According to American Indian philosophy, an Indian child, even in the womb, is taught to respect his brother's dream. After birth, the child will be taught to integrate the physical and spiritual aspects of his daily life; to live in harmony with and use the gifts of nature; to ever-expand his awareness; to learn the customs of his people — diluted though those customs may be by time.

It is likely that this Indian child will, for the rest of his life, struggle to retain his Indian identity, assimilate into the mainstream of society, or perhaps pass for a white person and deny generations of heritage and culture.

And, if relations between the American Indian and the United States government do not improve in this country, the child's bitterest lesson will be that not everyone is taught to respect his brother's dream.

The American Indian (or Native American — a term many Indians prefer), is one of the smallest minority groups in the United States. Approximately 792,700 Indians remain in this country.

Until the last decade, Indians essentially had been a passive minority. Their existence was and is now fraught with ironies. They were the original inhabitants of this country and were once collectively strong enough to be considered a sovereign nation by the U.S. government. Until the late 1960s, however, they were politically impotent and still have little representation in Congress. They once were rich in natural resources; now they are a poverty population. And, these people who once had no concept of land ownership now are fighting to retain a land base in
order to maintain themselves economically.

Perhaps more than any other minority group member, the Indian has the most difficulty finding his place in society. He can pass for a white person. He can retain his Indian identity and face rejection from modern society. He can stay within the protective arms of the reservation where his life is, in many ways, controlled by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Or, he can break away from the reservation and sever himself from his culture, people, and entire way of life to try to make it economically.

The Indians’ dreary social status is not a recent phenomenon. But the old cliché cannot always hold true that all of the Indians’ problems today are a direct result of the visitation of the white man. Rather, the coming of white settlers created myriad problems for the Indians and the European settlers. Both groups had various and conflicting ideas of land ownership, law, culture, religious beliefs.

These conflicts often erupted into war-like hostilities. It is false to say that Indians always passively resisted the white settlers. It is false to say that the white man always raped the land and wasted the natural resources. Indeed, there were atrocities committed on both sides with each group responding to its own cultural cues.

The fact does remain, however, that the Indian population of today has had many of its rights abrogated by the federal government. And, if the Indians are ever going to survive as a nation, they will need to unite far more powerfully than they now are.

Harold Iron Shield, 32, is (by his own estimation) a “proud individual” — a Souix of the Dakota nation Hunkpapa’ band.

He was raised traditionally as an Indian on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, and left there at 18 to attend Laney Junior College in Oakland, Calif., on an athletic scholarship. There he received a two-year general studies degree and later completed a four-year American Indian studies program at the University of Minnesota.

He is an Indian in appearance; very long, very dark hair — pony-tailed or plaited; brown, oriental eyes; high cheekbones on a full moon face; jeans; a handkerchief around the neck; a jacket with starkly geometric Indian designs on a beige and white background.

He is an Indian in attitude and makes definite racial and cultural distinctions between red and white. The phrases “my people” or “my Indian people” are woven into his deliberate, rather halting speech.

He is a man of patience — something, he says, the Indian people maintain “no matter how we are treated or what we go through.”

He is not a man of pretension.

Perhaps more than any other minority group member, the Indian has the most difficulty finding his place in society.

Neither is his “office” — the Longest Walk Communications Center in the United Christian Ministries (UCM) building on Clifton Avenue — pretentious. His office consists of a bare-topped desk and two, metal chairs, padded in green, just off the landing in the second floor hallway.

It is dingy. The traffic of UCM staffers is slow but constant. They mount the steps and disappear behind one of two doors on either wall. There is constant, muffled giggling and FM disco music in the room nearest his office. Buses grind through the gears outside. Diffused sunlight struggles through the sole window which faces the street.

Iron Shield stretches out in his chair and discusses Indian history and current problems — slowly, patiently. His job is not easy. As the director of Cincinnati’s Longest Walk Communications Center (a community based, student organization — one of several such centers throughout the country), he tries to work with student organizations on the University of Cincinnati’s (UC) campus to promote understanding of Indian affairs through programming such as the appearance of a native American Indian band at UC last spring.

The Center also helps promote Recognizing American Indians Now (RAIN), the official Indian student organization on UC’s campus. RAIN’s purpose, says Iron Shield, is to promote awareness and understanding of Indian culture, historical issues and “anti-Indian” legislation.

But RAIN (which, ironically, was composed of many non-Indian students) is now virtually defunct. This may reflect a general student apathy for Indian affairs on campus and in Cincinnati since there is a paucity of Indians in this area — only 116 American Indian and Alaskan Native students at UC as of Nov. 1, 1978, and 92 Indians in the Cincinnati metropolitan area according to the 1970 census.

And, UC does not offer any intensive course of study on the American Indian apart from some courses and seminars in the history, English and anthropology departments. Except for the Longest Walk Communications Center, there was only one other American Indian organization in this area that Iron Shield is aware of — the Native American Indian Foundation based in Clermont County. The foundation, he says, now also is defunct.

In essence, there would be little socially, educationally or even politically for an Indian in this area who wanted to pursue his culture as fully as he could on a reservation or in an area densely populated with Indians.

But, according to Walter Williams, assistant professor of history at UC, the reasons for the dearth of Indians in this area are primarily economic. Dr. Williams teaches and is a scholar of American Indian history. He has lived on a Cherokee Indian reservation in North Carolina, working there with the Cherokee Indian Museum. He also did research on the Seminole Indians in Florida last fall.

The Indian migration to urban areas, says Dr. Williams, is a post World War II phenomenon. People moved off the reservations to serve in the armed forces or work in the war industry. In the 1950s, the government saw this urbanization as a possible solution to rectifying Indian problems.

A program was developed under the Eisenhower administration called “Relocation.” This was to help relocate and employ Indians in the large urban areas rather than improve reservations
that were economically destroyed by the Depression. Several industrial areas such as New York and Cleveland were chosen as relocation areas. Cincinnati was not.

And, says Dr. Williams, Indians have tended to migrate to cities in the West where the majority of the Indian population is concentrated.

So, Iron Shield's job is doubly difficult. He must try to raise the student consciousness on a campus where there are few Indians — in a city where Indians comprise only a very small percentage of the population. It is not hopeless, but it is not easy. And, Iron Shield's struggle mirrors the struggle of Indians nationally today.

Indeed, The Longest Walk, which began in San Francisco on Feb. 11, 1978, and ended in Washington, D.C., on July 15, 1978, was successful in several aspects. It was dramatic. Over 500 people made the cross-country, six-month trek — walking each day. There was a sacred pipe ceremony each morning before sunrise. The pipe was carried at the front of the procession the entire 3,000 miles. It rallied support from other minorities. The motley crowd of pilgrims included American Indians and, at various times throughout the march, representatives from other countries who carried their national flags to show support, over 300 Buddhist monks and civil rights leaders such as Rev. Jesse Jackson. In total, the crowd swelled to 8,000 at the time of arrival in Washington, D.C.

Most important, The Longest Walk attracted publicity. The media latched onto the event, and the American Indian became a headliner. But the recognition didn't stop with a lead story in the afternoon paper. Congressmen and senators were deluged with letters of support and petitions throughout the country. The seed was rooted and began to grow.

Since the inception of the Indian Movement in 1969, many Indian leaders have set goals for the Indian nation — if it is ever to be a unified nation — of the future.

Regaining sovereignty — complete, independent political authority — is a key issue. Hence, economic independence is essential. Indian tribes are trying to regain rights and land, rich in natural resources, once given to Indians in treaties made with the U.S. government until 1871.

Treaties were, in effect, government bargains with the Indians. The government agreed to give Indians certain amenities in exchange for land such as a considerable food supply to replace food Indians may have been able to hunt or raise on a larger area. Treaties also guaranteed that the various tribes would have complete, internal control over this designated or reserved land.

Gradually, these tracts of land or reservations became the remnants of the American Indian homelands which eventually were whittled to a vastly reduced land base. By the late 1800s, the government was exerting more and more internal control on reservations, says Dr. Williams.

Hence, the Indians lost considerable independence along with much of their land.

Initially, the Indians had no strong objections to white settlers because of the beneficial trade relations, Dr. Williams explains. The conflicts began when whites cordoned off tracts of land as exclusively owned property.

Still, one would think that the sheer number of Indians on the North American continent would have been strong enough to overrun the settlers and at least push them back to the Eastern seaboard. Nevertheless, one factor which figures heavily in this historical drama prevented this — disease.

The Old World settlers had built up immunity to disease microorganisms to which the Indians had no immunity because of their isolation from the rest of the world. With the “visititation” from the Old World came deadly bacteria. Probably between 75 and 90 percent of the population of the entire western hemisphere decreased within about a 100 year period, says Dr. Williams. “So I think,” he says, “that disease was the major factor that allowed whites to take over.”

The American Indian Movement was ignited in 1969 by the Indian take-over of Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay.

Spring CLIFTON 15
employment, the high Indian drop-out rate, alcoholism.

At present, over 50 percent of America's Indians live on one of the 267 Indian reservations under the jurisdiction of the BIA. The land is used as a residence for Indians and for economic development such as farming, raising livestock and development of natural resources. However, according to The American Indians, a booklet produced by the BIA, "the majority of Indian reservations cannot support the rapidly growing population dependent upon (the reservations)."

Whether or not an Indian leaves the reservation, he faces some alarming realities that few other minority group members in the United States now face. When viewed in the light of the following grim statistics (which apply to Indians on and off the reservations) drawn from studies conducted by the BIA, some of the obstacles seem insurmountable.

There is little work on many reservations because of unproductive land, a dearth of industrial or commercial jobs near reservations, and a general lack of education and training programs to prepare Indians for better paying jobs. Overall unemployment is extremely high—40 percent of the Indian potential labor force was not employed in 1977. According to the 1970 census, the average per capita income of all Indians in the United States was $1,573; the average per capita income of Indians living on federal reservations in 1975 was $1,520.

Communicable and infectious diseases are more prevalent among Indians than non-Indians primarily because of the lack of nutritious food, crowded housing and inadequate knowledge of hygiene and health. Upper respiratory infections are common. The death rate from tuberculosis, which ranks 12th as the cause of death among Indians, is four times higher among Indians than non-Indians.

In 1972, the rate of violent crimes per 100,000 population was much higher on reservations than in rural America; 1,068 violent crimes on reservations as compared to 144 in all rural areas of the United States.

Although there are government schools built for Indian reservations, they often are staffed by white teachers who are not intimately familiar with Indian culture. Or, Indian students who venture into public schools cannot assimilate themselves into the mainstream and face rejection because of culture differences. In the late 1960s, the combined drop-out rate for Indian students in federal, public and private high schools was 42 percent.

And, particularly on the reservations, depression is rampant. According to 1973 government figures, the Indian suicide rate was at least two times the national average. Also in 1973, 75 to 80 percent of all suicides among Indians were alcohol related.

Though some of these statistics are from studies conducted over five years ago, the numbers sufficiently indicate that the American Indian has suffered and is suffering in society today.

Indian activists currently are fighting against proposed congressional legislation, some of which is designed to permanently abrogate treaty rights—most of which have never been recognized anyway.

Chief among these proposals is the Native American Equal Opportunity Act (HR 9054) ("the biggest farce of a name for a bill," says Dr. Williams). If passed, this bill primarily would end federal supervision of Indian affairs, and allow no special privileges such as unlimited hunting and fishing rights.

The latter purpose of the bill may seem to be a move toward non-discrimination. Some Indians currently can fish without license on their reservations as a result of treaty agreements with the government. But, Indians maintain they hunt and fish for subsistence—not for sport. This bill, however, supposedly eliminates special privileges and will help assimilate Indians into the mainstream.
Apart from the need to retain hunting and fishing rights, Indians seek recognition of their treaties to maintain a land base on which to build an economy with the wealth of natural resources on Indian land such as timber, coal and uranium.

Critics of the Indian movement say that there would be no major thrust behind the movement if it were not for the potential income Indians could gain from land claims against the government.

But, it may take an Indian tribe an average of 15 years to receive monetary compensation for land taken unfairly. Hence, land claims against the government are hardly a get rich quick scheme.

And, if Congress authorizes a per capita distribution of funds from a tribe’s claim, the Secretary of the Interior, as trustee for Indian land and natural resources, consults with the tribal government and prepares a list of persons eligible to receive payment. The tribe sets its own criteria for membership. In order to receive funds from land claims, the tribe may use certain restrictions such as being born before a certain date to determine who is eligible to receive money. Any Indian who wishes a portion of the distribution must prove his eligibility.

And, according to The American Indians, “tribes with both land and resources are encouraged to spend a portion of their judgment funds in comprehensive development projects for long-range benefits to the tribe and its members.” These projects may include programs for sanitation, employment or other programs which will help augment the tribe’s income.

Critics of the Indian movement insist that a sovereign Indian nation will never be achieved. And, it is doubtful that the Indians, at present, could sever ties with a paternalistic U.S. government because they currently have little unification or have realized their full political power.

Dr. Williams sees one solution to the problem in the formation of a domestic, dependent Indian nation which would have complete, internal self rule with no more federal dependency than state governments now have.

Perhaps, he says, the Indians then could form their own state — the original idea behind the Indian territory (present-day Oklahoma) set up in the 1830s. (By 1907, Oklahoma was admitted as a state to the Union primarily, says Dr. Williams, because white settlers became interested in the lands.)

Another solution to the Indian sovereignty question, he says, is that the government could reappropriate some of the lost Indian homelands to add to the reservations.

And, for political representation, Dr. Williams suggests that the Indians might combine the strength of all the reservations and elect a senator.

In any case, he believes the Indians should be allowed their individuality, culture — in essence, their social freedom.

“Not everybody should be thrown into the melting pot. Maybe a salad bowl conception of America is better that a melting pot,” he says. Forcing any group to assimilate into society, he adds, will wipe out the ethnic group or promote resistance. Voluntary assimilation, however, is ideal because there is a mutual exchange of cultural influences.

Where is the American Indian in society today? They are a people, who, in most cases, are caught between two choices — assimilation into a society where it is difficult to blend Indian and contemporary 20th century culture, or life on a reservation where it is difficult to extricate themselves from poverty and the other social problems they now face.

They are a dependent, almost colonial subject of the United States. And, even if the United States were to recognize the majority of the treaty rights and reapportion land unjustly taken from the Indians, it is currently doubtful that they could unite as a sovereign nation because of their lack of unity.

But still, they wait — for a time when their Indian leaders and government legislation will combine to help positively, permanently change their lives. And they probably will wait for many, many years.