

Editorial Comment—

Uncertain Terms

It seems to us that each time Native groups act to defend their rights, they are accused by large economic interests and the conservative press of acting selfishly and in haste, and without forethought and without warning. This reaction is somewhat disconcerting to us, but we are learning to live with it.

We recall one such example of this typical reaction during one of the most crucial phases in the fight to obtain a just settlement of the land claims. Remember statements a number of interests made prior to settlement of the land claims? The same people who now say that it is just dandy that the Natives are able to finally get a piece of the action were, at that time, accusing Natives of being "greedy" and "arbitrary" and made use of other such terms which weren't especially flattering.

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Terms ...

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What is often praised now as a noble victory was, a couple of short years ago, described as a "land grab" by many who have recently become friends of the Natives — or at least friends of the Native corporations.

Does anyone recall the uproar when the AFN announced that it would seek a 60 million acre settlement, rather than 40 million acres? None of the people who chose to apply the "greedy" and "arbitrary" adjectives would listen to the AFN at that time when it explained that the 40 million acre figure was a compromise arrived at in a two-party agreement, and that the acreage had to be adjusted when the other party decided the agreement was no longer in effect.

The Native corporations and businesses are now revered by our old land claims foes, and are much too sacred to draw their criticism. The friends of Native business, who used to be foes of the Native movement, now must satisfy themselves by casting their favorite terms — "greedy, arbitrary, without forethought" — in an oblique direction.

They now accuse the young North Slope Borough of being greedy in supporting the resettlement of the aboriginal settlement of Nookisut. They launched a vicious attack against the borough and Nookisut villagers, and then resisted repeated attempts to set the record straight. Nookisut is fortunate that higher authority recognized the validity of its existence and that others must also recognize the village as a fact of life.

And now the Nunamut, the residents of Anaktuvik Pass, are being accused of being arbitrary and of having acted in haste because they have taken action to prevent a highway from crossing their village lands and hunting grounds. Until the state transportation sovereign decided differently, they believed the Congress when it said that it would set aside certain lands for a transportation corridor to be withdrawn at the discretion of the Interior Secretary.

Mr. Campbell, incidentally, might do well to heed the words of his superior, if the Governor is indeed his superior, when Governor Egan reassured the Congress in 1971 that, "In order to protect the way of life of those who wish to follow the traditional hunting and fishing economy, some lands must be set aside for the primary and exclusive use of such purposes so long as they are used for those purposes. In these areas there must be a right to veto development from the point of view of the people who follow it consistent with this way of life."

Perhaps, Mr. Campbell might do well to think the state may have committed itself to such a policy as he seeks to scatter his highways through areas of heavy subsistence usage. Unless, of course, such statements as the Governor made to the Congress may have been said merely to sweep that nasty Native problem out of the way. Perhaps it will make no difference in either case. If the state succeeds in its current role as exterminator of all that pesky game, every one will be in the same boat because there will be nothing to hunt.

However, we would like to take this opportunity to say we are pleased that the old foes of the Native movement are willing to reconcile differences. We are delighted that so many people wish to become friends of the Native corporations — somebody besides the oil companies will have to spend money in Alaska.

As for that sparsely populated borough on the north slope and that little village at Anaktuvik Pass, let us all call them names and see how formidable they can be.