

**David E. Wilkins. *Red Prophet: The Punishing Intellectualism of Vine Deloria, Jr.* Fulcrum Publishing, 2018. 350 pp. ISBN: 9781682751657.**

<https://fulcrum.bookstore.ipgbook.com/red-prophet-products-9781682751657.php>

A table entitled “Recommendations for Native Peoples and Governments” appears in the first few pages of Lumbee legal scholar David Wilkins’ *Red Prophet*. It is an astounding six pages long and documents seventy-six policy recommendations over the span of forty-six years. By far the longest and largest table I have ever seen in a humanities book, it offers a condensed version of the book at large, which functions as a sort of long-form annotated bibliography of Vine Deloria’s most significant contributions to Native policy and politics.

Interspersed with the author’s personal correspondence with Vine Deloria over the course of two decades, the catalogue of Deloria’s policy contributions is impressive. Like the clean lines and categories of the six-page-long table, Wilkins neatly organizes these contributions into three chapters that are then divided into short—sometimes only two-page-long—sections that outline a litany of Deloria’s policy recommendations about some of the most important issues facing Native peoples. These brief but numerous sections give the reader a clear sense of the truly impressive range of Deloria’s work, not to mention the volume of what he produced over the course of his forty active years of writing and political advocacy. They address over a dozen interrelated areas of focus, including education, self-determination, sovereignty, treaty rights, healthcare, land return, jurisdictional disputes, tribal leadership, the environment, intellectual history, religion, medicine, science, and much more.

Although Wilkins provides a comprehensive accounting of Deloria’s contributions to policy, it is clear as readers make their way through the book that a few key areas stick out as major highlights in his oeuvre. Anyone familiar with Deloria’s career might recite his influence on landmark legal battles over the interpretation and enforcement of treaty rights and tribal sovereignty, and with its named focus on detailing and highlighting Deloria’s contributions to Native policy and politics, *Red Prophet* is primarily about these key aspects of his work. In a passage about an interview that appeared in a 1973 issue of *Akwesasne Notes*, Wilkins reminds us of Deloria’s sharp and ethical commitment to sovereignty and treaties:

Politically, he said the real crisis in the relationship between Indigenous nations and the United States lay in the fact that the federal government had not yet formally and emphatically recognized that ‘Indian tribes are sovereign nations as guaranteed in the hundreds of treaties...and that you [federal government] can’t interfere with our property rights, life style, anything that is important to us’ (39).

Although Deloria’s legacy in this regard is well-known (and well-studied), I still found the emphasis on sovereignty and treaties refreshing in an age where research and writing on treaties and treaty rights as the basis of sovereignty has lost favor. Wilkins chooses also to emphasize Deloria’s unflinching critique of academic knowledge produced by and about Native peoples. “Anthropologists and Other Friends,” a chapter by Deloria that was made famous with the 1969 publication of his landmark book, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, is still regularly taught in introductory courses on Native American studies. Generations of Native intellectuals and teachers have drawn upon this chapter to help students understand one of the

basic tenets of Native intellectualism: “Indigenous peoples can speak, think, and act for themselves” (4). But for Deloria, speaking, thinking, and acting needed to be done with the goal of addressing the major issues facing Indigenous peoples. Throughout the book, Wilkins offers candid exchanges with his mentor (Wilkins is one of Deloria’s most celebrated students) to contextualize Deloria’s expectations for Native intellectuals to undertake writing and research for the direct purpose of political advocacy. Wilkins recounts a response he received from Deloria to a letter he wrote requesting advice on his first book: “Deloria was bemoaning the fact that a substantial number of Native academics appeared to have a stronger allegiance to their disciplines than to their own peoples. This, he argued, was frightening because one might then conclude that ‘in a crisis they will side with the Whites and will not, under most circumstances, do anything to help Indians’” (127). For Deloria, the purpose of intellectual labor was “to do a better job of educating the public about Indigenous rights and epistemologies” in an effort to promote Indigenous self-determination, enforce treaty rights, and design real projects that could bolster tribal sovereignty in measurable ways.

The action-oriented foundation of Deloria’s work clearly influenced Wilkins, who has served as a foundational thinker and advocate for Native policy and law in his own right for the last twenty-five years. Works like *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (now in its third edition) and *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations*, which Wilkins coauthored with Deloria, are touchstones for comprehensive understanding of the history of federal Indian law and policy, particularly the relationship of tribal sovereignty to state rights, constitutional law, executive power, and congressional legislation.

The lineage of Native intellectualism that Deloria and Wilkins represent comes through in the book’s celebration of “the deep complexity and sincerity of Deloria’s thinking” (123). While this makes *Red Prophet* an invaluable resource for contemporary thinking and advocacy about policy and law, the book does at times feel hagiographic. Its contribution to Indigenous intellectual history might have been strengthened by placing Deloria in conversation with other Native thinkers, leaders, and activists who have made equally significant and critical contributions to shaping sovereignty and self-determination, most notably Indigenous feminists like Joanne Barker, Audra Simpson, and Jennifer Nez Denetdale. It is important to remember that while Deloria is certainly a tour-de-force in the history of Native American studies, he is also one of many Indigenous thinkers and leaders who belongs to a long tradition of Indigenous intellectuals that precede and follow his work. I imagine this is how Deloria would have positioned himself.

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