

After 20 Years, What?—

Upicksoun Addresses Alaska Press Club

(Note: The following are excerpts from a speech by Joe Upicksoun, President of the Arctic Slope Native Association to the Alaska Press Club—September 22, 1971.)

“...As we have talked internally among ourselves—our board of directors and our advisors—we long ago formed the conclusion that the Alaska Press—newspapers, radio, television, and magazines—was sharply critical of the Natives and our position in the settlement.

Now this critical attitude is not so bad, because the Press is supposed to question, to criticize, to make public institutions responsive to the public need. And so, the question is: You have done a fine job in criticizing us; what kind of a job have you done as against the other competitors for our land?

We, the Inupiat Eskimos of the Arctic Slope, have a story to tell the world. For the last time, the United States has a chance to prove to her own citizens and to the rest of the world that her Christian morality is more than words...

The question before the Congress today is: Can the Congress measure up to this high responsibility in settling the land rights of Alaska's Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts on the basis of fair value?

Have you, the Press, devoted any real attention to the honor of the United States? Have you reminded the State government that the more the State gobbles up from the Natives, the less honor the United States and her people will have?

We take courage, however, in Section 4 of the Statehood Act which states: “***The State and its people do agree and declare that they forever disclaim all right and title to any lands or other property***the right or title to which***may be held by and Indians, Eskimos or Aleuts***.”

“...The huge frenzy over the pipeline is an example. You see, I feel that most people missed the basic point: Over whose land is it going to be built? That is the initial question.

“...In looking at the Press, we have concluded that the Press has whipped up an hysteria over the pipeline. As a direct product of this hysteria, people up here over-bought on credit, over-spent on credit—all because of this atmosphere that everyone was going to be an instant millionaire. May I suggest that if the Press had really understood the mood of the Native people, it would have been more restrained and much hardship avoided.

You must understand that Western Civilization really didn't touch the North Slope until about 1965, and then it poured in like a gusher that drown everything.

This rampant development inflamed the Eskimos. It was like a bulldozer.

Even today we have no assurance that the Congress will pay us fair value for the extinguishment of our rights in our lands. And we are aware of Adam Smith's law: The ultimate source of all wealth is land...

“...Now we have the oil. We can learn from the whaling the placer mines, copper, salmon and timber. The real backbone of Alaskan industry is Native ownership. We don't leave, because this is our home.

Instead of concentrating on Native ownership, the Alaska Press has given the public the idea that the pipeline is the answer for our economy. We read our editorials and news columns. We also read the publicity put out by Alaska. There will be a construction crew of five to ten thousand for two or three years and a permanent crew of three hundred.

While speaking of the pipeline, we should mention the issue of environmental protection. No matter how competent Alyeska's engineers are, there is always the human factor. Recently, two sailors in Puget Sound forgot to check two valves, so that five thousand barrels (two hundred and ten thousand gallons) were pumped into the Sound.

One of our worries is that a spill will occur and our subsistence living will be injured. Our legal advisors tell us we don't own wild animals, so we can't sue for their destruction even though our subsistence living will be injured. We have, therefore, proposed that the Native regional associations be paid Fifteen Dollars per gallon of spillage and the association would then replace the subsistence living with substitutes to its people.

“...One of our truly basic concerns is that we love the North. We like living there. It is generous to us—the sea, the rivers, the tundra. Our advisors tell us that an oil field has an average life of twenty years. What then?...