Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Interior Secretary James Watt, and Ken Smith, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, flew into Navajo land for a brief visit September 17. En route from Phoenix to Denver, the Navajo stopover marked another leg of Watt's three-week tour of western states.

Watt was given a blessing by a Navajo medicine man, high on a chilly ridge facing a steep canyon wall. He and Smith visited the hogan of a traditional Navajo couple -- a home without electricity or running water and then were taken to the council chamber for a special evening session of the Navajo Tribal Council.

In visiting the Navajo Nation, though briefly, Watt was fulfilling promise he had made to Tribal Chairman Peter MacDonald.

"As far as Indian affairs are concerned, we don't know what kind of job you will do," MacDonald commented in introducing Watt to the 87-member Navajo Tribal Council.

"We will not judge you," the Chairman continued. "We will give you every opportunity to write a new and great chapter in the nation's history."

He then went on to talk about the Former Joint Use Area, from which several thousand Navajos are facing forced relocation by act of Congress, and he called for a "blue-ribbon commission" to investigate the situation.

Watt made no promises, saying he would have to comply with the law, but said he would instruct Smith and the BIA "to move with understanding and compassion."

MacDonald, in his introductory remarks, also alluded to Federal budget cuts which have already had an impact on the reservation. He noted that the reservation has no private sector to take up the slack for withdrawn federal funds.

MacDonald called for continued support of the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project in northwest New Mexico for which funding has been severely reduced. Watt replied he would support this project with available funds.

With Ken Smith at his side, the Interior Secretary praised him as a good advocate for Indians and called him "a good advisor" and "a good counselor" on Indian affairs.

Smith, who carne to his position after a successful career as general manager of the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes, said the Bureau could look for further budget cuts as "President Reagan seeks to turn the economy around" and he called for good leadership and good fiscal management among tribes and reduced dependency on the federal government.

Smith, a Wasco Indian, said he knew he was on an Indian reservation as soon as he got off the plane -- "sagebrush, poor roads, no running water and no electricity."

Watt was dressed more appropriately for Phoenix, from which he had come, than for the high altitude of Window Rock. Coatless and in shirtsleeves, he was given an outdoor blessing ceremony by Navajo medicine man Robert Shirley. He stood beside a small juniper tree while Shirley intoned the Navajo "prayer of protection." Later, he was given an eagle feather and an arrowhead to protect him.

The visit with MacDonald rounded out Watt and Smith's meetings with all tribal chairmen in Arizona, having lunched with the Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona earlier in the day at Phoenix.

The entourage from the Window Rock airport to the site consisted of a car carrying MacDonald's wife Wanda, the hostess, Watt, his wife, Smith and greeter Caleb Roanhorse, followed by about a dozen other cars. It rambled along a rutted, dirt road, past goats and horses and a few homesteads the high ridge where the ceremony was held.

On the way back the trailing car was stopped by a Navajo resident.

"What in the world is going on here?" the man asked.

Told that the "big land boss" and the "big Indian boss" had been taken on a tour of the countryside the man seemed pacified, then commented: "I hope you told him about this road!"

Others traveling in the Secretary's party were Steve Shipley, executive assistant to the Secretary; Doug Baldwin, Assistant to the Secretary and Director of Public Affairs; Ralph Smith, Assistant to the Secretary; and Carl Shaw, Assistant to Smith.