

Commentary

Salute to Ada, call for unity

by Paul Swetzof

Thanks to Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Ada Deer, most of Alaska's legitimate tribal governments are recognized as having a government to government relationship with the United States. Ada, probably under pressure, has resigned and will only remain in her position until her successor replaces her. Without Ada, full governmental recognition of our tribes would still be in doubt and the Venetie and Tyonek Indian Country rulings may not have been favorable. We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Ada Deer. Speaking personally and on behalf of those tribes I represent, we are sorry to see you go, Ada. We supported you in your current position and will continue to support you in whatever you choose to do in the future. Tribal sovereignty is a two-part issue. The first part, recognition (thank you, Ada), has been accomplished. The second part, Indian Country, which is simply limited governmental jurisdiction over at least some of our traditional homelands is, with the Venetie decision, close to reality. There are those, however, who would revert to the dark termination policies of the past and snatch our victory from us and, in the process, create a precedent which could adversely affect tribal governments nationwide. This must not be allowed to occur.

Senator Stevens has already mistakenly stated that if Venetie is allowed to stand it will lead to conflict between the villages and Native corporations. It has also been said, again mistakenly, that Indian Country in Alaska would result in diminished funding for outside tribes. Senators Stevens and Murkowski have vowed that if the Supreme Court does not reverse the Venetie ruling, they will do it legislatively. I think they mean it, intend to accomplish this goal soon and will probably make their play through a rider to a major piece of legislation that will be difficult for other members of Congress to remove and the President to veto. It is this type of threat that we must be prepared to fight at all costs.

It's important to note that Venetie has not and should not lead to any conflict between tribes and corporations which, as we all know, have historically been in conflict since ANCSA created a land claims without favorably resolving tribal jurisdiction. Far from creating conflict, the Venetie decision has the potential and presents the opportunity to remove some of the animosity which has existed between some villages/tribes and their corporations and heal many of the internal division which have divided tribes, villages, shareholders and families since the implementation of ANCSA. Venetie does not supersede or in any way affect

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Continued from page 2

ANCSA. ANCSA was created by an act of Congress, is thus "Indian" legislation, and is not subject to changes as a result of Venetie or tribal recognition. It's equally important to note that confirmation of Indian Country in Alaska does not impact competitive and/or limited funding for outside tribes. Any funding impacts were the result of recognition of Alaska tribes as being eligible for program and service money, which has been the case for years. Besides, most tribes recognize the basic morality in the Venetie decision, recognize the precedent setting threat a so-called congressional fix would present, and will stand with us to fight legislative attempts to negate favorable Indian Country rulings.

UNITY IS THE KEY! It is critically important that the enemies of sovereignty are not able to say that the Alaska Native community is divided on the question of Indian Country. We are not. AFN, which primarily represents corporate interests, was a party to the Venetie decision and its long term goals are compatible with the decision. Additionally, the Alaska Natives Commission was initiated by AFN and the final report makes clear that tribal recognition and Indian Country is the foundation and key to culturally, physically and economically healthy Native communities. AITC, which represents approximately 163 of Alaska's tribal governments, has a virtually identical position to that of AFN. RurAL CAP has the same point of view, as does every Native organization,

tribal and otherwise, that I know of.

This is the time for, and the moment of, the unity we have all been praying for. The tribes, regional and village corporations, and all other Native entities must loudly and clearly state support for Indian Country in Alaska and the unit of all of us in this position. Although unlikely, should any Alaska Native speak in opposition to the Venetie decision or Indian Country in Alaska, we should all raise our voices in opposition to such a rare creature so everyone knows we are practically unanimous in our position. This is one of those rare times in history which will clearly reveal who is for us and who is against us.

Venetie, coupled with recognition, presents us at last with the ability to assume direct control over our collective and individual lives and cultures. It allows us the opportunity to create and imple-

ment solutions to our own problems and allow our cultures to develop at our own pace and in our own ways. The implications are immense, from the reduction of suicides and alcohol/drug abuse among our peoples to economic, subsistence and cultural self-sufficiency. It is for these and so many other reasons we must not allow modern day "Indian fighters" to reverse Venetie or circumvent Indian Country. Our collective and individual identities, and the future of all of our children and future generations, are at stake.

It is critical we put pressure on our corporations, tribes, Native organizations and our outside friends to join together and speak as one at this rare moment in our history. This is the defining moment which will secure our future ability to survive. Unity is the key which will unlock the destiny of our respective Native nations and individuals.