

RENNARD LEAVES US WORDS OF THUNDER

*Bill Piatt**

Rennard Strickland was a quiet, modest, genial man who made many contributions to legal education over the span of his career. Among his most important gifts are the words he wrote and spoke which alerted us to the extent that the legal system contributed to the genocide of Indigenous America. These words, these words of thunder, continue to resonate.

It was my good fortune to meet Rennard in the early 1980s. I had heard much about him from mutual friends in my home state of New Mexico, where I attended law school, and in Oklahoma, where I began my legal teaching career in the late 1970s. Our discussions in the 1980s led him to bring me on as a visiting professor for a year at Southern Illinois University School of Law during his deanship there in the late 1980s. That visit was a wonderful experience. Rennard was the best law school dean with whom I have had the good fortune to work. Not only did I have the chance to watch and learn from Rennard as he skillfully navigated the complexities of law school governance, but I had the chance to speak with him away from school. At dinner and in social conversations, Rennard helped me see more clearly the progression from the physical genocide of our Native ancestors, to the paper genocide by the eradication of Indian identity. He explained how this eradication took place in the Indian boarding schools, and how it was still taking place by the imposition of blood quantum tests and the like. Oh, and he also taught me a great deal about classic movies!

Rennard inspired me to seek the deanship at St. Mary's University School of Law where he had taught early in his career. After nine years in the role of Dean, I returned to full-time teaching and thankfully, to my writing. Rennard's words had helped me to focus my Immigration Law casebook in the early 1990s by beginning with a discussion of the attempted eradication of our first Americans. Rennard's inspiration remained with me as I continued my human rights scholarship. And now, in particular, his words have motivated me to focus more recently on the marginalization and attempted eradication of the Indigenous identity of my own Genizaro people.

Genizaros, the descendants of Indian slaves captured and forced into the service of Spanish colonialists beginning in the late 1500s, have survived

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and have maintained their Indigenous identities. Although nobody needs a government to tell us who we are and to validate that identity for us, the State of New Mexico has recognized Genizaros as Indigenous through resolutions of that State's legislature. Still, the federal government does not recognize Genizaros as being "Indian." Rennard's words of thunder have guided me into scholarship and activism on behalf of non-federally recognized Indians. I cite Rennard's printed words, and I share with my students his conversations and lectures. And as I do, I can see him smiling, and nodding approvingly.

I also think of Rennard each time I look into the eyes of my nineteen-year-old granddaughter. She is a registered member of the Choctaw tribe. And like Rennard and like my son, she is a native of Oklahoma.

We miss you deeply, Rennard. Thank you for the words of thunder, and grace, that you leave with us.