrine from an active to passive role, better ties between urban and reservation-based communities, increased teaching of indigenous knowledge to Indian youth, strengthened tribal governments, and so on.

A thorough review of Deloria's major works across his disciplines reveals his true genius and visionary appeal. His ideas catapulted indigenous America from a period of dormancy and decay to one of revitalization and immense growth. Moreover, his skills in critiquing the fundamental problems of contemporary Western religious expressions, in examining the theory of evolution, and his assessment of the broader

ecological problems we still confront have a resonance that has educated a broad and ever-growing audience.

Vine's works are voluminous and diverse, and his constant engagement with various communities over the last four decades is undeniable. But trying to understand the eruptive and nurturing power that was Vine is not easy. His life and actions reflect a man of unusual talent and fortitude. Edward Said, in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), once described intellectuals as "exiles," since, metaphysically, they were always in a state of "restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others." And, according to Said, "the *exilic* intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still."

Vine was never taken with the notion of being identified as an "intellectual." But much of what Said had to say about intellectuals applies to Vine, especially Said's discussion of the "marginality" that many intellectuals experience—a state of existence outside the halls of privilege and power, yet carrying certain recognition. Paradoxically, Vine had a remarkable ability to slide back and forth between various intellectual positions. Vine exhibited the passionate revolutionary spirit of individuals like Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King. But, like those individuals, he was at the same time deeply pragmatic and looked to find ways to resolve sometimes profound intellectual and normative differences without taking extremist positions that preclude conversation. On the one hand, he was a universalist who had a visionary spirit with the breathtaking ability to scan the political, social, and cultural horizons in a comprehensive way that surmounted partisan, racial, tribal, and ideological differences. On the other hand, he was a grounded and stalwart Standing Rock tribal citizen, and he drew immense strength and knowledge from his kinship ties to his extended family and tribal nation. On the one hand, Vine exhibited brilliantly incisive, critical, and theoretical abilities that he used to skewer social institutions, stodgy academic institutions and disciplines, and inflated political egos—whether tribal, state, or federal. On the other hand, although he could be formidably critical, he was rarely cynical, always believing that human beings have the capacity for growth and maturity. On the one hand, Vine always remained fiercely independent, never allowing blind loyalty to particular institutions, power brokers, or even tribal nations to interfere with his ability to speak honestly. On the other hand, he accepted the reality that, as a tribal person, he had a clear moral and intellectual responsibility to assist family, friends, and those in need. Finally, although Vine was a remarkably public figure, with all the duties and obligations that come with that status, he remained an intensely private person. He always maintained a comfortable, quiet space for himself and his immediate family.

At the memorial service, Norbert Hill, a close friend of Vine's, noted that, with his passing, "the training wheels had been taken off." It was now time, said Norbert, for each of us to continue the struggle that Vine had led for so long, relying now on our own individual and collective knowledge and talents. It is unquestionably true that over the last four decades we in Indian Country were overly dependent on Vine's penetrating knowledge, his exquisite wit, his cunning and hugely effective political, legal, and cultural strategies, and his delicious and biting humor.

I hope our overdependence on this incomparable warrior did not contribute to his premature passing. But if it did, and I believe we all bear some culpability here, then let us step forward doubly energized to carry on the essential battles Vine waged throughout his fascinating life.

If we do this, he will smile upon us from his perch in the other world and rest easily alongside his ancestors knowing that when good people act from good values and time-honored traditions, they and the institutions they control will make appropriate decisions more often than not.