

'I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it' —VOLTAIRE

Interior testimony troubling

We are concerned and troubled about recent testimony by the Department of Interior on proposed 1991 amendments to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

This testimony clearly illustrates the classic philosophical differences between many Alaska Natives, concerned about protecting lands owned by the *group*, and the federal government, which appears to be bent on terminating its responsibilities to Native Americans.

The testimony, presented last week in Washington, D.C., by Steve Britt, assistant to the secretary of the Interior for congressional and legislative affairs, shrouds the 1991 issue in a smokescreen of "protecting individual rights."

For example, Britt stated: "The Natives who received stock in the corporations had the right to assume that, if the corporations were economically successful, they someday might be able to realize economic benefits from that stock.

"To strip away this expectation without some meaningful return of value for their settlement is wrong."

He says that a family may want to liquidate their shares to finance the college education of children or that a young person may want to pledge his or her shares to obtain a loan to establish a small business.

It all has sort of a lofty ring to it. However, it raises questions:

- What about the children of the family who sell their stock for that college education?
- What will they sell to pay for their children's education?
- What if the business established goes into bankruptcy?

This testimony also dodges the issue — most central to Alaska Natives — of what will happen to the land assets the corporations control? Will the Natives lose their right to control the destiny of that land?

Britt also makes some statements that are not just questionable, but downright wrong. He says in some regions up to 30 percent of stock already is held legally by non-Natives through inheritance or court decree of separation, divorce or child support. This figure is not known, but it is unlikely it is more than even 10 percent.

He also criticizes proposed 1991 legislation by saying it would be too restrictive in some cases, when, in fact, the system proposed would actually be less restrictive than Alaska state law.

What we seem to have in Interior's testimony is an attempt to skew the facts so that the federal government can hide behind efforts to protect *individual* rights. Yet, these officials really seem to be attempting to use ANCSA to take back what was given to the Alaska Native people in 1971.