at the Annual Convention, NCAI, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
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This is an important time in the history of Indian affairs, and this organization, the National Congress of American Indians, is in a good position to affect the future course of events.

Because this organization is comprised of Indian membership -- both tribal and individual -- it can and needs to become a source of great strength in the shaping of policies, programs and laws.

The Indian people of this continent have traditionally followed their own instincts and clung to their own convictions through trial and strife. It is for organizations such as this, made up of Indians, to foster the Indian spirit of independent thought. There is no need to fall into the pattern of racial agitation in order to attract attention. You already have the attention of this country. There is need, however, for some clear statements of principle, and for some constructive suggestions relating to Federal-Indian relations in the months and years immediately ahead.

First, there is the fact that the Bureau of Indian Affairs is no longer the one agency in Indian affairs. Congress has passed numerous laws in recent years providing a wide range of programs and services for all citizens, including Indians. These programs are geared to relieving adverse social and economic conditions among the poverty groups in our Nation. Indian people are now in a position where it becomes increasingly necessary to broaden their contacts and relations with other Federal agencies in order to take advantage of the new Federal aids.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs and other active organizations in the Indian field have found themselves in a position where traditional roles have become obsolete and new ones must be created to enable them to serve Indian people most effectively.

The Bureau, in the past, has been both protagonist and antagonist in the eyes of Indian tribal groups. Now, with all the other sources of aid available, it should decrease its day-to-day involvement in tribal affairs. It should give way to a new role by tribal governments themselves a role in which the tribal governments Hill be the negotiators with Federal aid programs. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, then, could become more of an advisory and coordinating agency for Federal assistance, rather than an administrating agency.

Recognition must be given to the fact that new authorities are needed in order to broaden opportunities for Indian people to improve their social and economic status.

Nothing is more important, in my estimation, than to accomplish a change in the policies and laws that are inhibiting the fullest development of Indian economic opportunity. This can be accomplished without jeopardy to existing protections now enjoyed by Indian people. I consider it my first obligation to the Indian people that such new legislation be formulated.

The major problems and needs thus far discussed in meetings with tribal representatives tend to fall into these general categories: low educational levels of reservation Indians, and need for expanded opportunities for children and adults to acquire education and training that will enable them to take their rightful place in the total national picture; sub-standard housing, and the need for more assistance in community planning and development; substandard living conditions, stemming from poverty, that need attention from health and sanitation workers; chronic unemployment and the need for greater business development on the reservations; and problems of heirship that create a stranglehold on land development.

The role of the National Congress of American Indians could become larger than it has been. It should become an organization respected throughout the Indian community and throughout the non-Indian community as the unified voice of the Indian people. Its great strength is yet to be reached and yet to be felt. It does not need to mimic anyone in order to attract attention. It needs, above all, to reflect the dignity, wisdom, and endurance that traditionally characterize the Indian people.

This is the time -- later may be too late -- to take a close look at NCAI's present role in Indian affairs and to make whatever changes in policy and procedure are necessary to ensure that its activities will accrue to the maximum benefit of the Indian people. As the voice of the Indian people, together, its force can be mighty. Let it be, then, an organization unified in its purposes, and let its purposes be toward constructive participation in Federal-Indian affairs.
