

Other Voices—

Then as Now

During our early history, the rapid population growth gave impetus to drives to acquire additional lands for purpose of increasing the resources and wealth of our nation and for the use of our pioneering settlers, who, in ever-rising numbers, were migrating westward. Conflicts broke out between the settlers and the Indians. There were periods of great stress.

The federal government was denounced for trying

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to protect Indian lands.

Complaints were made that Indians' occupancy of lands was hindering the progress of the nation.

It was asserted that a policy of honoring tribal occupancy rights and purchasing Indian lands would impose vast liabilities on the federal government.

It was argued that Indian occupancy of lands created no valid rights; and proposals were advanced to expropriate the Indian lands against the will of the Indians and without payment of any compensation.

However, Congress firmly stood by its policy of respect for the land occupancy rights of the Indians. In acquiring lands for the expansion of the nation and the use of the settlers, Congress recognized the just principal of VOLUNTARY purchase and sale for a NEGOTIATED price in its dealings with the Indian tribes.

By treaties and arguments made with Indian consent, the United States purchased the great bulk of the lands of the Indian tribes of the first 49 states. Further, despite the loss of many millions of acres during the years 1880-1934, by reason of improvident government policies, millions of acres of lands of these States have been retained, to this day in tribal or individual Indian trust ownership.

Once again, now, in this 6th decade of the 20th century, when the matter of dealing with the existing land occupancy rights of the Native groups of Alaska has come to the fore, we are hearing from some quarters the same baseless and inequitable arguments and the same discredited assertions and complaints which were advanced during earlier periods of our nation's history and which Congress has repeatedly rejected.

From some lips fall the familiar complaints that Native occupancy of lands is impeding the economic development and progress of the State of Alaska.

Our answer is that though we have the right of complete beneficial use of our aboriginally occupied lands and all the resources of such lands, we have been prevented and restrained from exercising our rights to deal with and to develop such lands and resources. We say that ONLY after we have been permitted the reasonable opportunity to exercise such rights can a fair judgment be made as to whether our occupancy is hampering the economic development and progress of Alaska.

WE BELIEVE that we have sufficient leadership ability to direct the development of our lands and resources.

WE believe that we have the capacity—at least equal to the federal and state bureaucracy—to make wise selection of experts and technicians to assist us, including engineers, geologists, foresters, managers, investment advisors, accountants, economists and lawyers.

We claim not only our lands, which have been ours since time immemorial; but we also lay claim upon the conscience of the United States and to our rightful place in society as the first Alaskans.

—JOHN BORBRIDGE