



Department of Justice

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REMARKS

By

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Before The

NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

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It is a tragic irony that the American Indian has for so long been denied a full share of freedom -- full citizenship in the greatest free country in the world.

And the irony is compounded when we realize how great the influence of Indian culture has been in shaping our national character.

The earliest white settlers in this country were quick to adopt Indian ways of dealing with the harsh elements of their new world; they must certainly have learned more from the Indians than the Indians from them.

The men who framed our Constitution are said to have drawn much of their inspiration from tribal practices of the Iroquois League -- the concept of a Union of sovereign states, for example, and the principle of Government by consent of the governed.

The nobility and valor of the great warrior chiefs -- men like Wabasha, Pontiac, Tecumseh and Black Hawk; like Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, American Horse, Cochise, and Joseph -- will always hold an honored place in our history.

Nearly half our states and many hundreds of our cities and towns bear Indian names; numberless Indian words and phrases have become a part of the American language and the American philosophy.

And still the paradox exists.

Alexis de Tocqueville, that nineteenth century French traveler who seemed to know so much more about America than the Americans knew about themselves, was outspoken in his admiration of the Indian race -- and in his disapproval of their treatment.

"In the little they have done," he wrote, "The Indians have unquestionably displayed as much natural genius as the people of Europe in their greatest undertakings."

"But," he added, "Nations as well as people require time to learn, whatever their intelligence and their zeal. The Indians have been ruined by a competition which they did not have the means of sustaining. They have become isolated in their own country . . . a little colony of strangers in the midst of a numerous and dominant people."

He was right. And we can see now, a hundred years later, that the blame and the guilt must rest with the white man.

But we can't go back. We can't undo the past. Rather than dwell with regret on the opportunities our forefathers missed and the wrongs they inflicted, it seems far more useful today that we take stock of the present state of the Indian people, and try to discern the outline of their future.

That many Indians have been able to rise to places of prominence and distinction in modern American society is inspiring, but it must not blind us to the plight of the vast majority of their fellows.

And when we consider that majority, we must begin with some disturbing facts.

Adult Indians today have been given about half as much education as other Americans. Their annual incomes are between one-fourth and one-third as large, and their rate of unemployment is between six and seven times the National average. Their health is so poor that their rate of infant mortality is nearly twice that of any other racial group in the country.

That these conditions can be allowed to prevail among a people uniquely entitled to call themselves the first Americans --- a people whose civilization flourished here for centuries before the name "America" was thought of --- this is nothing less than a National disgrace.

Poverty, under-education and disease are evil forces in their own right, but perhaps their most destructive effect in a society like ours is that they breed a practical loss of freedom.

The Indian may be technically free -- to vote, to stay on his reservation or leave it, to take part in state and federal government -- but that freedom amounts to precious little when he must struggle every day, against heavy odds, to feed and clothe and shelter his family.

He may be technically free, but he is the victim of social and economic oppressions that hold him in bondage. He is all too likely to become the victim of his own proud anger, his own frustrations, and -- the most humiliating of all -- the victim of racial discrimination in his own land.

And what about the future?

Will the injustice go on? How will things be for your children, and for generations yet unborn? Will they too spend their lives under the shadow of poverty and affliction and unfairness?

It may be too early to tell, but I think not.

I believe there are signs of change -- clear signs of a turning in the tide. America today is moving forward, more rapidly and in more ways than ever before -- moving toward the fulfillment of its destiny as the land of the free, a nation in which neither Indians nor any other racial or religious minority will live in underprivilege.

We can sense this forward movement in numberless open or subtle indications of public attitude. We can feel it in the air -- and we can see it reflected in the actions of our government.

The President, as you know, has always been deeply concerned about Indian affairs. Under his administration, that concern has begun to find expression not only in words but in deeds.

In 1960, the President campaigned on a ten-point pledge to the American Indian.

Let's go over those ten campaign pledges now, one at a time, and see what's happened to each of them in the past three years.

One: "To enact an area redevelopment bill which would offer substantial federal help for the development of industry in depressed areas, including Indian reservations."

The Area Redevelopment Act has now become a reality, and so has the accelerated Public Works Act -- both permitting Indian tribes to share significantly in federal benefits.

Fifty-four Indian reservations have already been designated to receive extensive redevelopment assistance, and projects are under way on at least sixteen of them -- projects that include everything from studies of tourism and recreational potentials on three western reservations to the exploiting of natural mineral deposits on seven reservations in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Groundbreaking will take place next month for a new electronics factory employing two hundred Indians on the Pueblo Laguna Reservation in New Mexico -- a factory that could not have been built except for the water, sewerage and road-access facilities provided by federal funds. And this is only one of many examples.

Two: "To provide ample credit assistance through expansion of the Indian Revolving Credit Fund."

This has been done. During all of the twenty-five years before 1962, Congress had voted appropriations totalling fourteen million dollars for the Revolving Credit Fund. In the year of 1962 alone, that total was increased by another ten million dollars.

Three: "To help Indians retain their land by rendering credit assistance, and by removing the elements of economic pressure and desperation which have caused them to sell their land."

The Indian Bureau has now enlarged and improved its real-estate appraisal staff to the point where it can rival any of the top professionals in the country. We are thus far better able to ascertain the true worth of Indian lands, and to establish fair rental fees that are more profitable to Indian landowners.

The Government now recognizes Indian ownership as paramount. In all cases where Indian land is up for sale, specific government action is taken to assure that it will remain in Indian hands.

Four: "To make the benefits of federal housing programs available to Indians."

This too has been done. For the first time since the adoption of the Public Housing Act of 1937, Indians are now eligible to take full advantage of it.

Five: "To give young Indian people full opportunity to participate in a Youth Conservation Corps."

The proposed conservation corps is still pending in Congress, but there is every likelihood that it will soon be passed. And it most certainly will include as many qualified young Indians as are interested in joining it.

Six: "To develop an effective vocational training program."

Last year, the Government more than doubled its appropriation of funds for Indian vocational training -- from three and a half million dollars to seven and a half million.

Seven: "To develop a better health program for Indians."

The new health program has moved ahead at a gratifying pace. It has provided an increase of more than a third of the total number of doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel, to broaden the attack on disease. Modern, fully-equipped hospitals have been built at Kotzebue, Alaska, and on the Hopi Reservation at Keam's Canyon, Arizona. This month, another new hospital will be opened at the San Carlos Apache Reservation, and still others are soon to be in construction -- one at Fort Yates on the Standing Rock Reservation just south of here.

Also, a new environmental health program has been launched. For the first time, tribal members and public health engineers are working together to bring safe water and sanitary facilities to Indian reservations and Alaskan native villages. More than sixteen thousand homes have already benefited from their improvements.

Eight: "To work with tribal groups to prepare community development programs."

This work is now going on. Moreover, we are currently working toward the establishment of a National Service Corps -- a domestic version of the overseas Peace Corps -- which would bring teams of highly trained volunteers to work for the betterment of living conditions on all reservations where they are needed and requested.

Nine: "To work for constant improvement in Indian educational opportunities."

In 1960 there were nearly five thousand Indian boys and girls with no school to go to. Now, classroom facilities are being built to accommodate more than seven thousand.

Appropriations for Indian school construction in 1960 were less than nine million dollars. By 1962 the figure had jumped to nearly thirty-six million -- and for fiscal 1964 it stands at fifty-two million, eight hundred thousand.

Ten: "To emphasize genuinely cooperative relations between federal officials and Indians."

Since the outset of this administration, our firm policy has been to consult with tribal groups and to work with them in determining every phase of federal action in their behalf -- in marked contrast to the long-standing custom of the past, when the wishes of the tribal organizations were all too often ignored.

As an example of this new and closer working relationship, it may be significant to point out that more settlements have been made on Indian claims in the past two-and-a-half years than in the whole previous eleven-year history of the Indian Claims Commission.

The pledges, in other words, are being fulfilled.

Still, let there be no governmental gloating over these achievements -- no premature rejoicing over problems solved and missions accomplished.

This is only a beginning, and a long-delayed beginning at that.

Even after ten more pledges have been made and kept -- and ten more, and still ten more -- even then there will be no cause for complacency.

May our government never forget that its goals are not merely to give succor to the Indian, to fill the Indian's hunger and ease the Indian's pain.

Those are the goals of charity -- of spiritual first-aid -- and the Indian deserves much more from his country than that.

Our ultimate goal is the time when the very sources of the hunger and the pain will be forever cast out. It is the time when no more promises will be needed because no more injustice will exist; when the "little colony of strangers" will be strangers no more -- when that natural genius of which de Tocqueville spoke will be released once again in all its power, for the greater glory of America.

That is our goal, and only then can we rest. Only then will the Indian be truly free.

Perhaps no man has better defined that goal of freedom than the immortal Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Tribe.

In 1877, after one of the last major Indian wars, the Chief made a statement to the troops to whom he had surrendered; and I believe he spoke for all Indians, then and now.

"Let me be a free man," he said, "-- free to travel, free to stop; free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think, talk, and act for myself -- and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty.

"Whenever the white man treats the Indian as he treats his own kind, then we will have no more wars."

"We shall all be alike -- brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us, and one country around us, and one government for all. For this day the Indian race is waiting and praying."

There is very little I can add to those eloquent words, except to say that I believe the day of Chief Joseph's vision is not far off.

I believe we will see the dawning of it in our own lifetime, and that its full light will come to shine on our children.

Thank you.