

The Havana Connection: Buffalo Tiger, Fidel Castro, and the Origin of Miccosukee Tribal Sovereignty, 1959-1962

Author(s): Harry A. Kersey, Jr.

Source: *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 491-507

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1186014>

Accessed: 24-09-2019 19:06 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1186014?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Nebraska Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Indian Quarterly*

The Havana Connection

Buffalo Tiger, Fidel Castro, and the Origin of Miccosukee Tribal Sovereignty, 1959–1962

HARRY A. KERSEY JR.

On 26 July 1959, the new Cuban revolutionary government of Fidel Castro held a gigantic *manifestacion* or celebration in Havana. This national holiday was ostensibly declared to commemorate the six-month anniversary of the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's repressive regime. The date also held strong historical significance because Castro called his revolution the "26th of July Movement" in honor of the date in 1953 when his guerrilla fighters launched an unsuccessful attack on government barracks in Santiago de Cuba.

Thousands of Cubans from the outlying provinces crowded into the capital city, along with numerous guests from the Communist bloc and Third World nations. Most of those assembled were unaware of the political undercurrents threatening the nascent Castro regime. Although radical economic and agrarian reforms during the first six months provided immediate relief to the poorest elements of Cuban society and cemented their loyalty to the revolution, support for Castro was not unanimous. As historian Louis Perez reports, "Apprehension and misgivings increased among liberals in and out of government and among property owners in and out of Cuba. Cuba was seen moving toward government by decree and rule by one man. Many were growing increasingly suspicious of the phenomenon of *fidelismo*, which smacked of demagoguery and over which, they sensed correctly, they could exercise little restraint."¹ Already several of his former colleagues had resigned, and others were executed as traitors to the revolution. Thus, in the time-honored tradition of beleaguered Latin American dictators, Castro was rallying his supporters in an orgy of patriotic excess that would drown out criticism.

During the three-day affair the new prime minister delivered a number of lengthy harangues to massive gatherings at a local stadium, each lasting for several hours under a broiling tropical summer sun. In the stands seated among the cheering throngs of Cubans and foreign visitors was a delegation of Native Americans who were there as guests of the Castro government. Eleven members of this group were Miccosukee Indians from Florida led by tribal spokes-

man Buffalo Tiger and their Miami attorney, Morton Silver. Why this obscure group of Indian activists came to be present in Havana, and the goal of their mission, is a little known and seldom discussed tale of how the threat of foreign intervention was used as political leverage to achieve an early victory for the cause of Miccosukee tribal sovereignty in Florida.

The antecedents of this strange affair are found in the early 1950s when the federal government instituted its infamous “termination policy” for American Indian tribes.² Following World War II, a conservative Republican-controlled Congress looked for ways to lower the national debt and reduce the size of government. A primary target of this effort was the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which supplied services to tribes living on the federal trust lands known as reservations. When organized attempts to assimilate Indians by relocating them from reservations to urban centers were only moderately successful, Congress turned to other means to end federal relations with the tribes. First, Congress authorized an Indian Claims Commission in 1946 and encouraged it to settle all tribal claims filed within four years, thus closing the books on existing federal obligations to tribes.³ Clearing such claims was a necessary political prelude to getting government out of the “Indian business.” Second, Congress moved to terminate all services to the tribes and end the historical government-to-government relationship that had existed through treaties and court decisions since the founding of the United States.

In 1953 the Eighty-third Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108 expressing “the sense of Congress” that elimination of services should become the fundamental principle of federal Indian policy.⁴ The BIA was required to prepare lists of tribes capable of running their own affairs. The Seminoles of Florida never appeared on these lists; nevertheless, they were among the thirteen tribes identified as being ready for termination of government services. Later in the same session Congress passed Public Law 280, which gave civil and criminal jurisdiction over Indian tribes to the states.⁵ This effectively relieved federal authorities from the responsibility for administering justice on tribal lands. The original act ceded this authority to five specified states but provided for other states to request legal jurisdiction over tribes. In all, twelve states ultimately assumed control over the tribes in their boundaries; Florida was one of those states. This was peculiar because most states accepting PL 280 jurisdiction had sizeable Indian populations.

How did this small Florida tribe numbering fewer than one thousand persons come to be included on the termination list? In the late 1940s Congress demanded a report from the commissioner of Indian Affairs identifying tribes ready to stand on their own, those that would be ready for independence in a few years, and those that would not be ready in the foreseeable future. The list provided by Acting Commissioner William Zimmerman identified the Seminoles

as one of the tribes that would need federal assistance for the foreseeable future.⁶ James Officer, the associate commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 1960s, has offered an insight into why the Seminoles may have been included: "While the Seminoles of Florida were a congressional add-on, the legislators omitted a number of others perhaps—I might suggest cynically—because of the reluctance of particular congressmen to have their constituents singled out."⁷ The disturbing implication of this is that the Florida delegation either sought to have the Seminoles included or acquiesced in their inclusion. Interviews with surviving members of the Florida delegation during the termination era seem to confirm that Representative James Haley, chair of the House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, was responsible for including the Seminoles to show that Indians from his own state were not immune from consideration; however, he was confident they would not be terminated once their situation was understood.⁸

Seminole termination bills were introduced in both houses during 1954, and a joint Senate–House subcommittee scheduled hearings in Washington and Florida. It was during the Washington hearings of 1–3 March that Buffalo Tiger emerged on the national scene as spokesperson for his people. He was not a hereditary leader but, rather, was selected as spokesperson because he spoke passable English, had lived and worked in Miami, had married a white woman, and understood the world outside the Everglades. Moreover, he was unflinchingly loyal to the traditional medicine men and would follow their directions explicitly.⁹ Initially his role was to express the elders' concern that state and federal water management programs would flood their hunting grounds. They also protested harassment by state wardens who came uninvited into Indian camps, ostensibly looking for illegally taken fish and game. State officials learned to accept Buffalo Tiger's advocacy for the Miccosukee people, all of whom lived in isolated Everglades camps or near the Tamiami Trail.

Approximately two-thirds of the Florida Indians who identified themselves as Seminoles lived on federal reservations at Dania, Brighton, and Big Cypress. They had a vested interest in retaining their homes, lands, and cattle herds with continued government assistance and protection. They sent a delegation that requested twenty-five more years of BIA support before they would consider running their own affairs. By then the Seminole reservation community could become self-sustaining. Laura Mae Osceola, a young Indian woman who served as interpreter for the group, promised the committee, "In twenty-five years they won't need your help. We will be giving you help!"¹⁰

When it was time for Miccosukee representatives to testify, they presented a mixed message. They wanted nothing to do with the federal reservations or the Seminoles, many of whom were their blood relatives. Morton Silver, their aggressive attorney, spoke first and alienated the committee by claiming that the

Miccosukees, not the reservation people, should be considered the major Indian group in Florida. He asked that their government be recognized as speaking for all Florida Indians.

Buffalo Tiger was a soft-spoken and more reticent advocate who neither affirmed nor denied the claims of the attorney. Instead, he stated that the Miccosukees were an independent and reclusive people who wanted nothing to do with government plans to create a reservation for them on the Everglades lands where they already lived. Indeed, they did not believe that anyone could or should own the land.

When questioned closely by subcommittee members such as Senator George Smathers of Florida, who wanted to know if the Indian people did not want to have control over their own lands, Tiger's rejoinder was, "I will tell you now I am pretty sure my people won't like that."¹¹ The committee never convinced Buffalo Tiger that Indians should take ownership of the land; they totally missed the point that the Miccosukees already considered the Everglades theirs to use. When Smathers asked if the tribe would be willing to send its children to school, Tiger again parried by saying, "It is a little too involved for Indians. I think they would be unhappy to do it right away."¹² Other members had even less success in securing straight answers on Miccosukee willingness to desert their traditional ways. By the end of the hearing an exasperated Smathers told his colleagues, "Mr. Chairman, I do not know where we are. I came here to find out what was going on, and we succeeded in getting me even more confused about this bill than when we started."¹³ Most of the legislators shared Smathers's confusion, and few left believing that the Florida Indians—either Seminoles or Miccosukees—were ready to operate without government assistance.

While the hearing was in session, the Miccosukees engaged in a piece of ethnic political theater on the capitol steps, presenting a "Buckskin Declaration" to an official of the Eisenhower administration. The document, inscribed on a buckskin, recited the independent existence of the Miccosukee Nation and demanded that the government not interfere in the Miccosukees' lives. The "Buckskin Declaration" and subsequent documents were most likely written by the Indians' attorney, as literacy was virtually nonexistent among the Miccosukees of that day. This media event, engineered by Silver, gained a great deal of publicity but also exacerbated the enmity of several congressmen.

Immediately following the hearings, Silver bombarded the White House with requests for presidential recognition, which were diplomatically deflected to the BIA. Eventually, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Glenn Emmons went to Florida to sort out exactly who the Miccosukees were and what portion of the Florida Indian population they represented. Following exhaustive meetings with virtually all Indian elements, he reported that the Miccosukees were a valid constituency living along the Tamiami Trail—but they were not a differ-

ent tribe per se.¹⁴ What differentiated them was degree of acculturation. There were both Miccosukees and Seminoles living on the federal reservations. Essentially, the Miccosukees were separated from their reservation relatives more by traditional religious views and lifestyle, and willingness to follow their medicine men and council, than by language or family lineages. The problem was how to deal with these separate polities. It was not the first time that the government recognized this fundamental cleavage between the groups. In the 1940s Commissioner John Collier proposed organizing the Florida reservations as a tribal government under the Indian Reorganization Act and letting the traditional "Trail Indians" (Miccosukees) go their own way.¹⁵

In 1955 a House select committee headed by Representative Haley held additional congressional hearings on termination in Florida.¹⁶ At a session in Clewiston the reservation Indians again asked the federal government to reconsider discontinuing government services. In addition, county officials enumerated the potential problems in depending on local government for health and social services to Indians. A second session was held at a Miccosukee camp on the Tamiami Trail, and again attorney Silver alienated the assembled congressmen with his vigorous assertion that the Miccosukees owned most of Florida. This led Chairman Haley to initiate inquiries about Silver's reported links with the Communist Party (this turned out to be negative, although the House Un-American Activities Committee had investigated one of his legal associates). At the conclusion of the Florida hearings, Representative Haley, having heard from many constituents, abandoned his neutral stance and became an outspoken opponent of terminating services to the Florida Indians, and the rest of the subcommittee followed suit. The Seminole termination bill died quietly in committee. In 1957 the Indians living on federal reservations adopted a constitution and by-laws as well as a business charter and were recognized as the Seminole Tribe of Florida, thus securing their lands and future.¹⁷

The future was not so certain, however, for the Miccosukee people living along the Tamiami Trail and in the lower Everglades. Although the termination fever was subsiding in Washington, tribes were still not out of danger during the final years of the Eisenhower administration. The government may have backed away from dismantling Indian tribes, but it certainly was not creating any new ones! Nevertheless, Commissioner Emmons felt an obligation to the Miccosukees and attempted to broker a deal with the State of Florida that would guarantee land for their use. He felt this would be easier after Governor LeRoy Collins and the cabinet members officially recognized the Miccosukee Tribe at a 1957 ceremony held in Tallahassee.¹⁸ The state also agreed to lease land in the Everglades Conservation Area to the Miccosukees. Despite the state's acceptance of the Miccosukees as a separate tribe, there was reluctance to set aside land for a reservation. In particular, Florida Attorney General Richard Ervin

was concerned that assigning the Miccosukees land might infer that the state had legal obligations in light of the tribe's pending case before the Indian Claims Commission. At that point the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) entered the negotiations on behalf of the Miccosukees. The Washington-based AAIA was arguably the most effective Indian advocacy group in the nation during that period. Founded in the 1920s by Pulitzer Prize-winning author and anthropologist Oliver LaFarge, during the 1950s it was headed by an aggressive executive director, LaVerne Madigan, who could energize a network of state-affiliated organizations on behalf of Indian issues. Madigan took up the Miccosukee cause in the pages of the organization's journal.¹⁹

Over the next two years several meetings were held in Washington and Florida to discuss the Miccosukee land issue, but nothing positive emerged. Tempers frequently flared, and there were frequent threats that the Indians would take their case to an international tribunal. Typical was a meeting in which the Miccosukees' attorney Morton Silver and his associate confronted Commissioner Emmons with the threat to take their case before the World Court at The Hague. Emmons responded by promising to continue working with the Florida officials to find a solution. The Miccosukees also went public with their complaints. A Miccosukee delegation appeared on *The Dave Garroway Show*, a popular morning talk show broadcast nationally by NBC. They also made presentations to the Spanish and British embassies claiming that the Miccosukee people retained rights to their lands under a number of colonial treaties with those governments. Although this negative publicity embarrassed the federal government, BIA officials remained adamant in their refusal to recognize the Miccosukees as a separate tribe. Moreover, there were allegations that individuals with political agendas were leading the Miccosukees astray. Buffalo Tiger recalled,

That's how we started. When we start[ed] doing that, we got involved, like Cuba[ns], with different people. We sit here today, and that kind of stuff [is] not so important, but years ago, lets say about the 1950s and 1960s, the communism: it's a big deal; it's like poison. So that's what people start calling Morton Silver and some of the lawyers we worked with, and then we got to be called communists, too. We don't care because we know what we [are] talking about anyhow. But when that kind of thing came up, things got [a] little tough.²⁰

Early in 1959 the Miccosukees entered the arena of pan-Indian politics. Buffalo Tiger made contact with the Indian activist Wallace "Mad Bear" Anderson, who came to national attention through his opposition to building a dam on the Tuscarora Reservation in New York. Anderson was not actually an elected leader of the Tuscarora or even a man of great standing among his people;

rather, in the opinion of Laurence Hauptman, a prominent historian of the Iroquois, he was an opportunist who knew how to manipulate the media in publicizing social causes.²¹ Nevertheless, at Anderson's instigation, the Miccosukees hosted a February gathering in the Everglades attended by some eighty Indian activists who claimed to represent a constituency of over 150,000 native people. During this meeting it was decided to prepare several buckskins stating the claims of Indian peoples. At "Mad Bear" Anderson's suggestion, one of these was sent to Fidel Castro accompanied by a laudatory note congratulating him for liberating the Cuban people. In response the Castro government, sensing the potential public relations bonanza to be derived from having indigenous people from the United States in attendance, invited a group of Native American leaders to attend the 26 July celebration in Havana. The Miccosukees sent a delegation of eleven individuals including Buffalo Tiger, his father Tiger Tiger, Howard Osceola, John Osceola, Homer Osceola, Raymond Tigertail, Wild Bill Osceola, Calvin Sanders, John Willie, Stanley Frank, and their attorney Morton Silver.²² The Indians spent three days in Havana, and according to "Mad Bear" Anderson's account they were royally received: "They rolled out the red carpet for us, including police escort in Cadillacs, bands and machete waving campisinos [*sic*]." ²³

When the Miccosukees enplaned for Havana they took a letter that had been prepared for presentation to appropriate officials of the Cuban government. It not only is a statement of Miccosukee appreciation for the support of the Cuban government but also includes a blatant endorsement of Castro's precarious position as political leader. The letter alludes to two eighteenth-century compacts between the Florida Indians and Spain as a basis for the Miccosukee claim to be a sovereign nation. This is further evidence that attorney Silver, who had been researching such treaties, likely authored the document. The Miccosukees' letter and the Cuban response are published here in their entirety for the first time; the first is as follows:

July 25th, 1959

CHICKEE-CHOBEE

Everglades

To his excellency Fidel Castro Rus, Great Cuban Leader, Patriot and Liberator:

Greetings from the Sovereign Miccosukee Nation.

We are very happy to be your personal guests of honor on the greatest day of celebration in the history of Cuba.

We congratulate the fortunate Cuban people who have regained their land and freedom. We hope some day to know the great blessing which you will tomorrow so joyfully celebrate.

We hope that our people will someday celebrate the Universal recognition of our rights to continue to live in freedom and peace in our Florida Everglades homeland.

We honored you when you led a handful on [*sic*] heroes in the hills to fight for freedom. We rejoiced when you came from the hills to free your nation from tyranny and oppression [*sic*]. We were sad when you laid aside your leadership of your free people. We urge you to resume again your destined place as great chief of the Cuban nation. You must take up again the noble task of leadership.

We believe that you love your country and your God as we do ours, and that you will never fail to deserve the trust that freedom loving people place in you.

Our history tells us that our forefathers sailed from Florida in log canoes with animal-skin sails to Cuba, where they found friends who feasted and traded with them. Our people made an alliance with your forefathers in 1785 and 1795, which we have not forgotten.

Our ancestors fought against the enemies of your ancestors, and defended your land and people. More than a century has gone by since any Miccosukee has enjoyed the hospitality of your people and the help of your government.

We will tell our children's children that you did not forget. W[e] will tell them your great generosity as hosts and your staunch support and championship of justice in our struggle to protect our home land.

We will always cherish . . . your recognition that is being given us on the eve of the first anniversary of your revolution.

May the Great Spirit guide and protect you, and lead you back again to your place where you belong, as saviour and chief of the Cuban nation.

The Sovereign Miccosukee
Seminole Nation²⁴

In return the Miccosukees received official support from the Castro regime in the form of a letter signed by Dr. Juan Orta, an official in the Foreign Ministry. Written in surprisingly error-ridden English, the letter clearly states that the Cuban government recognized the Miccosukee Indian Nation; this was to prove valuable political leverage in the future:

Havana, Cuba

July 26, 1959

To your Excellencies Buffalo Tiger
Howard Osceola, Bill McKinley Osceola
John Osceola, Homer Osceola, Sonny Billie'

Henry Nelson Panther, and Bobby Tiger,
The Executive Council, and to your Excellency
Jimmy Tiger, Head Councilman of the General
Council, and to your Excellency Smallpox Tommie,
Chef Justice of the Judicial Council, and to
Your Excellency William McKinley Osceola,
Counsel-in-Chief.
The Sovbereign [*sic*] Miccosukee Seminole Nation
Chickeechobee, Everglades, Florida Peninsula.

The free Cuban Government having liberated its people from the tyranny and opression [*sic*] of a dictator who was guilty of muerdering [*sic*] and torturing thousands of innocent Cuban men, women and children, now has the opportunity to send its greetings to you and wishes for the succes [*sic*] of the Revolutionary Government, extended by your Government [*sic*] on January 6, 1959—in your note adressed [*sic*] to Dr. Fidel Castro Rus.

It is whit [*sic*] pleasure that the free Cuban Government takes this opportunity, in return, to formally recognize your newly established government as the duly constituted government of the Sovereign Miccosukee Seminole Nation.

The free Cuban Government appreciates your sympathetic approval and wished for the succes [*sic*] of the Agrarian Reforma, which is se [*sic*] essential for the welfare and future economy of the Cuban people, and the Cuban government hopes that your government will, likewise, be successful in protecting your everglades [*sic*] homeland for your people.

The long struggle of your Miccosukee Nation and the perseverance [*sic*] and courage of your indomitable and freedom loving people is well known throughout the world.

Freedom and land has, at last, come to the Cuban people through the efforts of the great Cuban liberator Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, and the Cuban Government hopes that the rest of the world will someday enjoy the same God-given rights.

Truthfully yours,
Dr. Juan Orta²⁵

Buffalo Tiger recalled the Havana visit in vivid detail during recent interviews with me. He was particularly impressed by the security precautions that were taken during their stay, noting,

We did meet Castro. What he did was give us places to go and do different things. We didn't see him much except one time he made a little speech.

About two or three Castros were there. It was hard to tell which one was the real Castro. It looked like they had doubles for him; it was pretty hard to tell which was the real one. He was big and said hello to us and that kind of thing. I think they made a lot of pictures there, too, but I don't have any. Here again it looked like it was planned and everything was set up. You'd just go in to see him, come and go quickly. That was what he was doing. I remember the things he had to say. He said [them], I guess, because the interpreters said . . . , "We are your friends, and we're going to help you all we can." He promised us that if we had a hard time living in the United States, our homeland, then Cuba was open for us anytime. Yes, he made an offer, but through interpreters. But that's the only thing I remember when we really faced him. The other times, I believe the next day, he made a speech for one whole afternoon. We had to go high, really high up there to see him. He's up there [on stage] with his group and made a speech, and we were guests, so we went. We were [sitting] outside. I thought it was very hot, and you got thirsty! Hot sun, hot day—I had to bear with it! Anyhow, everything went okay. We came down and went back to the hotel and rested. Well I don't see how he can talk that long!

I believe business-wise we were there about three days. Altogether it will be about four days. Let me tell you, you had a lot of Americans and newspapers there. One reporter from the *Miami Herald*, he went with us. He's a friend. He wanted to go, so we took him. [He was] Jane Reno's son, Bobby Reno. I think she's got two sons. He took some pictures, and when we got back he put us on the front page.²⁶

Jane Wood Reno, mother of the former attorney general of the United States, was a feisty newspaper reporter who befriended Buffalo Tiger and other Miccosukees during the 1950s, spent a great deal of time in the Everglades, and had accompanied them to the Washington termination hearings. In a 1971 interview Reno recorded her impressions of the events surrounding the visit to Cuba. Although her account is a bit sentimental and not totally accurate in every detail, it does capture the excitement of events in Cuba from the perspective of a decidedly pro-Miccosukee white Floridian:

The tail end of the organized Indian effort to embarrass the U.S. government came about in 1960 when I was called and asked, "How would you like to go with a group of Seminole Indians to be a guest of Fidel Castro in Cuba?" By that time we weren't broken off from Castro. I was working with Hank Meyer Associates in public relations—I was no longer newspapering [so I could not go]. I said, "Oh, how I envy you!" This was the first anniversary of the Castro's revolution. I said, "Why don't you take my son, Bobby Reno, who's working for the *Miami Herald*?" So they took

Bobby. They had the thirteenth floor of the Hilton Hotel, and Bobby said, "It was the wildest, most beautiful weekend. The crowds and everyone, including all of us Indians (including me), were on the balcony with Castro, and he kissed us with tears streaming down his cheeks. We all got drunk on champagne on the thirteenth floor of the Hilton, and those Indians can drink up a storm!" That was the last gasp, in effort, of the Miccosukee revolution of 1950, which was a PR revolution, an attempt to embarrass the United States government into paying. I always wish I had been there in Havana!²⁷

Reno's support for the Miccosukees' maneuver was decidedly a minority view. The Florida press, including Reno's former employers the *Miami News* and the *Miami Herald*, were particularly scathing in their denunciation of the trip. The *Herald* offered,

The silly season seems to be with us again. It blossomed in a bit of grandstanding by a dozen of Florida's Seminole Indians. They junketed to Cuba for the big doings in Havana last weekend. There they swapped documents with Premier Fidel Castro. . . . The Cuban gambit was the latest in a long series of headline-hunting antics by this ill-advised group, which must embarrass most of the 1,000 Seminoles in Florida. We'd blush, too, if we took such foolishness seriously, which we don't.²⁸

One member of the Seminole Tribal Council, ironically enough a cousin of Buffalo Tiger, was quick to express disapproval of the Miccosukee action, saying, "These people don't speak for us. If we have differences with the U.S. we believe in settling them over the conference table—not with our tomahawks."²⁹ State Commissioner of Indian Affairs Max Denton also made some disparaging remarks about the Trail Indians' leaders, claiming that they represented only about thirty-five people.³⁰

Governor LeRoy Collins and state cabinet officials, responding to the press as well as to a public outcry over Indian involvement with Castro, expressed second thoughts concerning the Miccosukee land lease and temporarily put it on hold. However, in 1960 the cabinet relented and gave the Miccosukees a limited-use lease on 149,000 acres of Everglades land. Even so, the state commissioner of Indian Affairs was the first person to contact Buffalo Tiger following his return from Cuba. He also received a call from the BIA officials in Washington promising to reconsider recognition of Miccosukee as a separate tribe if they discontinued contact with Cuba. Tiger recounted,

It didn't take long [before] I had phone calls. That's when the state began calling me to talk. [They said,] We have a reservation and you know we're going to work things out and you're not going to go back any more. Of

course, I couldn't change anything then. Max Denton called first, and he promised me there was going to be a reservation set up to what we wanted and that kind of thing. I told him we could get together. The same afternoon I had a call from Washington. They asked me to promise not to go back [to Cuba] and not to talk to those people again, and they were going to come down and work with us.³¹

Evidently the Department of State, always alert to how Third World nations might respond to the appearance of racial oppression in the United States during the Cold War era, was not pleased at the prospect of an American ethnic minority having to turn to a Communist nation for support in achieving its political rights. Castro was just beginning to export his revolutionary ideology throughout Latin America and would capitalize on any contacts with Indians for propaganda purposes. It was widely believed in Washington that there was pressure on the BIA to moderate its stance on recognition, although no documents have been found to confirm it.

Although Buffalo Tiger and the Miccosukees took the federal officials at their word, there would be foot-dragging for almost two years until the Kennedy administration came into office in 1961. Meanwhile, the Miccosukees had split into two factions, the larger group of Trail Indians led by Buffalo Tiger and a group in Hialeah encouraged and advised by Morton Silver. Determined to fulfill outstanding commitments to various tribes, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Philleo Nash sent an experienced tribal affairs officer to Florida to determine which of the competing Miccosukee groups should be organized as a tribal government. After several months of investigation it was established that Buffalo Tiger's group had the support of a vast majority of the Miccosukees. Accordingly, Reginald (Rex) Quinn, the BIA's leading expert in developing tribal constitutions, was sent to work with a committee of Miccosukees. Quinn, a Sioux Indian who had previously worked with the Seminole Tribe in establishing their government in 1957, was well known to many of the Miccosukees who had taken part in that discussion.³²

From Buffalo Tiger's description of the process of constitutional development, it is apparent that Rex Quinn listened closely to the concerns of the Miccosukee people in advising them on how they might structure their government. They were not forced to accept some cookie-cutter BIA model of government but, rather, adapted the constitution to tribal needs and values. Most important to Tiger, they were able to retain structures that emphasized traditional Miccosukee values based on the primacy of clans and the role of medicine men as religious/political leaders. Quinn suggested they could have both a Tribal Council and a business Board of Directors like the Seminole Tribe, but the Miccosukees demurred. Instead, they opted to have all the people acting

corporately as a General Council to set overall policy and a small elected Business Council running day-to-day affairs. At the same time the medicine men remained in charge of religious affairs. As Tiger explained,

We can have the Tribal Council running the tribe, and the Business Council would run the business. We said not really, we don't want to go that way, because we're such a small tribe and we have two sets of power there. . . . So let the Business Council run business and run the tribe, the reservation, and all that. But as far as the religious practice and all that, should be left out, so those [religious] people can run it [as] they want to see it run.³³

In December 1961 the Miccosukees voted on the constitution and by-laws prepared by a committee that Buffalo Tiger chaired. Although only seventy-six of ninety-four eligible adults cast ballots, fifty-eight were in favor of the new government. Tiger recalled that at the last minute some disgruntled medicine men urged traditional families to boycott the proceedings: "Most of the people did not want to be that bothered. In other words, the way it is now."³⁴ On 2 January 1962, the secretary of the Interior approved the constitution and by-laws of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.³⁵ At long last Florida had its second federally recognized Indian tribe.

When the Miccosukee people met later that month to select tribal officials, Buffalo Tiger was elected tribal chair, a post he would hold for the next twenty-four years.³⁶ During that time he would become recognized as one of the most innovative tribal leaders of the twentieth century. Few have pulled the levers of power in quite the same way. Not only did he command support from a very conservative constituency, but he also succeeded in pitting Castro against federal government lethargy and disinterest to achieve Miccosukee recognition. Certainly the Miccosukees realized that they were being used by Castro for propaganda purposes to support his regime, but they were also using him to gain their ends. In a statement to a U.S. Senate subcommittee in 1982, Chairman Tiger recounted, "When Castro took over Cuba, he wanted us to come over as his guests. We went and were treated ok. When we got back the United States said 'ok, don't go back. Promise us you won't, and you will be Miccosukees.' We needed our own power, and we had to go to Cuba to get it."³⁷

By the 1970s, capitalizing on President Nixon's call for a policy of Indian self-determination, Chairman Tiger challenged the BIA bureaucracy and achieved total economic control of all programs for his tribe. The tribal leaders demanded the elimination of the Miccosukee Indian Agency at Homestead, which they considered paternalistic and authoritarian, as well as direct contracting of funds from Washington to the Tribal Council, thus bypassing the BIA field bureaucracy. This placed Tiger in the forefront of the Indian self-determination movement. With the assistance of astute attorneys such as Bobo Dean and

Arthur Lazarus, the Miccosukees were able to maneuver successfully through the bureaucratic labyrinth of the BIA.

In a recent interview the prominent Washington Indian rights attorney S. Bobo Dean, who represented Buffalo Tiger and the Miccosukees for over thirty years, provided a candid and insightful assessment of the Miccosukee leader's accomplishments during that period. When asked if it was the attorneys or Tiger who actually called the shots, he responded,

What I can say is that I meticulously, I think he would agree with this, followed his direction. I, of course, cannot speak Miccosukee. The client, although more Miccosukees speak English today, in the 1960s and early 1970s, many older Miccosukees were not fluent in English, and Buffalo was the person who communicated their wishes. The contracting was, in fact, a political issue. It was Buffalo who led the tribe and persuaded the tribe. In an election, I think in the early 1970s, there was an opposition, and the vote came out for Buffalo. That was a sanction from the tribe for going forward. So I would have to say that Buffalo is far wiser and far more effective than many people that I have worked with in Indian Affairs, many of whom are federal and some tribal officials or folks, and who are more fluent in English than he is. I worked closely enough with him to be absolutely convinced of that.³⁸

On the national scene Tiger played an active role in the National Tribal Chairmen's Association and was also instrumental in forming the United Southeastern Tribes as a major regional force lobbying for Indian rights.³⁹ For two decades he served as cochair of the Florida Governor's Council on Indian Affairs, which advised the state's chief executive on matters affecting native people in the state.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Tiger was a conservative tribal leader who had little use for the "Red Power" radicalism of the 1970s. He took a strong stance against the American Indian Movement activists who ransacked the BIA building in 1972 and challenged an elected tribal government during the 1973 confrontation at Wounded Knee. Moreover, this is consistent with a historical tradition of political strife among Indian nations and even within tribal communities. After all, the Miccosukees' split from the Seminoles was precipitated by social/religious differences between closely related peoples.

In some respects the Miccosukees' visit to Cuba, and their strange interlude with Fidel Castro, is reminiscent of how large and powerful North American Indian tribes of the colonial era manipulated major European powers. From the early seventeenth century through the French and Indian War (1754–63), skillful tribal diplomats played the French against the British to retain some semblance of political equity as their relative economic and military power declined. Indian tribes alone were not capable of overcoming a European power,

but they provided the margin of military force that would potentially enable one or the other of the metropolises to emerge victorious. The way in which the Miccosukees leveraged formal Cuban recognition to overcome U.S. opposition to granting tribal status was a twentieth-century reprise of the old Indian balance-of-power politics set in a Cold War context.

Buffalo Tiger's story is a remarkable illustration of how a traditional Indian leader could function effectively in the political milieu of modern America and make a serious impact without losing his traditional cultural grounding. When his period of elected political leadership ended, Tiger moved quietly into the role of revered tribal elder, in which, in his eighty-second year, he remains an unparalleled link between the Miccosukee culture's past and present.

NOTES

1. Louis A. Perez Jr., *Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 321.

2. Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945–1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986). Larry W. Burt, *Tribalism in Crisis: Federal Indian Policy, 1953–1961* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

3. Harvey D. Rosenthal, *Their Day in Court: A History of the Indian Claims Commission* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990). Nancy O. Lurie, "The Indian Claims Commission Act," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 311 (1967): 56–70.

4. U.S. Congress, *House Concurrent Resolution 108, Expressing the Sense of Congress That Certain Tribes of Indians Should Be Freed from Federal Supervision*, 83d Cong., 1st sess., 1953.

5. *U.S. Statutes at Large* 67 (1953): 588.

6. Lyman S. Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy* (Washington DC: Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1973), 35.

7. James E. Officer, "Termination as Federal Policy: An Overview," in *Indian Self-Rule: First-Hand Accounts of Indian–White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. Kenneth R. Philip (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986), 115.

8. Harry A. Kersey Jr., *An Assumption of Sovereignty: Social and Political Transformation among the Florida Seminoles, 1953–1979* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 25–50.

9. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 36.

10. U.S. Congress, *Termination of Federal Supervision Over Certain Tribes of Indians, Joint Hearings Before the Subcommittees of the Committee of Interior and Insular Affairs, Congress of the United States, Eighty-third Congress Second session on S. 2747 and H. R. 7321, Part 8 Seminole Indians, Florida, March 1 and 2, 1954*, 1122.

11. U.S. Congress, *Termination of Federal Supervision Over Certain Tribes of Indians*, 1089.
12. U.S. Congress, *Termination of Federal Supervision Over Certain Tribes of Indians*, 1087.
13. U.S. Congress, *Termination of Federal Supervision Over Certain Tribes of Indians*, 1093.
14. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 41–42.
15. Harry A. Kersey Jr., *The Florida Seminoles and the New Deal, 1933–1942* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1989), 106–7.
16. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 44–48.
17. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Constitution and Bylaws of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Ratified August 21, 1957* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1958).
18. James W. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 263–64.
19. LaVerne Madigan, “A Most Independent People—A Field Report on Indians in Florida,” *Indian Affairs* 37 (April 1959): 1–6. LaVerne Madigan, “U.S. and Florida Act on Miccosukee Lands,” *Indian Affairs* 38 (October 1960): 1–2.
20. Buffalo Tiger, interview by the author, 8 October 1998, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP), University of Florida, Gainesville, Tape SEM 215, 7–8.
21. Laurence Hauptman, *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 163.
22. Bob Reno, “Seminoles Win Cuban Recognition,” *Miami Herald* (28 July 1959): 2A.
23. Edmund Wilson, *Apologies to the Iroquois* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 270–72.
24. Miccosukee Seminole Nation to Fidel Castro Ruz, 25 July 1959, copy in the files of Buffalo Tiger.
25. Dr. Juan Orta to Miccosukee Seminole Nation, 26 July 1959, copy in the files of Buffalo Tiger.
26. Buffalo Tiger, interview by the author, 27 August 1998, SPOHP, Tape SEM 214, 15–17.
27. Jane Wood Reno, interview by Marcia Kanner, 21 October 1971, SPOHP, Tape SEM 219, 31. See also George Hurchalla, ed., *The Hell with Politics: The Life and Writings of Janet Wood Reno* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1994), 105–17.
28. *Miami Herald* (29 July 1959): 5C.
29. *Miami Herald* (4 August 1959): 6A.
30. *Miami Herald* (12 August 1959): 16A.
31. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 186.
32. Reginald W. Quinn, interview by the author, 13 December 1977, SPOHP, Tape SEM 99AB, 20.
33. Buffalo Tiger, interview by the author, 8 October 1998, SPOHP, Tape SEM 215, 12.
34. Buffalo Tiger, interview by the author, 19 November 1998, SPOHP, Tape SEM 216, 11.

35. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Constitution and Bylaws of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, Ratified December 17, 1961 with Amendments Adopted 1964 through 1977* (photocopy).
36. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 197.
37. U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, *Hearings on S. 2893 to Settle Certain Land Claims within the State of Florida, and for Other Purposes*, 97th Cong., 2d sess. (1983), 92.
38. S. Bobo Dean, interview by the author, 30 October 1998, SPOHP, Tape SEM 217, 12.
39. Virginia Irving Armstrong (compiler), *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1971), 155–56. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 260–65. Kersey, *An Assumption of Sovereignty*, 197–98.
40. I served as a member of the Florida Governor's Council on Indian Affairs 1978–88 and observed the leadership of Buffalo Tiger firsthand. Tiger and I have coauthored a collaborative biography, *Buffalo Tiger: A Life in the Everglades*, that has been published by the University of Nebraska Press.