Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Lovett 202/343-7445
For Immediate Release: June 18, 1984
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The course of American Indian history was drastically changed, fifty years ago, by the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, Interior Assistant Secretary Ken Smith told Indian leaders in a letter marking the act's fiftieth anniversary. Smith, a Wasco Indian from Oregon, is the Reagan Administration's top Indian official.

Smith noted that the act "marked a turning point in Federal-Indian relations. It halted or reversed prior policies which had cumulatively proved disastrous for Indians."

The act ended a period of almost fifty years in which federal policy was to break up tribal land holdings through allotments to Indian individuals. Under this policy, implemented by the General Allotment Act of 1887, Indian land holdings were reduced from more than 136 million acres in 1887 to less than 50 million acres in 1934.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 ended the allotment period and its attempt to dismantle traditional tribal groups. The act initiated substantive efforts by the federal government to develop functional governments and to work with tribes for the improvement of living conditions on reservations.

Smith wrote: "The importance of the Indian Reorganization Act cannot be overemphasized, as previous federal Indian policies up to that time had increasingly diminished Indian land holdings and the freedom of Indian people to practice their own culture and customs, and had resulted in a steady decline of the ability of tribes to function in their sovereign capacity."

Smith said the act represented a major national commitment to improve the administration of Indian affairs and it reaffirmed the right of tribes to exist as self-governing entities.