Agency's 175th Anniversary Occasion for Reflection

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In a powerful and moving speech at a ceremony commemorating the Bureau of Indian Affairs' l75th anniversary, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Kevin Gover today apologized for the ethnic cleansing and cultural annihilation the BIA had wrought against American Indian and Alaska Native people in years past. Speaking before an estimated audience of 300 people, most of whom were BIA employees, he observed that the event was not an occasion for celebration, but a time for reflection and contrition.

"We desperately wish that we could change this history," Gover said, "but of course we cannot. On behalf of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, I extend this formal apology to Indian people for the historical conduct of this agency."

Gover pointed out that the agency's lengthy cultural assault on American Indians and Alaska Natives for most of its history, particularly on the children sent to BIA boarding schools and their parents, has yielded a trauma of shame, fear, and anger that has passed from generation to generation fueling the alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence that continues to plague Indian country. "These wrongs," he said, "must be acknowledged if the healing is to begin."

Gover noted a healing process is crucial to letting go of the past and laying the groundwork for the future. "The Bureau of Indian Affairs was born in 1824 in a time of war on Indian people," he said. "May it live in the year 2000 and beyond as an instrument of their prosperity."

Gover also presided at a ceremony dedicating the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs' corridor in the Department's headquarters as the "Hall of Tribal Nations" where tribal flags from across the country will be on permanent display.

Note to Editors: The full text of Assistant Secretary Gover's speech is on the BIA's web site