

No U-turns for Any Indian Policies—

President Jerry Ford to Continue Nixon Indian Programs

By RICHARD LA COURSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. — (AIPA) — Gerald Rudolph Ford Jr., who on Aug. 9 was sworn in as President of the United States, “won’t take any U-turns for any Indian policies” but will continue the Indian policies of his predecessor, Richard M. Nixon, according to a White House staffer who met recently with him.

Bradley Patterson Jr., who met with Ford in February of this year on Indian policy matters personally, gave this assessment to AIPA:

“He is forthright and interested and progressive in Indian affairs. Indian people can look forward under Mr. Ford to the same kind — and more of the same kind — of serious interest and concern. There’s no question of any diversion. We’ll continue on the same track. There won’t be any U-turn for any Indian policies.”

If President Ford’s Indian policies do continue those of Nixon, there will nevertheless be new faces and new top level personnel in the White House itself.

AIPA has learned that Leonard Garment, Nixon’s special counsel on minority affairs and the arts, and thus the topmost Indian affairs official in the White House under Nixon, had made known his intention to Nixon that he would leave the White House as soon as impeachment

matters had reached their conclusion so that his children could begin the fall school term in September in their home town of New York.

Expected to emerge in some high level capacity as the White House level in Indian affairs was William E. Casselman II, named legal counsel to then-Vice President Ford when Ford was designated vice president last October.

Casselmen has handled, almost singlehandedly, all Indian affairs matters for Ford since that time, including a proposal to replace the mechanisms of the now-defunct National Council on Indian Opportunity (NCIO) with an Indian Affairs Committee on the White House Domestic Council in the White House, and with the creation of two national Indian advisory councils.

On the day Nixon resigned, Aug. 9, Ford asked Morton and other Cabinet officials to remain in their present posts. Morton, however, a long-time close personal friend of Ford, was named the following day to a four-member “transition team” to monitor what Ford labeled “an orderly transition of power.”

Top national columnists immediately speculated that Morton might leave the Interior Department for a White House assignment, either as White House chief of staff or in another top role in domestic affairs. Should Morton leave Interior, he would likely be succeeded by Interior Under Secretary John Whitaker.

Morton was scheduled to appear at the Crow Fair Aug. 16 and 17, where it was expected he would draw the major outlines of a continuation in Indian policy between Nixon and Ford.

At Interior itself, most top Indian affairs officials told AIPA they expected to continue their work. Indian Commissioner Morris Thompson, a presidential appointee, was also expected to continue, as well as BIA division chiefs recently appointed.

One uncertainty was whether Bradley Patterson Jr. would continue in the White House, where he had served as special assistant to Leonard Garment.

Patterson had been scheduled to head the Indian Affairs Committee on the White House Domestic Council before the impeachment issue downed all such

plans in the making, and Patterson told AIPA “I’m completely unclear where I’ll be.” Either Patterson or Casselman might eventually hold that post — or Casselman may replace Garment as Patterson’s boss.

Besides personnel questions, the major question now is whether and how Ford will continue the Nixon Indian policies and legislative initiatives.

Ford remained almost totally uninvolved in the affairs and needs of Indians in his home state of Michigan during his 25-year tenure in the U.S. House of Representatives, according to Michigan Indian spokesmen who talked to AIPA last October when Ford was designated vice president following the resignation of former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew on Oct. 10.

Those Indians in Michigan telegraphed Ford their congratulations and support on his new assignment.

Ford, according to Capitol Hill staffers, has voted the Nixon administration line on most major national Indian legislative proposals since 1969. As a consequence, it is expected that Ford will continue the Nixon legislative initiatives.

Of the original eight Nixon bills originally proposed in 1970, one — the Indian Financing Act — has been enacted into law, another bill to elevate the Indian Commissioner to an Interior Department Assistant Secretary is hung up in the House, and a bill to create an Indian Trust Counsel Authority is expected to gain new momentum before Congress recesses in early winter.

Among the very first Indian bills arriving on President Ford’s desk for signature may be bills now moving through Congress to resolve the historic and difficult Navajo-Hopi land dispute, a bill significantly increasing health services and contracting for Indians sponsored by Sen. Henry M. Jackson, D-Wash., and the bill to create the Indian Trust Counsel Authority introduced by the Nixon administration.

And Ford has styled himself a “conservative in fiscal affairs.” His approach to government may soon be an approach in spending cuts, which will not bode well for any major increases in federal expenditures for Indians during the new Ford administration.

During his brief eight months as vice president, Ford met only

once with Indian leaders — this past March 7. Mel Tonasket (Colville), president of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and Gov. Robert Lewis (Zuni), president of the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association (NTCA) met with Ford personally at Ford’s initiative for about 40 minutes to review Ford’s proposal to liquidate NCIO, then under the office of the vice president. NCIO formally died this June 30.

Ford proposed the creation of the White House Domestic Council Indian Affairs Committee and the creation of the two national Indian advisory councils to replace NCIO. His proposal became embroiled in controversies among national Indian political groups, and was left unresolved at the hour of impeachment itself. He may, upon the stimulus of his new advisors, revive the proposal.

During the March 7 meeting with Lewis and Tonasket, Ford told the two: “I will always be your advocate. Come in any time and I’ll be your link.”

NCAI President Tonasket commented on Ford to AIPA that meeting:

“The vice president is very much a businessman — he never took time to joke. I’ve met quite a few politicians, and my personal impression is that he’s kind of a point-blank man. He doesn’t mess around. He comes right to the point with a straightforward attitude. And he made no pretense of knowing a great deal about Indians. I appreciate that — and it makes it easier to work. There was no waste of time. It was all business, and that is refreshing.”

On Aug. 9, the day Ford took the presidential oath of office, William Youpee, executive director of the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association sent the following letter to Ford:

“We wish to congratulate you

in assuming the responsibility of the 38th presidency of the United States.

“We in the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association feel these are exciting but critical times for Indians in the United States. Treaties are being tested, Indian lives are being exerted and new expectations are being voiced. To be responsive to this mood, the NTCA has dedicated itself to the promise of a better future for the reservation Indian.

“It is to the point, the one of communication and working toward common objectives, that the NTCA pledges its support and cooperation to the Office of the Presidency in matters related to Indians.”