Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Secretary of the Interior Thomas S. Kleppe today hailed the new spirit of determination and confidence among Indian leaders. In remarks to 200 leaders of the American Indian community at a White House meeting, Secretary Kleppe said: "Whether young or old, the Indian leaders today have a new spirit -- perhaps it is revival of a very old spirit-- of determination and of confidence."

"I certainly applaud those of you who have brought about this new era -- the older leaders who have worked quietly but diligently over the years to demonstrate the capability of Indian leaders and the younger ones who are making such great strides."

Secretary Kleppe acknowledged that previously the image of the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the, Interior Department had been one of "inflexibility --of bureaucrats who sit behind big desks in Washington and decide what would be best for the Indians."

"Let me assure you," the Secretary told the Indian group, "that if that were ever the case, it is not the way we operate today."

"The critical question is where we should draw the line when a tribe wants to take action which the BIA and I feel would be detrimental to that tribe," the Secretary said.

"Mistakes are made every day in government at all levels. Do we have an obligation to allow tribal governments to make mistakes? Self determination Says that we have the obligation - to allow you to take action which our best judgment tells us is a mistake, our trust responsibility argues that we do not have the legal authority to allow you to make mistakes if we can prevent them. We constantly strive to determine that fine line between the two extremes."