Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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I have looked forward to this day -- to the chance to meet with you, to share in your 25th Anniversary celebration, to congratulate you - and especially your charter members, some of whom are here today -- for your vision and leadership.

An impressive as your past growth has been, even more impressive are the prospects for your contributions to the Indian future. As never before, the nation is aware of Indian problems and the need for clear, decisive Indian leadership.

As a representative of government, I am especially interested in Indian leadership because I am convinced that the Indian people and their Federal government must work closely than ever before.

The President's statement, delivered to the last NCAI Convention in Omaha, still stands. This Administration opposes termination. This Administration favors the continuation of the trust relationship and the protection of Indian lands and Indian resources.

Let us now and forever put to rest all fears and begin positive action together. For every Indian problem there is also an Indian opportunity. Building upon that special relationship between Indian tribes and the Federal government, we will solve the problems and open the opportunities.

There is no question that this special relationship will and must continue. It is its quality that should concern us most.

Not one of us who has responsibility can be complacent about Indian Affairs. And no one is sincerely interested will allow the plight of the Indian people to be used for publicity, politics or personal advantage.

I see no merit in trying to place blame for the present situation. Too much energy has been diverted already to excuses for conditions of life that any sensitive person can see are inadequate.

You do not want our apologies and you do not need our explanations. You want and need action. And it is time for action.

There is a desperate shortage of job opportunity. Indian unemployment runs up to ten times the national average in this year of record employment,

- Housing shortages still plague more than half the families living in Indian communities
- Schools for Indian children are underfinanced and deficient
- Hardship invades almost every phase of individual and community life.

I do not have to go into details with you. You know the facts better than I. It is time to move forward. We must have improvement and sense of direction.

This Administration understands that there is no single solution to Indian problems. There is no such thing as "the Indian problem." A rich diversity of culture, language and background characterizes Indian communities across America. No single set of programs will fit everywhere.

This Administration does not even expect complete uniformity and agreement among Indians as to their own goals or needs or desired programs. We must be flexible. For too long the Indian has been forced to fit a particular program. From now on the programs will be tailored to fit the particular Indian requirements. We will work with the Indian people on a community-by-community and tribe-by-tribe basis to develop programs best suited to local needs and priorities.

Indian tribes possess a unique and direct relationship with the Federal government which is derived from several sources. First, it is a legal relationship. Through treaty and law, Indian communities are entitled to certain services from the Federal government.

As a result of the treaties, the Indian people surrendered their land to the Federal government under certain conditions of trust and good faith. The government undertook a sacred trust to finance basic programs such as health and education. In attempting to respond to their obligation, Congress has enacted much legislation affecting Indians. Some of it has been successful but too much has failed to carry out its objective.

It is important to remember that Federal support of Indian services is, to a great extent, legally due to the Indian community. These are not services offered at the pleasure of the government but solemn obligations to a people who accepted a good faith settlement in reliance on governmental integrity.

Moreover, there is a formal basis for the special relationship between the Indians and their government. Congress, by establishing the Indian Claims Commission, acknowledged the integrity of Tribes as legal entities. This created the way for government to acknowledge debts and obligations to the Indian people.

Thus, the special efforts to offset costs of certain services in Indian communities are the rights of the communities and the legal and moral obligations of the Federal government. But there remains a crucial distinction that has been generally ignored for the past 150 years.

Government may have the absolute duty to provide services, but that does not necessarily imply that government must perform and administer those same services.