

Other Voices—

A GENERAL STATEMENT ON THE ALASKA NATIVE LAND CLAIMS

By EBEN HOPSON

For whatever the reason the Subcommittee finally decided to report a bill, I think it is laudable in itself. That does not mean the product should not be criticized and its weak points discussed even under the most unreasonable circumstances the recipients of this bill are placed under.

I believe in a democracy where there is a real freedom of speech, freedom to express my views, freedom to consult with the powers that be, freedom to gain as well as lose, freedom to do right as well as to make mistakes. Without these principles, there is no freedom under God, so well stated in the pledge of allegiance to our flag and the America for which it stands. We have a tendency to forget these principles at times, and having to be reminded usually sets the hard and wavering path on a route so different, easy and basically sound and always leads to a happy conclusion.

Unless, to a great degree the Congress gets back on the track, so to speak, and starts working for a settlement that is just, instead of dealing with the rights of the Alaskan native, the result of many years of effort will only perpetuate our problems and the Congress will be faced with it for years.

For instance, why does this whole problem of solving the Alaska Native Land Claims have to be based on prior claims settled in the courts, in one instance, the interpretation of which is; the Congress has the supreme power to do what they want. We know this to be a fact and we also know that it can make a settlement with or without compensation if it so chooses. Why are we left out by a mere rule of the House Committee, rules are made every day, when times comes to marking up the bill behind closed doors and have to fight later? Could we not, by the wisdom of the Congress, sit down and argue this matter and agree on the overall provisions to simplify the process through what is called consultations and negotiations instead of confrontations? This whole process has had the tone of the Congress through its committees wielding a sledge hammer over our heads and threatening to strike us down unless we agree to something less than equitable and just according to our interpretations.

We also forget sometimes that the members of the Congress and any legislative members are public servants for which enormous efforts are made on their part to continue in office and perpetuate the authority implied thereby. I can agree that some things artificial and temporary in nature which nevertheless require legislation can be dealt with.

The importance of this legislation and any other involving the basic rights of people can only be handled based on that principle. Let me remind the reader of one historic issue that the Congress dealt with and is still dealing with today, and that is the civil rights legislation. My personal analysis of that issue, to say it in one sentence, is: "That the Congress, in fact, refused to correct the situation while recognizing open discrimination exercised in their midst for many years."

Today this problem exists, and can only be blamed on a minority control caused by a rule of the Congress introduced many years ago and whose attempted change continues to be blocked by a minority. This is minority rule. I will refrain from commenting on House Committee Point Two for one reason, that a final bill is still in the making, hopefully, and given the opportunity we will have additional input so extremely important and without which a good bill will never emerge.

Needless to say, the Alaskan Native leadership is happy, as might be others, that a bill has finally cleared the House Subcommittee. It is only beginning and the Native leadership wants input all the way through its passage. We have a right to demand this little bit of our Congressman and Senators.

Denial of this request to have input will only mean that their still remains a desire on the part of Congress, in this day and age, to perpetuate the manner in which it has treated the American Indian. All of which concludes that after the miserable and unjust treatment handed the American Indian, this issue is the last and only opportunity to, partially at least, rectify the inequities, injustices, and downright discrimination unleashed by the Congress on the American Indian which will enable them to say; "By God, we finally did it, we did something agreeable not only to the Congress, but something worth mentioning as a deed well done by the Natives of America."

This would be justice in its true sense of the word. It is obtainable, together we can do it.