Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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I am delighted to be with you again at your annual meeting and to help you celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. In the martyrdom of Lincoln,

Jenkin Lloyd Jones saw the interruption of an unfulfilled task. In memory of the Great Emancipator, he determined to create an institution that would be truly equalitarian, both as to people and as to ideas.

Now, a century later, we meet, and we, too, stand in the shadow of martyrdom. Some of John F. Kennedy's greatest accomplishments lay in the control of interÂnational and interracial violence. How tragically ironical that he should have died by the violence he sought to eliminate.

But the country must go on, just as it did a century ago. We are fortunate to have in President Johnson a man of experience, of humble origins, and with a determination to be strong, frugal, and compassionate.

You may wonder why I have come to the south side of Chicago to talk about American Indians and the war on poverty. Jenkin Lloyd Jones would not have wondered, for his interest in human welfare transcended region and race.

President Johnson, in his State of the Union Message in January, declared unconditional war on poverty. He pointed out that poverty is a national problem and that we, as the richest Nation on earth, should not rest until the war on poverty is won. Poverty, he pointed out, exists in many different kinds of places--in city slums, in small towns, in the shacks of sharecroppers, and in migrant worker's camps, on Indian reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in boom towns, and in distressed areas.

He specifically mentioned as weapons in the war Area Redevelopment, the Youth Employment Act, the National Service Corps, a Commission on Automation, Federal aid to education, improved medical care, housing and urban renewal, improved mass transit, and tax reduction.

These are very large programs indeed, but the President has committed his Administration to them and we are all determined to carry them out in a national drive on poverty.

My part in this drive concerns the Indian reservations. Let me tell you about them. No one is obliged to stay on a reservation. Reservations do not belong to the Government; they are made up of private land belonging to tribes or individual Indians; the Government is merely the trustee. The superintendent of a reservation is not there to run the tribe or the people; he is there as the representative of the trustee. He is the head of a service agency whose mission is to help Indians help themselves.

Indians are citizens; they vote; and they perform military service just like other citizens. They pay the same taxes that others pay, with one exception. On some tribal and individual Indian lands held in trust by the United States for the use and benefit of Indians, there are no real estate taxes. But personal property, automobile licenses, cigarette and liquor taxes--the whole range of State, local, and federal

taxes other than those on certain kinds of real property--are borne by Indians just as they are by anyone else.

"Reservations" have the name they do because the lands that comprise them were "reserved" by the Indians for their own use when they gave up title to their other lands so that you and I and others like us might live here. Many Indians can and do prefer to live away from the reservations, but others prefer to stay there. There are several reasons why this is so. Indian people are bound to their lands by religious ties, by family association, and by a feeling that land is not a commodity to be bought and sold, but an essential of life, to be used and enjoyed and passed on to the next generation.

Some Indians, both tribes and individuals, have received spectacular income from gas and oil, and other minerals; or from commercial leases; but these are the exception. Most Indians are poor, desperately poor--as poor as anybody we know of in this rich country of ours.

Let me tell you how poor Indians are: Unemployment on the reservations runs between 40 and 50 percent--seven or eight times the national average.

Family income on the reservations average between one-fourth and one-third the national average.

Nine out of ten Indian families live in housing that is far below minimum standards of comfort, safety, and decency.

Average schooling of young adults on reservations is only eight years--two-thirds the national average.

The average age at death on the reservation is 42 years, two-thirds the figure for the national population.

About 380,000 Indian people come within the scope of the programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Most of them live on reservations in sparsely populated rural areas far from cities where industrial employment is readily available. Many Indians lack the vocational training needed to compete for the few skilled jobs that can be found in their home areas. The unskilled agricultural jobs upon which many Indians have depended for years are steadily disappearing as more and more farmers follow the trend toward mechanized operations.

The average income of $3,000 received by the lower fifth of families in the overall population constitutes a national "poverty line." Families cannot exist at a decent level on so low an income. The stark reality of Indian poverty is revealed by the income of $1,500 received by the average reservation family in 1962.

Indian housing ranks among the worst in the country, as shocked visitors to almost any reservation can attest. Poverty is present in a cruel form when one or more large families must live crowded together in one or two-room shacks or cabins, and when the dwellings have no sanitary facilities, no nearby water supply, no electricity, no safe or adequate means for heat, often no flooring except the bare earth.

A young adult with no more than an eighth-grade education must generally content himself with a low-paying job that requires little or no skill and that leads nowhere in terms of salary and advancement. In these days, he is lucky to get a job of any kind. Much worse is the plight of the Indian, who has less than an eighth-grade education, or no education at all.

Indian health conditions are far below those of the general population. At birth, Indians have a life expectancy of 62 years, but the poor health of the older Indian people brings the average age at death on the reservation down to 42 years. Infant mortality is high. Indian babies have little more than half the chance that non-Indian babies have of reaching their first birthday.

The programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs are designed as a two-pronged attack on poverty. Some of our programs improve individual Indians' capabilities and relate them the job opportunities wherever they may be found. Others develop reservation resources so as to increase their job and income potential.

Education is essential to the success of all other Bureau programs. It is our biggest single activity, both in terms of man power and of money. Over fifty percent of our budget goes for the education of children and adults, and for school construction. We operate an education system of elementary, high school, and vocational schools for 47,500 Indian children and youth in schools and dormiÂtories located in 17 States, primarily west of the Mississippi. This is only a part of the Indian school-age population. More than 90,000 are enrolled in public schools.

Our goal in Bureau-operated schools is to bridge the cultural gap between Indians and non-Indians. Our major effort in recent years has been to expand the system and remedy past neglect. We are providing classrooms and dormitories for the rapidly increasing Indian population. We are upgrading the quality of instruction, we have been emphasizing school construction and the rehabilitation of existing school buildings to overcome a long-standing shortageÂ of classrooms. The Congress has been generous with funds for this purpose. During the past two years we have been able to add nearly 7,000 classroom seats and related dormitory facilities to our school system.

Many adult Indians desire education denied them in their youth. In 1955, adult education was brought to five Indian communities. In the beginning, adult education was designed only to develop literacy. Today, adult education seeks to spread knowledge and improve the understanding of civic, economic, and social problems. We now have adult education programs in 140 communities, and 24,000 adults are currently participating in them.

Special programs to prepare Indian youth for employment serve about 6,000 yearly. Since 1946, nearly 70,000 young Indians have enrolled in this program, with a high rate of employment after graduation. In recent years we have been making special efforts to reduce the rate of high school dropouts, which, among Indian youngsters, runs much higher than the alarming national average.

Our employment assistance program involves two principal activities: relocation, and vocational training. The first part of the program is the oldest. It is, of course, wholly voluntary. Relocation is available to Indians who decide on their own initiative to leave the reservations and re-establish themÂselves in urban communities where jobs are more abundant. The Bureau helps them make this transition in many ways. We counsel with them. Before they leave the reservation. We provide transportation and subsistence for the job-seeker and his immediate family. We help at the receiving end in finding a job, locating housing, and adjusting the family to the urban environment.

But experience has taught us that many relocates return to the reservations unless they are adequately trained to hold an industrial job. We are now placing increased emphasis on vocational training.

In 1956 Congress enacted a statute which authorized us to provide Indians, principally between the ages of 18 and 35, with three kinds of occupational training: vocational training in regularly established

technical schools; on-the-job training; and apprenticeship.

Trainees may receive up to two years of vocational training in the occupation of their choice in an approved institution. All of the expense is borne by the Federal Government, including transportation, tuition, health insurance, tools and supplies, subsistence for the trainee and for his family if he has one. The Bureau also bears a substantial proportion of the expenses involved in on-the-job training, mainly conducted in industrial plants located on or near the reservations.

Right now the total enrollment in all phases of the program is 3,500. The total permanent placements during the past 12 years number 17,000, affecting 36,000 family members. More than 70 percent of all who go through the full program find full time employment.

In addition to the young Indians who benefit from the Bureau's vocational training program, 1,300 others have been assisted to enroll in vocational trainÂing courses under the programs of the Area Redevelopment Administration and the Manpower Development and Training Act during the past two and half years.

Indian employment and employment potential have also been helped through

The Bureau's growing program of industrial development. During the past three years the Bureau has negotiated the establishment of 25 small manufacturing plants on or near the reservations. To do this, we have drawn upon the financial aid available through the Small Business Administration, the Area Redevelopment Administration and other agencies, as well as from our own revolving loan fund. Current Indian employment in these plants is 750, with good prospects of substantial expansion during the next several years.

Bureau programs in irrigation, soil and moisture conservation, forestry, and other efforts to improve grazing and agricultural resources on the reservaÂtions currently provide 2,200 man-years of employment. The potential is much greater. It is estimated at 54,000 many years.

Our programs of road construction and the maintenance and repair of buildings and utilities on the reservations provide jobs for Indians under a policy of Indian preference in Bureau employment. These activities currently provide 3,800 man-years of employment annually. The potential employment is estimated at more than 20,000 man-years.

In addition to these long-run programs which are so essential to overcoming Indian poverty an immediate attack on the problem was launched late in 1962 under the Accelerated Public Works Program. Twenty million dollars has been spent or obligated on the reservations in the past 15 months. Accelerated Public Works has maintained temporary employment at an average level of more than 3,000 Indian workers.

The cost of public works as a means of providing Jobs for the unemployed is very great. The Accelerated Public Works program on the reservations has enabled us, on the average, to provide work for a little more than one year for only one out of every twenty unemployed. The benefits of such public works, howÂever, go far beyond the assistance to the unemployed. Hundreds of miles of roads, thousands of acres of Indian forest lands, many hundreds of miles of fence and soil erosion works have been provided by the Accelerated Works program. There are lasting benefits to the reservations and the people who live on them when money for public works is available.

After many years of neglect and inattention, real progress is about to be made in the field of Indian housing. Until recently, the Federal housing programs initiated during the 1930â□□s were of little help to Indians on reservations. Today, Indians are eligible to participate in these programs as other citizens do. In 1962, in cooperation with the Public Housing Administration, the Bureau of Indian Affairs brought low-rent housing to the Indian reservations for the first time. In that year construction began on a low-rent housing project on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota Since then, construction has started on several other reservations and is scheduled for an even larger number. Seventeen hundred units of low-rent public housing and 1,600 units of mutual-help housing have now been reserved by the Public Housing Administration for the reservations, a total of 3,300 dwellings.

Mutual-help housing is a new program under which the Indian is able to acquire an equity in his home by contributing his own labor to its construction. This concept will be helpful to the many Indian families who cannot afford even the low monthly sums required by low-rent housing. Actual construction of homes has so far reached less than 5 percent of the total units authorized, but the housing program is at last under way and the future looks brighter. So far, 58 tribes have formed housing authorities, and 48 of these are in active operation.

Among the many causes of poverty on the Indian reservations is a shortage of credit. As far as economic development goes, the Indians and the pioneer settler started out in pretty much the same footing. Both lived directly off the land, but the pioneer settler had the desire to develop and improve his land, to farm it or to mine it; and he had a banking system open to him that would loan him money with his land pledged as security. The Indian also had his land, but he was not accustomed to banking and the money lenders, in any case, would not have accepted land held in trust by the United States as security for a loan.

To close this gap, public funds for credit were provided more than half a century ago, but the amount was small in comparison to the need, and it still is. Today we are finding ways to help Indians get loans from conventional sources.

The tribes use their own money and carry on lending operations through credit committees of their tribal councils.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has a revolving loan fund and backstops the tribal operations with both cash and technical assistance. Via the Bureau of Indian Affairs' credit program, both individuals and tribes have been helped to do an amazing variety of things. For example, individuals have been helped to go to school, to start small businesses, to improve their homes, and to buy liveÂstock. Tribes have been helped to build and operate motels, to develop and improve tribal herds, to build and operate canneries, to build and operate saw mills, and to engage in many other forms of enterprise.

Last fall we helped one tribe buy, and it is now operating, a ski-lift in eastern New Mexico. Such tribal enterprises do not in themselves relieve unemployÂment, but they are an essential part of our economic development program, until enterprise development on the reservations equals that of the non-Indian neighbor, the Indian people will continue to be less well off than their neighbors.

One of the great Indian assets is their claim against the United States for wrongs done them a century ago. Nearly 20 years ago the Congress recognized the need to settle these ancient disputes once and for all and passed the Claims Act and created the Indian Claims Commission. Actual settlement has been long and arduous, and both Government and Indians are dissatisfied with the slow progress. Only about. 20 percent of the claims have been settled so far, but they are now being concluded somewhat faster.

So far, nearly 95 million dollars has been awarded to the Indian claimants. The Bureau of Indian Affairs does not take part in the settlement of the dispute; but we do take part in the planning with the Indian tribes for wise and productive use of the money.

As an example, the handling of the award to the Crow tribe of Montana will 1how how much can be done with settlement money.

In 1962 the Crow tribe was successful in pursuing a claim against the United States for inadequate compensation for lands purchased from them in the last century. After payment of attorneys' fees and other expenses of the litigation, the tribe had a net award of approximately 10 million dollars.

The Crow reservation in Montana is a big one. It contains some very beautiful scenery and will have part of the shoreline of the reservoir formed by the Yellowtail Dam, now under construction. It also contains within its boundÂaries some of the finest dry farming lands of the West Fortunes have been made by wheat farmers on lands leased from the Crows.

But few of these benefits have flowed to the Crow Indians. Some of them are successful and prosperous ranchers; some have moved to nearby cities and are successful business and professional people; but the majority of the Crows remain on the reservation, poorly housed, and seemingly unable to make money from their own lands.

With technical assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the elected officers of the Crow tribe began to plan for the wise use of this money. The Crows are poor and like poor people everywhere, they are cash-hungry. A movement arose, sponsored equally by the more prosperous and highly acculturated Crows and the impoverished full bloods, to distribute all of the money in individual cash payments to tribal members. Wiser heads prevailed, and the Crow Tribal Council of resolution, adopted a fair sighted plan.

Four and one-half million dollars was to be set aside for long-range family improvements--education, housing, business loans, and the like. The balance was to be set aside for tribal improvements: one million dollars for economic develÂopment; one million dollars for a land leasing program; one million dollars for land purchases. Smaller amounts were set aside for education, law and order, a tribal headquarters building, and similar projects.

Not every single member of the Crow tribe agrees with this handling of the money, but the majority have stayed with it. It is the Indian's own plan, approved by the Secretary of the Interior as trustee, and will stand until changed by both parties to the agreement.

Last summer I had the satisfaction of examining a half dozen of the two hundred homes that have been improved with family plan money on the Crow reservation. From ranch homes that would be the envy of the most prosperous cattleman in the neighborhood, to one- and two-room rehabilitated cabins, about 200 Crow families are living better today because of careful planning and thoroughgoing cooperation between tribal and Bureau officials.

The Seminoles of Florida give us a good example of what tribal enterprise and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' technical assistance can do working together.

A decade ago the Seminoles were living on three reservations in Florida. Their way of life was, and still is, not very different from the one they developed more than a hundred years ago when they fled into

the Everglades to escape Federal troops in the Seminole Indian wars. About ten years ago they gave up their resistance to accept help from the United States. Today the two branches, Seminoles and Miccosukees, are organized tribes with Federal charters.

The Seminoles have developed an outstanding beef herd; an arts and crafts cooperative; their own commercial tourist attractions; and they are engaging in the long-term commercial leasing and development of some of their lands. They have an outstanding housing project and some excellent projects that are still on paper but which will materialize in the near future. Among the latter are a series of stores, restaurants, bait shops, and boating marinas along the Tamiami Trail.

In 1927 the first school was established for Seminole children. Eleven years later the Seminoles asked for a second school. Today, there are schools in all Seminole communities. Nearly 70 percent of the Seminole children now attend public schools. Their high school records are good and two are enrolled in college,

Poverty has not come to an end for these people, but their economic base is greatly improved. Living conditions are much better and will improve even more in the near future. The end of unemployment and poverty is in sight if present and projected programs are adequately funded and are successfully carried through.

I have told you about the situation on the reservations and the programs we have to combat poverty, mostly because I wanted you to be informed about them. However, I also have a larger purpose in mind. We are about to embark on a national campaign against poverty and the experience with deeply rooted rural poverty on the reservations is related in some degree to the problem of combating poverty in cities, such as Chicago.

We have learned the following things:

1. Hard-core poverty is self-perpetuating. After a few generations, it becomes a way of life with its own values and customs. When parents are poor, under-educated, under-employed, and dependent on public assistance, their children are likely to be weakly motivated, to drop out of school, to be underÂemployed, eventually unemployed, and in time to become dependent on public assistance. To combat poverty successfully, it is necessary to break the cycle of dependency, and this is not easy.
2. Education alone is not enough. We Americans tend to believe that education will solve all problems, and we approach the problem of poverty with this same philosophy. We think that if we provide better educational opportuniÂties and training, young people will break the poverty cycle, will find the desire for achievement that is lacking in the poverty culture. But this is not necesÂ-sarily the case. Some individuals thus trained and educated will make the break; these do not make others find the failure and the frustrations in urban life too much. These do not make the break at all, or drop back into the patterns of dependency.
3. The most successful programs are those which relate training to job Opportunity. In the Bureau of Indian Affairs we have been engaged in vocational education for decades, We have many tens of thousands of successful graduates of our institutions, but we are learning that we can be more successful with everyone and can help those who wish to make a successful break with the reservation if we accompany vocational training with extensive counseling and supporting services, including job placement at the end of the training period.

Even so, there will remain many who do not wish to leave the home environÂment, for the roots of

neighborhood and community go deep. Vocational training for such persons will be successful only if it is accompanied by economic development which generates job opportunities.

1. Relocation by itself solves nothing. Like other Americans, Indians have joined the trek to the city. Many tens of thousands have moved into such urban areas as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, the Twin Cities, and Chicago. For nearly fifteen years we have had a program of helping those who wished to make this move. But as long as relocation was merely a program to transport people from one pocket of poverty to another, little was accomplished and the return to the reservations was about as frequent as the permanent relocations. Not everyone likes city living--not everyone is suited to it. To combat poverty successfully will require programs that relate people to jobs wherever they may choose to live.
2. Wars are expensive, and the war on poverty will not be an exception. Credit, economic development, public works, industrialization, tribal enterprise these things take money in large quantities. Education, vocational training and rehabilitation, the upgrading of social services, community development--these are also expensive programs. Good housing and the renewal of blighted areas are most certainly essential to the successful elimination of poverty, and they are expensive, too.

But these costs are investments in America's future. It costs us $4,200 to train an Alaskan or Athabascan high school graduate to become an electronics maintenance technician, but when he has completed his course he earns that much in about five months. If he is single, his income taxes repay the cost to the Government in less than two years.

In contrast, a large family on public assistance, less and less inclined to break the cycle of dependency as years go by, can readily consume $3,000 of public funds annually year after year, and still be miserable.

As America has grown, we have become accustomed to the pockets of poverty in our midst, whether we have been talking about rural Negroes, migrant workers, the ethnic minorities, the old Americans in Appalachia, or the American Indians on their reservations.

America has grown affluent, but the processes of economic development have left these communities in cultural isolation, cut off from the affluence around them.

Today we are in the process of awakening to this need in our midst and to the proven capability of solving the problem by technical assistance and upgraded community services. The war against poverty includes much more than American Indians on their reservations, but in that war Indians must and will be in the forefront.

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