

Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc.  
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THE TIME IS NOW

Annual Address  
by  
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We expect more of our friends than we do of our enemies, and by the same token, they expect more of us. The top command in Indian affairs today is made up of people who are our friends, because they are, not only in word but in deed, the friends of the Indians. After so many Democratic and Republican years in which, despite the efforts of fine individuals, the enemies of the Indians dominated the Bureau of Indian Affairs, I find the present situation almost as confusing as it is gratifying.

One thing is clear; that we are going to be harder on the present leadership, in many ways, or at least far more demanding, than we were on a group from whom we wanted nothing so much as that they would just quietly go away. And if we are going to make such demands, we, all of us here in the Association on American Indian Affairs, and all others who have the Indians' true interests at heart, yes, and the Indians themselves, had better be ready to pitch in and help in a big way.

This is going to be the case because Indian affairs in general have evolved to a point at which major actions must be taken now. Perhaps I mean "deteriorated" rather than evolved. Last spring I had the privilege of talking with the members of the Task Force on Indian Affairs, including the present Commissioner of Indian Affairs, whom we are happy to have with us this evening. I was impressed by the repeated, emphatic statement that Indian affairs were at a point at which things could only get much worse, perhaps even incurably worse, in a very short time, unless major and far-reaching changes for the better were made without delay. This sense of urgency, I know, continues in the present leadership of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We in this Association share it.

Let us consider a few of the specific, critical matters.

We are deeply concerned about the future of the natives -- Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts -- of Alaska, now the largest of all our states. You will hear at first hand, from the next speaker, about one sector of the situation there. Alaska is the last truly frontier state. Its native population slightly exceeds 50,000. A large part of this population lives by hunting and fishing, which means that it requires the dominant, if not exclusive, use of large areas. In a large part of that state, hunting and fishing are about the only ways in which humans can make a living.

As far back as 1884 the Congress formally recognized that the natives of Alaska had rights in the lands they used, and reserved to itself the task of determining just what territories belonged to the natives, and since 1884, the Congress has never been willing to act. When the executive set out to define the native possessions by administrative action, on several occasions it ran into extreme opposition. Now, the enabling act of this new state does recognize that the native rights exist. It does so in general terms, raising only an uncertain shield between these people and simple expropriation of the earth on which they have so long



abided, from which for countless generations they have wrested their living.

Theoretical recognition of an undefined right is all very fine, but such recognitions are of no avail unless they are backed by firm intent and unquestionable authority. Consider for a moment the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, relating to what is now a large segment of the eastern part of the Middle West. That ordinance contained the fine words:

"The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights, and liberty they shall never be invaded or disturbed..."

How can you ask for fairer? But we look over what used to be the Northwest Territory now, and only in the northernmost part of it do we find scattered remnants of once powerful tribes. The others are gone. A few descendants of some may be found in Oklahoma; of others, nothing remains.

Now what we know for sure is that the Alaska enabling act authorizes that state to select 102,550,000 acres of public domain, not otherwise occupied. We can argue that the state cannot lawfully obtain land, classified as public domain or no, that in fact belongs to communities of natives. We can argue, and history can repeat itself, and we can have all over again in Alaska what happened in the Northwest Territory, in the South, in fact in every part of the older, forty-eight states, wherever the natives of the land stood unaided against the furious land-hunger of the white man.

We are, as a nation, considerably more humane and more law-abiding than we were a century ago. We can be sure that the state of Alaska wants to secure its lands honorably and without cloud upon the title. We also know that against such good intentions greed still operates just as it always did. The pressure is to get hold of the land now, to start profitable exploitation now, and if as a result there be breakage, pick up the pieces later. It is strong and is bound to increase. So here is a geographical area that poses a stiff challenge to the present administration; here are difficulties and oppositions that put it squarely up to us, in this Association, to back up the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of the Interior.

You have seen some mention, recently, in our newsletter, of contemplated legislation to deal with the problem of Indian heirship lands, which, as you know, is the curious term used to denote allotments that have been inherited by many heirs, creating a horrible tangle of multiple ownerships and crossownerships. Such ownership creates almost impossible problems of administration, makes the simple use of the land difficult, and has been for decades the principal factor in forcing the sale of Indian land and checkerboarding the reservations. Until now, no administration has ever seriously faced up to this problem.

Now, at long last, the present administration plainly intends to do something about a problem that is approaching the borderline of the incurable. There is also evident an interest in Congress in enacting new legislation to correct this monstrosity, especially in the Senate. The matter of an over-all, legislative cure is far from simple. Delicate questions of constitutional rights are involved. There are important, honest differences of opinion on many matters to be resolved. Now and again, we find traces of the old, termination thinking muddying the waters. Interested senators and the administration are approaching this large matter carefully, with careful interchanges of ideas. We may wish that action could come faster, but we must also be thankful that it is being so fully considered.

As the Commissioner has pointed out, there is, meantime, much that can be



done administratively. Already he has taken the necessary steps to prevent the alienation of land essential to the economy of a community. Remedying the evils of the allotment system, however, which have been accumulating and accumulating ever since the 1880's, requires much more than merely stopping the forced sale of allotments.

A whole program of profitable exploitation of the land has to be developed, attached to and inseparable from the buying in of these wildly multiple-owned tracts and the consolidation of Indian holdings into usable units. It may be in some places that all the land can do is furnish home sites for communities that must look beyond their borders for their livelihoods. In other cases, the land will additionally have value as the sites for manufacturing enterprises of one kind or another, in others it can be exploited as we commonly think of exploiting land -- for farming, grazing, mining, timbering, recreation. All of this means money, money with which to buy allotments before they are lost forever, money to be put to work building economies that make land ownership profitable.

A few tribes have funds of their own, and one or two, like the Navajos, have vigorously seized the initiative in using their own capital, with excellent results. Some may hope for capital from awards of the Indian Claims Commission, although we do not want to see any programs stalled because the community concerned is awaiting pennies from heaven. In the main, the source of American Indian capital is, as it has long been, the Indian Revolving Loan Fund, the authorized sum of which is now only \$20 million. We must support the administration in pressing for the appropriation of the full amount authorized, and in getting the authorization increased. A revolving loan fund of \$50 million is the least that can be stretched to meet the need.

Please note that this is no handout. When we say a loan fund we mean just that. Since the fund was first established in 1934, the Indian record of repayment has at all times been better than that of non-Indians in repaying secured loans to banks. When we say that in asking for an adequate revolving loan fund, we are not asking for charity or generosity, but only a wise investment in improving a sector of our economy, we are not just saying pretty platitudes.

While we are thinking about land, economy, enterprises, natural resources, and other such matters, we must never forget the most important resource of all -- the human resource. How many times will a man continue to struggle to get on his feet if every time he does so you push him down again, no matter how gently? This has been the dreary experience of many, many tribes. There has been lip service for years paid to the idea of Indian initiative, Indian planning, and yet, as we all know, we have never yet really shaken off the habit, formed over generations, of coming bulling in with our supposedly superior knowledge, taking the plan away from the Indians, taking the initiative away, and pushing them down on their shoulder blades again. How much longer will the human resources of hope, of pride, of belief that a man can help himself, hold out? We know already, we in the Association have seen it in our We Shake Hands operations, that in many cases pride, hope, belief in one's self and one's people, seem to be extinct. We uncover them as faint coals in the ashes, to be patiently fanned back to a blaze.

Most of you here are pretty well acquainted with the case of the Northern Cheyennes. You remember how inflexibly, in 1957, the Bureau of Indian Affairs prevented them from using their own money to hold their land intact. You remember how hopefully their chairman described to us the broad plan for land retention and economic development, and with that a whole new lease on life, they then proceeded to work out. You know that, despite the support of the then Assistant Secretary of the Interior, the former heads of the Bureau as well as their higher field employees rejected these plans, and how absolutely they denied to a people among whom a completed high school education is the exception, any help at all in revis-



ing their plan to make it correct from a business point of view and acceptable to high authority. As for the Association on American Indian Affairs, which worked steadily to encourage and help the Cheyennes and to try to secure serious consideration of their plan, the Bureau's officials in Montana did not exactly make our representatives welcome, and in the Washington office of the Bureau our reception was, to put it mildly, cool.

I know that you will all be happy to hear that, under the new dispensation, the best qualified man in the Washington office is shortly to go to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation to sit down with the Tribal Council and do what is necessary to enable them to put their project into proper shape. He will not go with a predetermined, white man's program to be pressed down upon the tribe whether it fits or not, but in a spirit of genuine consultation, to give practical form to the aspirations of the tribe. And our executive director will arrange her schedule to permit her to sit in on the consultations, welcomed by both parties.

In reciting the Northern Cheyenne story, I have touched upon the edge of another matter that is a problem both to the present administration of Indian affairs and to the Indians. This is the problem of people, the thing commonly referred to nowadays as "personnel." A year ago, at our annual meeting, I said, "To your experienced bureaucrat, the high-ranking, Presidential appointee is but a cloud that will soon pass -- unless and until he discovers that the cloud has lightning in it." The remark still stands, but to it I must add that in the last few months I have seen the lightning.

You understand, you do not ordinarily find officials in the Indian Service who are actively hostile to Indians -- although occasionally a case does occur -- and dishonesty is extremely rare. The trouble lies in the inherent nature of bureaucracy, which seems to divide itself into two types, what we might call paper shufflers and public servants.

Paper shufflers want administrative efficiency, they want their routine to go smoothly, they hate exceptions or any untidyness, and human beings are largely made up of exceptions and are often untidy. The one thing they do not mind is delay, in fact, they feel real pride in developing a new method by which the processing of some particular application, which once took a week, can be made to take two weeks. The paper shufflers are little men, and it is among little men that you most commonly find prejudice, so, to this formula, add a quantum of contempt for reservation Indians, an inability to believe that people who are poor, shabby, and live in tumble-down homes are really capable of intelligent thought. The final combination is fatal to the purposes of an agency such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and in fact, the paper shufflers give no thought to those purposes. They are interested in smooth administration, the game for the game's sake, and a secure pension in old age.

Public servants can briefly be defined as the exact reverse of paper shufflers. They know what the purposes of their agency are and believe in them; they see administration only as a tool, to be subordinated to the greater aim.

The paper shufflers require the lightning. Some must be eliminated, others simply disciplined into genuine service. By the same token, the public servants must be advanced, rewarded, and protected. The official who really goes to bat for a tribe of Indians, or an Eskimo community, or for our native population as a whole, sooner or later runs foul of special interests of one kind or another, and finds that someone who at least sounds impressive is out to get his job. He must know that his superiors will not yield, and his superiors must know that many common citizens, such as ourselves, are solidly behind them.

The time is now, the time for a new, major attack on the heirship lands prob-



lem, on the economy, the use of the long-neglected human resource, and the building of a strong element of public servants throughout the Indian Bureau. The time is now for moving in on the amorphous situation in Alaska. This is a neat little package that I have thus easily wrapped up for the present administration. It is enough, I realize, to use all the resources of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to use to the utmost all the strength, vision, and ingenuity the Commissioner can summon and all the help with which he can surround himself, all the help he can get from higher in the Department of the Interior, and all the political skill that all involved can muster.

I do believe that we are at a point where we must achieve great changes for the better, or see deterioration rapidly going beyond cure. So we ask this excellent group of public servants who now head up the administration of Indian affairs for great things, and we, for our part, must stand ready to deliver the support, the help, without which in this political world, no reform was ever made into reality.