

Letters to the Editor  
Mother Jones Magazine  
[backtalk@motherjones.com](mailto:backtalk@motherjones.com)

Your article, “*Accounting Coup*,” captures the devastation of American Indians through early colonization and subsequent, regrettable, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century laws and acts of Congress. But your reporting greatly falters when you say this is what the *Cobell v. Norton* lawsuit is about.

The litigation was filed in 1996, two years after the passage of the American Indian Trust Fund Reform Act of 1994. You wrongly say the case demands “payments of all unpaid revenues from Indian leases for the past century, a tally of past revenues, and a new accounting system to deal with future revenues.” The litigation only asks for an accounting of funds deposited to and disbursed from the trust, and to provide account holders with historic account statements. It is not a court-of-claims case. What’s more, existing records, available because of “Do Not Destroy” orders put in place in the 1950s, account for a large percentage of Indian Trust funds because the bulk of the money came into the trust after 1970, when oil and timber prices began to rise dramatically.

I understand it is easy to continue to vilify the government, but misstating the facts and propagating emotional rhetoric clouds the issues for all involved. There are many statements in your story that beg for clarification, but it is more important to explain, in this small space, that Interior staff members—many of whom are American Indians—and tribal leaders have worked long hours to improve and modernize the trust for beneficiaries. Today our accounting systems are the same as those used in major private trust corporations and are audited every year. Almost 50 Fiduciary Trust Officers in the field have the sole responsibility to serve individuals and tribal account holders, and we opened a nationwide toll-free call center. Interior reconciles cash receipts on a daily basis, and financial assets on a monthly basis. Beneficiaries are provided with quarterly financial statements, and we are beginning to issue asset statements reflecting land interests owned by each beneficiary. These are just a few of the reforms in place and I am proud to work with Interior staff, Indian leaders, and Congress on this important mission.

Sincerely,

Ross O. Swimmer  
Special Trustee for American Indians  
U.S. Department of the Interior

*Ross O. Swimmer served three terms as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, and one term as Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs.*