Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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President Jimmy Carter showed a special interest in Indian affairs when he visited the Department of the Interior Friday, February 18.

The President, scheduled to speak to Interior employees in the Department's auditorium, came early, went directly to the fourth floor wing housing the Commissioner of Indian Affairs' offices, shook hands and exchanged greetings with BIA staffers in the hall and then visited with Acting Commissioner Raymond V. Butler for a few minutes.

Carter talked with Butler, and Secretary of the Interior Cecil Andrus, who was with the President, about the impact of the drought in the west on Indian reservations and the economy of the tribes.

The President then asked Butler about the present government structures for dealing with Indian Matters. Butler explained the BIA's dual role in the trust responsibility for land and natural resources and the delivery of services to the tribes.

The President then asked Butler about complaints from Indians about how they are being treated. "Are these complaints legitimate," he asked. “I’m concerned about decisions that are made which affect the lives of these people."

Butler replied that often the complaints were valid. He added that many times they were the result of a vacillating policy toward Indians. Butler said that to improve conditions a consistent Federal policy was needed.

In later remarks in the auditorium, Carter said that he wanted to substantially improve the status of Indians and the concern of our country for them. He said that he thought the person responsible for Indian affairs in our government should have the rank and dignity of an Assistant Secretary of Interior. He said he would attempt to bring this about.

Subsequently, in answer to a question, he said that he felt strongly that there should be more Indians in top positions in the federal government and, especially, in programs affecting Indians. He said that he had made a campaign promise that in his government those responsible for Indian affairs would either be Indian or be recommended as knowledgeable and competent by Indians.

The President said that he was not familiar with a bill 8.666, to allow non-Indian employees of BIA and IRS to retire early, but he would read it and would be willing to support it if it were not punitive towards non-Indian now employed in those agencies.