

**Mark Trahant Interview**  
**Interviewed by: Yvette Joseph and Jeff Ferguson**

Transcribed by: Haley Adair (11/18/20)

Joseph: How did you get to know Lucy Covington?

Trahant: I got to know Lucy Covington through my great-uncle, George [P. Lavada?], who was actually one of the founders of NCAI, and George and Helen Peterson were kind of the main people at NCAI back then. They introduced me to her, and I remember from the start I was at the Sho-Ban News and I was really intent on being a reporter and I had a, back then, a little portable typewriter and I'd sit in the lobby and start typing my stories. And, um, Lucy didn't care why I was there but thought I could be helpful, and so handed me stuff to go get copied. And I remember that, um, I guess charisma she had and command she had that instead of arguing I just went and made copies.

Joseph: What year was that Mark?

Trahant: That would have been about 1976 or '77. My grandparents and George would travel together to NCAI meetings and they were good friends with Helen and, kind of, all of them would get together.

Joseph: So, you know she was very involved in the fight against termination. So, what does termination mean to you and what do you think Lucy was able to accomplish?

Trahant: Well, in so many ways, and its true of all leaders that, um, she gets credit kind of for everything, but it really was a combination of a lot of people. She was part of a great movement. And termination was so pervasive and in the case of Colville, it was really a done deal. The senate had passed a termination bill the house was supposed to do it again and, um, the majority of the council, of the business council, was for termination. And

there was a sense of greed that I think was taking place and, it was against those odds that the coalition at Colville to try to stop termination got going. And, um, it was a multifaceted campaign that included the media, with a newspaper called Our Heritage. It included bringing in leaders from around the country. One of the most extraordinary things I've read some of the transcripts is that Lucy Covington would follow around the elected leaders, the chairman, and he would give a statement of some kind and she would get up and say, "well here's the other point of view", and challenge him directly. You think about kind of our view of tribal government, today we forget that sometimes dissent is a part of that. Sometimes, somebody's outside of the mainstream, and it's not just Lucy Covington. In the northwest, it's a great story because originally tribes weren't the first to claim treaty rights for fishing. It was dissent, it was people on the outside saying, "this is our treaty right", and tribes were reluctant. So, there's always that push-pull in tribal government, and it's a good thing. But she was probably the best at it. One of the things I found extraordinary in some of the reporting I've done about her was, her respect on Capitol Hill was such that, in so many ways she was treated as an equal when she would come to Capitol Hill. She would have personal, private relationships with senators and members of the House, because of who she was and what she represented. The idea that you would sell your cows to go lobby, that gives you some credence that most of us don't have, it's "where's my expense report?". (Laughs). It was pretty phenomenal in that sense. But, termination, I think Colville is really important because, had Colville gone South and had gone the way that the leadership in Congress had intended, I think termination would have happened to a lot more tribes. Colville was really the first to push back and say it's not going to happen anymore. And the policy took a few years to

change, but it changed after that. And I really think it was because of the Colville's pushback.

Joseph: Well, I know you've always been close to Forrest Gerard, and that Forrest had worked for Senator Jackson, but do you have any recollection of stories that he shared or insights he had from a Hill perspective?

Trahant: Sure, well the key one was, um, Henry Jackson was a terminationists and, um, he really... I think there were two schools of termination, one school was basically greed and it was people like Arthur Watkins who saw termination as a way to end federal government control and to acquire Indian land and to be aggressive. The other side of it were people who saw termination as a logical extension of tribal assertion of being able to basically, a poor metaphor, is to basically grow up.

The senate really thought that termination was going to happen, and I think the mindset was really a surprise. Henry Jackson took on termination because he came out of an immigrant experience, and he saw assimilation as a good thing, and a family thing, and a way to becoming good Americans. So, his approach to termination was not venal, it was really constructive in that sense. I thought it was really interesting: I went back and read all the letters between Henry Jackson and Lucy Covington, and we think in our era how many tribal leaders basically have nothing to with Slade Gorton, and just completely, he's done. It wasn't like that. She continued to woo him and was respectful of him pretty much until he flipped. I think that's really extraordinary, is that she saw this redemption somewhere in there that said he could be an ally even though he wasn't. He had supported termination really from his first election in the House all the way through the Senate. But, the story is, when Henry Jackson decided to run for president, starting in

1972, a group of democrats went to him and said that “you cannot be for termination, this is going to be a stain on your record and it’s going to hurt you in the primary and you got to get right.” One of them was Dr. A Bergman, who runs a clinic in Seattle. Jackson was really studious, and he took a look at the issue again and he realized he was on the wrong side of history. So, Jackson had a partnership with Clint Anderson, who was a senator from New Mexico. In fact, he viewed him as a father figure, he married Anderson’s secretary, was Helen Jackson, and so they had just an amazing relationship and Anderson was an old school terminationist who went to his death supporting termination. And that was troubling for Jackson. He got elevated to a committee chairman way before his time because of Clint Anderson, so he felt he owed him a lot. So, there was kind of a push back. One of the promises that he made to Anderson was that he would keep the staff intact. There was a guy by the name of Jim Gamble who was the primary architect of termination, and he was the staff director for the senate interior committee. So, Jackson was loads of fire for that reason. But eventually when he decided to run for president, he knew that had to change, and he promoted Gamble to office of senate territorial affairs subcommittee and basically just moved him out of Indian affairs. And that’s when he hired Forrest, when Forrest was first approached, he was you know, I can’t be window dressing. If you’re going to bring me, we got to change policy. And Jackson was open to that. Jackson’s relationship, I think, with Lucy Covington was built on this back and forth respect. It’s interesting because she had such strong supporters, particularly in Montana with the senate, some in the delegation of Washington State. Julia Butler was chairman of the house appropriations subcommittee and she had been actively trying to do things behind the scenes. It’s interesting because when termination was finally repudiated, the

senate is built on tradition, the house is not. So, Forrest went to Jackson and wanted a resolution to reverse course on termination, he wanted a senate resolution to do that. Jackson said, "Well that will have to start in the house". So, Forrest went to see Frank Ducheneaux, and Morris Udall in the House about getting resolution to appeal House Concurrent Resolution 208 and Udall and Ducheneaux. Said "we don't do that in the house", every house is new there are no resolutions that have any matter. So, we can't go back and reverse it. And the Senate didn't want to act until they did. So, it's actually interesting that there never was formal, Congressional reversal of 208. What's so interesting about that is that to this day, so many of the provisions of termination that really handicap tribes in so many ways are still on the books and still on the legal structure because Congress never could repudiate termination. Things like jurisdiction. Things like control of highways, taxation policy, you can go down the list of peculiar bills that are still set up on termination as the premise.

Joseph: That's very interesting Mark. Lucy was sort of credited with um, we're here with the National Congress of American Indians, so there are different tribal leaders who've talked about how Lucy would inspire others to assume positions of leadership, and you know, she recruited all these young folks to run, to take and bring back the council a majority of anti-terminators. So, we have Mel Tonasket, we have my father, Andy Joseph, we have other folks like Virgil Gunn, who ran for office and were successful. Rachel Joseph talks about what Lucy would do to take all these young women to get them to mentor them. So, do you have any stories about that or revelations of that?

Trahant: Well, I think the metaphor more is important. I don't have a personal story, but um, what I really liked about that whole method that she had was that you don't have to

have the title to be the leader. She was never the chairman of the tribe, she was always by one case, a member of dissent. But she had a moral authority that allowed her to do things that was really long range. I think that's a really important lesson that a lot of, particularly young people, need to hear is that there are things you can do without the title, if you don't get hung up on that. I know it's really easy to think I need to be this, I need to be that, rather than to think: What's the policy? What's the outcome? And I think that's really where she led, is her goal was to get rid of termination and to do that... I'll let Mel tell the story cause it's not my story to tell. One of the stories Mel told me is his first disagreement with Lucy Covington, after Mel got elected to the council, they were looking to fill jobs and like any elected leader, ;looking for ways to build up the government. And he'd run a name by her and she'd say, "well, they're a terminationist". And Mel was, "We got to get past that, we got to start thinking what's good for the tribe and good for everybody. And maybe that means bringing in people who are in on the other side". And she didn't like that at all, but Mel said this is what we're going to do. So, even then I think that's both a great story about leadership with both of them. That one of them had this singular vision about stopping termination, but yet it's almost like a start-up, some people who are really good at start-up aren't good at running the thing. This is the sort of story where Mel had that wisdom to be able to start the healing process.

Joseph: Well you've been very involved, you're sort of the editor/publisher of the Indian Country Today now, um, I know you've done an application, you've made it a weekly, you've gotten awards from Associated Press and from NAJA [Native American Journalist Association] recently from your lifetime of work. What do you know about Lucy and Our Heritage newsletter? Can you tell us a little about that?

Trahant: Sure, Our Heritage was really important. So, she realized that media was going to be really important, and in that era, media was newspapers and cartoons. She had in her toolkit two of the most remarkable people from that era: Vine DeLoria and Chuck Trimble and she reached out to both of them and said, the way Chuck tells it, “I want you to come to Colville. I want you to help me start this newspaper. I’m not going to pay you; I’m not going to pay your expenses. (Laughs). But I need you here.” And they both came. Vine would write pieces; Chuck would do cartoons and help put the paper together. The idea was, and Lucy’s written about this as well, that the most important message was what was at stake with termination. I think it was really easy for folks to think short term with termination, you especially saw that with some of the other termination battles where folks would get hooked on per capita and say, “We want our money. Termination is fine”. And our Our Heritage really set out the idea that there was a lot at stake, that it wasn’t just a one-time payment, that it was land, that it was culture, that it was a bunch of things. There would be immeasurable harm, as Lucy put it, if the tribe didn’t come around on this one issue. Our Heritage, I don’t know how it’s distributed, I’ve just read the papers, but they were thoughtful, they were humorous, they really set out to the community how important both the issue was, and then the election of the people that she thought could carry out the reversal of termination.

Joseph: Eastern Washington University is interested in advancing scholarship and I know you’ve worked as a faculty member for the University of Alaska and the University of North Dakota, I’m just curious what your thoughts are about what would Lucy do? What should universities do so that we honor and commemorate such a courageous leader?

Trahant: Well, two things. First, I think it's really important to put Lucy Covington in context. We have had so many great leaders that we all know from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we don't know the great leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the same way. I think Lucy Covington is definitely in that group. Folks like Billy Frank, folks like Vine DeLoria, Joe Delacruz. There are so many folks that really set a tone for what we're doing today and, Vine wrote that every generation there will be a Joseph Gary. That's where Lucy fits in, is this really important cadre of leadership. The second thing is, so much of our history is written about male leaders, and Lucy changes that story by being who she was. We need to know that women were leading too, and it wasn't just the men. And in termination's case, probably there was more weight to the women who fought termination than the men. Both Lucy Covington and Ada Deer. I think those two stories are why it's so important to carry it out. I also think one of the stories we so often we get two narratives about Indian country, we get into ruts. One narrative might be about poverty, one narrative might be about casinos and wealth. One narrative might be about, occasionally, about culture. One narrative I don't think comes up is excellence. And folks who are either strategic or building economic development, who are doing things that the rest of the country could learn from. The health system is another one that fits into that. People always see the negative without seeing what real successes have happened at the same time.

Joseph: Does tribal sovereignty play a role in the education of students?

Trahant: Absolutely. I think kids grow up thinking city, county, state, and federal. And they should know that the fifth one is tribal governments and they've been here before the United States, and they'll be here after the United States.



Joseph: Do you have any ideas or strategies that you'd like to share? That you think sort of emerged or might have been inspired by leaders like Lucy?

Trahant: No, I wish more people knew her story. I think we already run the risk of so many young people not knowing how we got to where we're at and not knowing the stories of folks. I think we could do a lot more to have, I mentioned, it's interesting when Washington first debated a Billy Frank statue my first thought was "What about a Lucy Covington statue?". We need to have our heroes remembered, not just for the larger community, but in our own community. And we don't do enough in that regard. We can name far more 19<sup>th</sup> century chiefs than we can name 20<sup>th</sup> century ones.

Joseph: So, in your opinion, how important would it be to have printed resources that tell us about the Lucy Covington story?

Trahant: I'm a nerd, I would have printed resources out of archives, the works. I'd love more, again, this is how you carry the story forward, so I think the more avenues you have in that respect, the better.

Joseph: So, Lucy Covington socks?

Trahant: Lucy Covington socks. (Laughs).

Joseph: Okay. Jeff? Do you have any questions?

Ferguson: Uh, you covered quite a bit of it. I think that your perspective is really good cause you look at it more from a, kind of on a bigger level than most of the other interviews we had. Everybody else is really kind of a one-on-one, where you're looking at the big picture and like her policy and how she works and that route. I think that was really good. What about now? I mean if you look at the leadership in Indian country today, as far as

the women leaders go, what do you think the single most important thing for especially young native women leaders to learn from her would be?

Trahant: Well one thing you're seeing with women leadership right now is the whole violence against women and missing and murdered indigenous women. It's been a female led movement, and it's been very successful. And I think it will get even more successful over time, changing the rule of law. Just last week, Senator Murkowski dropped a bill to give jurisdiction over non-Indians across Alaska. But it opens up a whole new area of law and basically reverses [Oliphant? Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe] That would not have come if it wasn't for that pressure from leaders across the country. I think young people see the world differently, and they're already pressing Indian country leadership in ways that I think is going to be both innovative and exciting, and maddening to the folks who are running things now.

Ferguson: Yeah, for sure. I think that's about it.

Joseph: The only other one is, in your opinion, who or what organizations would be a trusted source of tribal sovereignty information and are solutions to increase education awareness?

Trahant: Oh, I don't know. I think multiple sources. I really want to see a great university at a tribal community. We haven't come there yet, though we're working on it. But I'd love to see it. I mean, we're based at a university and the university has been an amazing partner and I could not say enough about them. I mean, I kind of have a dual thought. One thought is it would be great to have this stuff in a tribal community, on the other hand, it's all Indian country. It's not like you have to leave in order to do stuff.

Joseph: Well, I know we're thinking of having sort of flash cards or curriculum materials that would describe her work, but it would be an opportunity to describe your uncle's work, and the work of people like Forrest.

Trahant: Yeah, I agree. I think, one other might be graphic novels. I mean, it would be a great graphic novel to do: Termination. (Laughs).

Joseph: So, can you explain that a little bit more?

Trahant: Yeah, just a story through pictures and the tension and, um, you would need a good artist and a good writer to put together a good narrative and then do it as – I don't know if you'd do it as, I think you could do it as non-fiction. In fact, it's interesting, so graphic novels historically were really important. Both to the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, for example, had a graphic novel, it was a comic book they called it, distributed as part of their movement. But, also in South Africa. I mean, it was one of the tools Nelson Mandela used to get the word out. And the great thing about that form is that it just got ordinary people engaged in ways that you don't get with, say, policy wonks. And I think that is the way to get an important story out like this, is to get it into everybody's hands. Whether it's a comic book, or a television show, or something that is down to earth, is essential.

Joseph: I agree. I know the April 1970 edition of Our Heritage, the one you directed me to at the University of Arkansas, I looked it over and I remember it pretty clearly from when I was a kid, and all of the cartoons did capture my attention. I know that the, in the Kellogg Foundation's work on American healing and truth, racial healing and transformation, they're promoting with the American library schools the book about John

Lewis and the march for civil rights. So, who would you think would be good artists for that kind of endeavor?

Trahant: One of the best graphic novels I've seen is about a Metis woman in Manitoba and I think it's called *Echo*. Take a look at that, that artist is exceptional. She does a good one. And this is fiction where the young woman goes back and forth between Metis camps and modern times. But the idea of using that genre I think would be interesting. Maybe, I don't know, maybe an RFP with people. We actually, I wanted someone to cover the news with a graphic novel and couldn't get anyone interested in it, so we kind of pushed that idea to the side.

Joseph: That's too bad. Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to offer up, or suggest?

Trahant: No, I hope you do build a statue too. I'd love to see a statue of Lucy Covington.