

Alaska Native Social Issues

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The mission statement that was adopted in two AFN retreats reads that: Alaska Native Peoples began as members of fully sovereign Nations and continue to enjoy a unique and political relationship with the federal government. We will survive and prosper as distinct ethnic and cultural groups and will participate fully in the overall society.

It is a very clearly and concisely stated statement of what Native people are, have been, and what we will continue to be.

And, in adopting this mission statement and the goals that have been discussed here on this panel, a word has crept into the discussion this afternoon that I think needs to be emphasized. That word is challenge. "We challenge ourselves and our leadership at all levels to promote and actively participate in making this mission statement and the accompanying goals a reality."

We've heard this afternoon a litany in three panels of many, many problems of many, many things that we as Native Peoples need to be concerned about. We've also heard some glimmers of hope. We've heard people talk about what they themselves at the community level are doing about these challenges.

I want to talk about a relatively isolated challenge but one that I think is very important. One of the ways I think that we can measure where we are today is, in addition to looking at the past, to try to project ourselves into the future. To say 25 years from now, we look back at our institutions and what did we see?

Some of you, I think, had the opportunity to watch the Democratic National Convention on TV and you saw a speech and a number of follow references where there was a chant and a phrase used that said, "Where was George?"

Well, as I look back on today in 25 years from now, the question I want to ask is, "Where were the ANCSA corporations?" Those institutions which were created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in a bill which was full of hope, words of promise, and those institutions which received 44 million acres of land and \$900 million.

Where were those institutions today in 1988 as we look back from 25 years from now? When AFN had a \$300,000 budget and a seven member staff, where were the ANCSA corporations? They were spending in that same decade over

\$25 million fighting one another over an issue called 7(i).

At a time when we had statistics recited to us as we have today of alcoholism and suicide, where were the ANCSA corporations? They were fighting about a thing called ANWR. Not about sharing, but about how not to share.

When in Washington, D.C., we had legislation involving many critical issues affecting American Indians and Native Americans - the Indian Child Welfare Act - where were the ANCSA corporations? They were fighting over NOLs. Again, not about how to save a piece of legislation, but how to protect their own particular small piece of a bill. And, they could not come together in Washington, D.C. to agree on how to do that and thrust the problem at Senator Stevens and said, "You solve it for us."

Where were the ANCSA corporations, when at the community and personal and school level, at the regional and village places, we were clamoring for leadership...and were clamoring for resources to deal with problems? They were selling NOLs and bringing into those institutions over a half billion dollars. And how much of those financial resources were allocated as we look back on today from 25 years from now? ...to dealing with the problems that almost in a crescendo, Native people had said were the most critical facing them - issues of pure survival. What were the priorities of these institutions? What were their values? When at the local level and the individual level and the community level, people were reciting human values and values of survival and values of philosophy. Their values, if we look back at it with just what we have accomplished today from 25 years, were material - they were monetary.

When we were trying to gain at the village level, money in the thousands to deal with problems such as have been described here today, ANCSA corporations, where were they? They were spending literally millions on lawyers and consultants to preserve their corporate institutions.

Now, I'm not delivering this as an indictment of ANCSA corporations because there have been examples of tremendous effort and resources being brought to bear by those corporations on issues that were important to us in 1988. The 1991 legislation, the ability to gain the NOL exemption in the tax law, the ability and the leadership and the

vision in particular regions at particular times to deal with particular issues - such as we've seen in NANA - identifying values and working to preserve them.

But if you look back from 25 years, the world and our people and our own children, they will not see the exceptions, they will see the general results. Those things that we did in a small way - which were good - will have disappeared. And, what history will judge us on are the broad brush strokes of what we did.

And so I issue a challenge to those ANCSA corporations which are the repository of our land - which were given the money and which have doubled the money from ANCSA - that we must apply those resources to these issues. We must readjust our priorities so that we care not so much about the survival of the business institution, but we care

more about the long-term survival of the people that the institution represents. And that we bring to bear a larger portion of those assets - those financial assets, those leadership assets - that we bring them to bear on these kinds of problems. And that we reach out to one another and that we stop this incredible and expensive warfare. And that we bring back into AFN those regions which have left. And that we, on a statewide level, begin to say that we will apply all of our resources, and most importantly, we will require you as shareholders in those ANCSA corporations - we will demand that you use those assets that belong to us to advance our future - not as shareholders concerned about dividends, but as Native people concerned for our survival.

Thank you.



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Photo by Rob Stapleton/AFN