

EDITOR'S CORNER

Quincentennial Truths and Consequences

American archaeologists over the past decade have heard the growing voice of the American Indian where previously it was muffled or quiet. Archaeologists, shocked and sometimes offended by the often strident tone of the new cry, have imagined a major rift between archaeologists and Indians, a conflict of such magnitude that it threatens the continuity of the discipline. That a conflict is perceived as real is gauged by the papers received at *American Antiquity* over the past several years seeking to heal the wounds and bridge the gap. One might be tempted to interpret the papers from the 1992 Annual Meeting Plenary Session that appear in this issue as just another attempt at rapprochement. These interpretations and sentiments are shrouded in misperception and myth.

No acrimonious dialogue between archaeologists and Indians even approaches the incivility one encounters in presentations and in print between champions of different theoretical positions. I am unaware, for example, of any protracted dialogue between archaeologists and Indians that matches in venom and vehemence the harangues of the late 1960s and early 1970s between new and old archaeologists. Furthermore, I can attest that three short years as editor of *American Antiquity* provide ample examples of colleague invective in contrast to 21 years of peaceful fieldwork on tribal land. When placed in proper perspective, the discussions over the past decade between archaeologists and Indians do not seriously threaten our long-term relationship.

The dialogue between archaeologists and Indians has been blown out of proportion, in part I suspect, by tendencies inherent in contemporary archaeology, specifically an increase in whininess in response to criticism. One ploy has been to label criticism as a personal attack, which, of course, is unacceptable only within the shelter of the academy and few other domains of public interaction; certainly not in modern American politics. From a comparative historical perspective I do not see the impact of contemporary personal criticism matching that of yesteryear. In this regard one need only recall the Plenary Session—"American Archaeology in the Early Years of the Society"—at the 50th Anniversary Meeting where moderator Jeremy Sabloff's question to the panel concerning W. W. Taylor's classic critique exposed the strength and durability of professional and very personal criticism.

I contend, therefore, that a major rift between archaeologists and American Indians is partly a self-inflicted delusion born of the inability of archaeologists to deal with the heartbreak of criticism.

Quite apart from whether one believes in the illusory character of a conflict is the historical fact of a silent revolution that has taken place in America and which continues today. Over the past two decades tribal Indians have gone from being wards of a paternalistic federal agency—the Bureau of Indian Affairs—to asserting authority and power as independent governing bodies. They have learned and have practiced power politics in the best traditions of American self-interest. And, indeed, the entrance of new, powerful participants in any field of endeavor creates a wrenching of traditional structures with attendant discomfort for many.

Contemporary American Indian, Hispanic, or African-American rhetoric is not the threat to archaeological science that some imagine. Rather, it is the clear sign that these groups are achieving the academic equality that has been our mutual goal. As such, all ideas—those of archaeologists, Indians, Hispanics, and African Americans—must be published in order that they be the object of close scrutiny, careful evaluation, and often rather harsh criticism.

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Editor

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58th ANNUAL MEETING
SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Adam's Mark Hotel
St. Louis, Missouri
Wednesday, April 14–Sunday, April 18, 1993

Program Committee Chair: Jay F. Custer, Department of Anthropology, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716

See the April 1992 issue of *American Antiquity* for full details of the 1993 Annual Meeting.