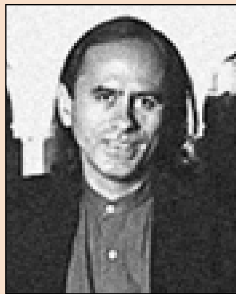
in search of indians



[Questions] such as "How many Indians live in the United States?" have multiple answers. My answer is an equivocal "it depends." You can pick the answer you like most, depending on the combination you prefer.

I have spent the bulk of my career examining the implications of race in America. What began as a search for identity as a pre-adolescent evolved into a career—a professional preoccupation with what Americans call themselves and why.

As a child raised in the 1950s and 60s, I watched my share of Westerns: *The Rifleman*, *Rawhide*, *Wagon Train*, *Daniel Boone* and *Bonanza*. I was intrigued by the Indians in these programs. They did not look like any of the Indians I knew. They did not look like my family or my family's friends. They did not even look like the Indians in the old photos at my grandmother's house—and those were Indians who had died a long time ago. My dad dismissed the television Indians as "Hollywood," but if they weren't real, then why did the pictures of Indians everywhere always show them wearing feathers and buckskin? And if my forbearers did not wear feathers and buckskin, were they imposters? I wanted to know who the real Indians were.

In school, my teachers said little about race—and they said even less about Indians. In college, I met American Indian students from many parts of the country. Some of them had ancestors who wore feathers and buckskin. And we debated whether the fact that my Cherokee ancestors in the Southeast were colonized two hundred years before their forefathers on the Plains somehow made my family less Indian than theirs.

As a young sociologist, I pursued the subject of who is an Indian with a vengeance. This turned out to be valuable preparation for the next chapter in my career: a decade working with the federal government as it has struggled to measure the racial composition of the United States.

My first foray into this controversial field was a February 1994 meeting at the National Academy of Science. Speakers representing organizations of multiracial families heatedly denounced the injustices of the existing official racial classification system and the burdens it imposed on them. They complained that the census question on race, which allowed them to indicate only one race for themselves and their children, forced them to choose one race over another in their family heritage. They demanded that the race question allow more options. People who insisted that I could not understand what it meant to be mixed race in America lectured me in the hallways. I could have told them about my French-Irish grandmother, but my racial heritage had been determined long ago by my parents when they decided that I was an American Indian and only that.

For the next several years I attended numerous meetings at the Census Bureau and elsewhere in the federal government. It became clear that political interests drove the need to address the racial question. Politicians like Newt Gingrich supported the idea of allowing multiple race responses. Columnists such as George Will opined that such a question would render interest group politics along racial lines all but impossible. Civil rights groups such as the NAACP worried that allowing multiple responses would make federal data so complex that enforcing civil rights legislation, such as the Voting Rights Act, would become much more difficult.

But once the political decision that something should be done was made, the question of what should be done was supposed to be guided by "science." After all, there were many talented social scientists—including several well-known sociologists—working on the issue. But in the end, the best that science could manage was an

unhappy compromise from a set of equally undesirable alternatives. In a representative conversation with one senior official, he and I concurred that whatever decision was made, it would be the wrong one. No one, inside or outside the federal government, could offer a universally acceptable definition of race in American society, much less an acceptable scheme for measuring and classifying it.

In 1996, I was appointed by then Secretary of Commerce William Daly to serve on the Census Bureau's Racial and Ethnic Advisory Committee (REAC). This committee advises the Bureau, and occasionally the Commerce Department, on all matters related to race and ethnicity. REAC is a large committee—with approximately 45 members. It consists of politically well-connected community activists from around the country and a handful of social scientists. The committee also was divided on what to do about modifying the race question on the census form. Some members were sympathetic to those who wanted a multiracial format; many others worried about the policy consequences of such a change. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) officials met with us on several occasions to make clear their awareness of the committee's concerns. They also made it clear that the decision rested outside of the Census Bureau. In particular, another committee consisting of representatives from 28 federal agencies was meeting regularly to consider research and testimony about this problem.

OMB finally announced its much-awaited decision in October, 1997. It mandated that Americans be allowed to identify themselves and their children with one or more races. This raised the number of unique racial identities recognized by the Census Bureau from 5 to 63, once the various combinations, such as African, Asian, and American Indian were included. The new OMB rules also stipulated that statistics for American Indians should include members of Mexican, Central and South American tribes.

My appointment to REAC came just in time to witness early fallout from the OMB decision. Much of it involved mundane, albeit important, matters such as how to tabulate and present the race data. Would it be possible to publish tables with all 63 racial combinations? Why had "Central and South American Indian" become one of the largest tribal groups in the nation, along with "Cherokee" and "Navajo"? As these discussions proceeded, OMB weighed in again, mostly to prevent chaos from overtaking civil rights enforcement.

We—the activists and the academics—are still waiting for the other shoe to fall: Will the new classification cause discussion about race in America to collapse under the weight of its unwieldiness? Will this mean an end to interest group politics in America? The National Congress of American Indians is unlikely to disband simply because of a change in how the Census Bureau classifies American Indians, but it and many other representatives of American Indian interests are certainly perplexed by the data gleaned from the 2000 census. Why did the percentage of "Hispanic American Indians" double between 1990 and 2000? Who are the 1.6 million people who identified themselves as "Black" or "White" in addition to "American Indian?" And how are these individuals similar to or different from the 2.5 million people who identified themselves only as "American Indian?"

As someone who is supposed to know the answers to these questions, I am frequently asked to account for the actions of the OMB and how the census collects information about race in American society. Some of these questions are easy to answer. Others, such as "How many Indians live in the United States?," have multiple answers. My answer is an equivocal "it depends." You can pick the answer you like the most, depending on the combination you prefer.

In the meantime, the 1997 revision of the OMB guidelines for racial and ethnic data has been akin to a full-employment act for sociologists and demographers. One book has already been published, and I have seen or reviewed at least a dozen papers about the new classification, what it means and how to use it. For my part, I am uncertain how these debates will eventually be settled, whether this is a revolutionary transformation or a minor shift in how Americans think about race. But I am very certain that much more will be written about it in the future.

Though I know much more now about race—and about Indians—in America than I did as a child, this knowledge continues to raise as many questions as it has answered. ■

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