

U.S. History

Choose an individual in the Civil Rights Movement and explain how their actions demonstrate the values of civics (the rights and duties of a citizen), civility (formal politeness and courtesy) and collaboration.

Wilma Mankiller: Fighting for Feminism and the Cherokee Nation

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When thinking of the Civil Rights movement, most people think of the plight of African Americans in the 1960s but another group that has had to fight for equal rights are the Native Americans. Wilma Mankiller, during her time as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, demonstrated the characteristics of civics, civility, and collaboration by advocating for the improvement of the way of life for her people with the help of the United States government.

Wilma Mankiller first saw first hand the misfortune of her people due to lack of care from the government starting in the mid 1950s. During this period the United States government started to reconsider old bills causing them to "[pass] a series of laws known as the 'termination' bills" which would end support to a number of groups, including Native Americans (Ramirez). One of the laws passed was the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 which "encouraged Native Americans to move from their tribal lands into cities under the guise of obtaining better jobs" (Ramirez). This was not the case. Instead, many natives, now no longer having native land to fall back on, could not find jobs and moved further into poverty. In fact, these bills removed 1.3 million acres of land from over 100 tribes (Ramirez). This led to the termination of those over 100 tribes. Not only did the government steal tribal land with their forced relocations, but they closed tribal health centers and schools (Ramirez). Mankiller's family was one of the many forced to relocate from rural Oklahoma to urban San Francisco, California. In the midst of her poverty, "surrounded by a strong, political, and diverse indigenous community," Mankiller developed not only her strong sense of feminism, but also her "belief in the power of Native communities to support and govern themselves" (Keene). This would shape her future policies because someone had to stand up to the US government or her people would continue to suffer.

Even though the actions of the United States government hurt the Cherokee people, in collaboration with Mankiller, they were able to be redeemed. Mankiller worked to improve relations between the governments of the United States and of the Cherokee Nation. Working toward a united future, Mankiller "[met] with Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton to present critical tribal issues" (U.S. Congress HR 1237). The Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation meeting with the President showed great trust between the two by having the top elected

officials communicated their problems and also illustrated that the United States government would listen to Native problems that they had previously ignored. These talks allowed Mankiller and other tribal leaders to “facilitate the establishment of an Office of Indian Justice” (U.S. Congress HR 1237), which allowed Natives to have a larger role in the government to give their own people justice rather than outsiders who might not understand their hardships. Although earlier politicians mistreated the Native American people in their care, with the assistance of Wilma Mankiller, they were able to right many of the wrongs of the past and move forward to unite the governments.

A problem Mankiller had to work through was to make others look past her race. She was often met with centuries old stereotypes that led to discrimination. During the time of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, many Natives were forced to move but, in its wake, they were faced with mass discrimination, loss of support culturally, and unemployment (Ramirez). The American people would belittle them and keep them from jobs purely for their race. While Mankiller did not have to “struggle to adjust” to a new life the way her family members did, she still had to face ongoing discrimination (Ramirez). Often people did not take her political ideas seriously because of the stereotypes. Mankiller claimed that “one time a reporter with an English accent called me at my home in rural Oklahoma and asked me if I rode a horse to work” (Martin). In the interview, she told the reporter about more stereotypes, sarcastically of course, and he was “writing this stuff down” (Martin). Instead of asking her about her political beliefs, the reporter asked about racist stereotypes believing every word that was said; thus, making Wilma Mankiller have to work harder to share her activist views with the world.

Her sex was another issue she had to face to become elected but was able to overcome these views with civility. Mankiller was not only the first female Chief of the Cherokee Nation but the first woman elected to be Chief of any major American tribe. Mankiller had originally run as a Deputy Chief alongside Ross Swimmer before he stepped down to go into the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1985 leaving her as Principal Chief (Ramirez). Although this appointment to Chief was met with skepticism, Mankiller “overcame hesitancy and sexism” and would go on to be re-elected to two more terms as Principal Chief (Keene). Even after taking over the role as Chief, she was still intentionally left out of a big intertribal council meeting because she was a woman (Corona). She showed up anyway and forced her way into their discussions. Once she was heard, the other leaders “respected her fully after they gave her the moment” (Corona). Another way Mankiller got the people to see her as a true leader was by helping the people scarred from all the oppression and genocide heal (Stienem). Once the people of the Cherokee Nation overcame their sexist views and saw her for the leader she was, they continued to re-elect her for helping the Nation bloom into something beautiful.

Overcoming the many obstacles in her path, Wilma Mankiller showed great personal and political courage by improving the living conditions and creating unity for all people of the Cherokee Nation. One of the improvements Mankiller pursued for the betterment of the Cherokee Nation was to work on the platforms of education and healthcare. In her time as Chief, Mankiller improved education amongst her people by “expanding the Head Start Program to promote school readiness for young Cherokee children” (Ramirez). By doing so, she made

sure future generations of Cherokee were educated enough to get good jobs, improving the quality of life for future generations. This allowed lower income Cherokee families to improve their children's future economic class. To improve her people's health Mankiller opened "health clinics" (U.S. Congress, House, "Honoring the Life of Wilma Mankiller" HR 1237) and a "center for prevention of drug abuse" (Ramirez). The health clinics further improved the Nation by reducing infant mortality rates and life-threatening illnesses. Mankiller's proposal of drug prevention centers also helped Cherokee people go back into the job market, improving the Nation's next generation by giving them steady incomes. These improvements in healthcare and education, which led to better quality of living for her people, allowed her to reach a deeper level of civics.

Wilma Mankiller once said leaders should "think about the impact of your decisions on seven generations into the future" (qtd. in Whittemore). Mankiller did just that. She worked so that the future children of the Cherokee Nation could have a good education, so that women were seen equal to men, and so that all her people could reach healthcare. In 1998 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom which is said to be "the highest honor given to civilians within the United States," (McGrath). Mankiller kept fighting for her beliefs until her death in 2010; she delivered speeches, she wrote books, and she taught at colleges. Mankiller was seen as an inspiration to Native women everywhere especially for female activists (Stienem). After Mankiller left office she continued to be a strong voice for women, social justice, and her native people through the qualities of civics, civility, and collaboration she fought to help her people re-establish the Cherokee faith and leave a legacy of inspiration (McGrath).

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