



Ben Reifel
‘Lone Feather’
(Lakota: Wíyaka Wanǰíla)
First Lakota to Serve in Congress



It is quite fitting that Ben Reifel’s Indian name was Lone Feather. He was the first Lakota to ever serve in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1960s, and he was the lone American Indian in Congress.

Reifel was born in a log cabin near Parmelee on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in 1906. He graduated from the 8th grade at age 16, in 1923. He spoke both English and Lakota. After working on the family farm for 3 years, he enrolled in an agricultural vocational high school program in Brookings and graduated at the age of 22. He then paid his own way through college, with the aid of one of the first loans available to Indian students. In 1932, he graduated from South Dakota State College (now SDSU) with a degree in agriculture. His first job was as an adviser for boys at Hare’s School in Mission.

Reifel’s career with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was from 1933-1960, led him to many positions, farm agent on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, field agent in Pierre, and area administrator in Aberdeen. Reifel was called to Active Duty in the Army during World War II, serving from 1942-1946 and reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was awarded a scholarship to Harvard University during that time, earning both his master’s degree (1949) and doctorate (1952).

After retiring, Reifel spent 5 terms in Congress. While Native Americans in the state were largely registered with the Democratic Party, Reifel was regarded as a “conservative Republican”. Reifel held several important committee assignments-the agricultural committee, and the appropriations committee-and he served as the ranking Republican on the appropriations subcommittee on the Interior Department Affairs.

He worked hard for farming interests in South Dakota and the plains states, opposing cuts in farm supported programs, and pushing for the Oahe Dam to supply water for irrigation. He was a stern opponent of segregation and supported key educational programs to enroll both Indian and non-Indian students together.

After leaving Congress, Reifel remained in the public eye. President Nixon appointed Reifel chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission in 1971, overseeing federal projects in the Washington, D.C. area. He then served as special assistant for Indian programs in the Department of the Interior. He was interim commissioner of Indian Affairs during the last two months of President Ford’s administration.

Reifel was instrumental in getting the Earth Resources Observation Systems Center (EROS) located in SD, keeping Ellsworth Air Force Base as an active military base, and creating the National Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was involved with The South Dakota Art Museum and established the first Native American collection at the museum, donating most of his personal collection.

Reifel died of cancer in 1990, at the age of 83.

An Executive Proclamation was signed on September 11th, 2017, by Governor Dennis Daugaard proclaiming **September 19, 2017, as Ben Reifel (Lone Feather) Day in SD.**

To honor Reifel, members of Congress created, on 11-5-1990, Public Law 101-512, changing the name of Cedar Pass Visitor Center at Badlands National Park to Ben Reifel Visitor Center



“Ben Reifel embodied the spirit of the Dakotas and his contributions to this state and country continue to make a difference for many of our citizens.”

Steve Emery, SD Sec. of Tribal Relations

“From humble beginnings, Ben Reifel was a true Lakota leader.”

