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## Visionary Thinker and Wordsmith Par Excellence

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# Visionary thinker and wordsmith par excellence

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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, policy and law. We called ourselves "Vine's Disciples," not because he was a religious figure, but because we sensed that in having the privilege and opportunity studying with the individual we all considered the most gifted of our time, that we would receive profound lessons in what was required of us as we sought to become active and informed defenders of indigenous nationhood.

What an influence he has been. Vine has said, I think too abruptly, that his approach to scholarship has been "ad hoc" or "spur-of-the-moment political tracts." In another work he noted more accurately that if one reads his scholarship in the context of his life it is 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."

Such recommendations would include, but not be limited to the following: Formal federal acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty, revival of the treaty-making process, disavowing congressional plenary (read: absolute) power, continuing the consolidation and restoration of tribal lands, affirming the political rights of bona fide non-recognized tribal groups, establishment of a permanent Court of Indian Affairs, supporting the international status of First Nations, modifying the trust doctrine from an "active" to "passive" role, forging better ties between urban and reservation-based communities, increasing the teaching of indigenous knowledge to Indian youth, strengthening tribal governments, etc.

## FULL TEXT

It is fitting that Vine Deloria Jr. is the second, and not first, recipient of the American Indian Visionary Award. I believe he would want it this way. Why? Because Vine, despite his unparalleled activist and scholarly career has always appreciated that individuals like last year's recipient, Billy Frank Jr., clearly embodies the natural sovereignty that emanates from living, depending on, and defending a given sacred landscape and the various species that are connected to a sacred space. Vine understands as well as anyone that it is those stout Native men, women and children who are most deserving of such recognition.

In fact, most of Vine's adult life has been spent 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. His work, however, has 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.

Vine is undeniably the most prolific indigenous writer in history. He's authored, co-authored, edited and co-edited well over 20 books, more than 200 articles and essays, and he's delivered an untold number of keynotes, lectures, interviews and congressional testimonials.

Equally as impressive as his incredible output is the stunningly diverse range of intellectual disciplines he has traversed with aplomb - law, religion and theology, natural and social science, literary criticism, education, anthropology, paleontology, philosophy and political science, among others.

Of course, he has also held many important positions outside the Academy - he headed the National Congress of American Indians in the 1960s, and he has served on numerous boards. He also played a leading role in developing and leading a number of critically important organizations like 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 Vine, to me, is much more than the sum of all his major and ongoing scholarly, professional and public accomplishments. Our paths first crossed in a sustained way in 1980 when, based on the recommendation of Helen Maynor Schierbeck, 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, whims and nuances 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, policy and law. We called ourselves "Vine's Disciples," not because he was a religious figure, but because we sensed that in having the privilege and opportunity studying with the individual we all considered the most gifted of our time, that we would receive profound lessons in what was required of us as we sought to become active and informed defenders of indigenous nationhood.

For those of us who finished this intellectually rich and rigorous program, we left feeling prepared to engage our nations on multiple fronts and knew that we had been armed with research and writing skills (though I, for one, never did learn the proper use of my grammatical nemesis, the apostrophe, despite Vine's best efforts), that would enable us to continue to mature in whatever fields we chose.

My relationship with Vine and his talented and generous wife, Barbara, has only broadened and deepened over this last quarter century. While he remains my mentor we have become good friends and I've had the honor of co-authoring a book with him, and we are hard at work on another.

It is, of course, impossible to summarize in such a short space the incredible influence that Vine has had on me, my nation - the Lumbee - who Vine and his aunt, the noted ethnographer and linguist, Ella Deloria, have supported since the 1940s, a period when some other national Indian figures regularly sought to belittle and disparage my people - Aboriginal nations here and abroad, and the larger society.

But what an influence he has been. Vine has said, I think too abruptly, that his approach to scholarship has been "ad hoc" or "spur-of-the-moment political tracts." In another work he noted more accurately that if one reads his scholarship in the context of his life it is 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.

Vine, in reflecting on his own work, and in particular, his research and thoughts on these three ideas, states that "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.

Of course, in the vast array of Vine's many works there are other equally profound, timely and important recommendations that if ever implemented by Native nations and the states and federal government would go far towards stabilizing and clarifying the cultural identities, political and legal standing, and territorial basis of First Nations and their diplomatic relations with other governments.

Such recommendations would include, but not be limited to the following: Formal federal acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty, revival of the treaty-making process, disavowing congressional plenary (read: absolute) power, continuing the consolidation and restoration of tribal lands, affirming the political rights of bona fide non-recognized tribal groups, establishment of a permanent Court of Indian Affairs, supporting the international status of First Nations, modifying the trust doctrine from an "active" to "passive" role, forging better ties between urban and reservation-based communities, increasing the teaching of indigenous knowledge to Indian youth, strengthening tribal governments, etc.

While some of Vine's suggested reforms have been acted upon, it is clear that many others have not yet been responded to. The fact that we have not acted upon many of his timely recommendations is cause for some dismay; but that they have been proposed and retain all their potency to improve the human condition gives us cause to hope.

David E. Wilkins, Lumbee, is professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota.

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