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ADDRESS BY THE VICE PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS  
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I have looked forward to this day -- to the chance to meet with you, to share in your 25th Anniversary celebration, to congratulate you -- and especially your charter members, some of whom are here today -- for your vision and leadership.

As impressive as your past growth has been, even more impressive are the prospects for your contributions to the Indian future. As never before, the nation is aware of Indian problems and the need for clear, decisive Indian leadership is urgent.

As a representative of government, I am especially interested in Indian leadership because I am convinced that the Indian people and their Federal government must work more closely than ever before.

The President's statement, delivered to the last NCAI Convention in Omaha, still stands. This Administration opposes termination. This Administration favors the continuation of the trust relationship and the protection of Indian lands and Indian resources.

Let us now and forever put to rest all fears and begin positive action together. For every Indian problem there is also an Indian opportunity. Building upon that special relationship between Indian tribes and the Federal government, we will solve the problems and open the opportunities.

There is no question that this special relationship will and must continue. It is its quality that should concern us most.

Not one of us who has responsibility can be complacent about Indian Affairs. And no one who is sincerely interested will allow the plight of the Indian people to be used for publicity, politics or personal advantage.

I see no merit in trying to place blame for the present situation. Too much energy has been diverted already to excuses for conditions of life that any sensitive person can see are inadequate.

You do not want our apologies and you do not need our explanations. You want action. And it is time for action.

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There is a desperate shortage of job opportunity. Indian unemployment runs up to n times the national average in this year of record employment.

- Housing shortages still plague more than half the families living in Indian communities
- Schools for Indian children are underfinanced and deficient
- Hardship invades almost every phase of individual and community life.

I do not have to go into details with you. You know the facts better than I. It is time to move forward. We must have improvement and a sense of direction.

This Administration understands that there is no single solution to Indian problems. There is no such thing as "the Indian problem." A rich diversity of culture, language and background characterizes Indian communities across America. No single set of programs will fit everywhere.

This Administration does not even expect complete uniformity and agreement among Indians as to their own goals or needs or desired programs. We must be flexible. For too long the Indian has been forced to fit a particular program. From now on the programs will be tailored to fit the particular Indian requirements. We will work with the Indian people on a community-by-community and tribe-by-tribe basis to develop programs best suited to local needs and priorities.

Indian tribes possess a unique and direct relationship with the Federal government which is derived from several sources. First, it is a legal relationship. Through treaty and law, Indian communities are entitled to certain services from the Federal government.

As a result of the treaties, the Indian people surrendered their land to the Federal government under certain ~~maximale~~ conditions of trust and good faith. The government undertook a sacred trust to finance basic programs such as health and education. In attempting to respond to their obligation, Congress has enacted much legislation affecting Indians. Some of it has been successful but too much has failed to carry out its objective.

It is important to remember that Federal support of Indian services is, to a great extent, legally due the Indian community. These are not services offered at the pleasure of the government but solemn obligations to a people who accepted a good faith settlement in reliance on governmental integrity.

Moreover, there is a formal basis for the special relationship between the Indians and their government. Congress, by establishing the Indian Claims Commission, acknowledged the integrity of Tribes as legal entities. This created the way for the government to acknowledge debts and obligations to the Indian people.

Thus, the special efforts to offset costs of certain services in Indian communities are the rights of the communities and the legal and moral obligations of the Federal government. But there remains a crucial distinction that has been generally ignored for the past 150 years.

Government may have the absolute duty to provide services, but that does not necessarily imply that government must perform and administer those same services.

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It is completely feasible that a service be funded federally but run locally. There have been some tentative approaches in this direction recently. But, in my view, these approaches fail to establish clearly the willingness of the government to consider local ideas and arrangements.

Most who observe the Indian scene use the word paternalism to describe government's relationship with the Indians. That may be true, but it is not necessary. We have never had a better opportunity to change this attitude.

One obstacle to a serious management effort on the part of some Indian groups arises from the fear that proposals for local initiative may become the first step in a Federal pull-out of funds and responsibilities. Study of Indian history certainly would cause a person to be suspicious. However, I want to reassure you that this Administration recognizes the legal right of the Indian community to be provided basic services and the legal responsibility of the Federal government to finance them.

But while we urge greater local leadership, we will not force it nor use its immediate absence to deny assistance. The Indian people must have the right to accept or reject local control. In fact, no change in the operation of federally funded services should go forward without full local discussion and agreement. Adequate safeguards can be developed to guarantee that Federal responsibilities are recognized and continued.

Some communities might want no part of change now. Others might prefer maximum local administrative authority and responsibility. A full range of alternatives should be available. Above all, the Federal government must be ready at all times to respond to reasonable local determinations.

The National Council on Indian Opportunity -- which, as Vice President, I chair -- is one newly created agency to serve in developing new programs and proposals. Six American Indian leaders serve on the Council by Presidential appointment. They are full participating members whose voices and votes are equal to those of the seven members who are heads of major Federal departments responsible for Indian programs. Mr. Chino, your distinguished President, Mr. Valandra, your treasurer, and Mr. Jourdain, one of your regional vice presidents, serve on the Council.

This is the first time in the history of Federal-Indian relations that the Indian people have had this type of official recognition and representation. It gives us a better chance of solving the problems because your leaders will be certain we understand them fully and will personally assist in the solutions.

I appreciate and support the NCAI endorsement of the Council. Your statement adopted in Albuquerque last May read in part: "There is no other like body which gives the Indian people such vital participation in the discussion and solution of their problems." I am confident that the future will bear out your faith.

Today, it is realistic to talk of Indian communities as self-determining. More Indian youth are in college than ever before. More Indian leadership is serving the nation. A member of my personal staff -- Woody Sneed, an Indian, a scholar and a White House Fellow -- provides but one example.

Many an educated and dedicated Indian youth would gladly return to his community to administer important programs were the opportunity to do so truly available. But these young people are impatient with excuses and delays. They want real involvement, not mere tokenism.

The American Indian and the Federal government have a clear agenda for action.

We must tap the wealth of talent among young Indian leadership.

We must resolve the unadjusted claims of native Alaskans.

We must come to grips with the problems of California Indians living on public lands without ownership.

We must attack the problems of Indians isolated in remote reservations which lack sufficient resources.

We must give priority attention to the increasing number of landless Indians now living in urban centers who seek to bridge two cultures in an alien environment.

We must capitalize upon the unique relationship between the Indian people and the Federal government to solve these problems.

This Administration recognizes that the time of oratory and tokenism is past. The time for action has come. The time for paternalism is past, the time for Indian leadership has come. The time for studies and promises has past, the time for solution and progress has come.

This week's NCAI deliberations will serve as a major source of guidance to Secretary Hickel, to Commissioner Bruce, to me and to all concerned Federal officials.

You are confronting vital issues on Indian rights, reservation development, tax status and education. Out of these sessions will come creative ideas.

While we pay proper respect for the past, let us focus on the future. Let us achieve a partnership between the American Indians and their government that is productive and worthy of our highest efforts.

There is a new Administration in Washington, a new awareness in the country. Together, we must draw upon both to create a new era of progress for the American Indian.