

# NCAI's Leon Cook Defines Problems Facing Native Americans

By PAT MONOGHAN

MINNEAPOLIS — One week after introducing a Native-rights plank to the Democratic National Convention and proudly witnessing its near-unanimous passage, Leon Cook tersely but eloquently defined for TUNDRA TIMES the problems facing Native Americans — issuing in particular a strong warning against “this administration’s covert policy of economically forcing Indians out of their natural communities and into urban America, there to destroy them as a people and as a culture.”

“That policy means that we would be assimilated into the polluted mainstream of American life,” asserts Cook, at 32 the youngest president in the 27-year history of the National Congress of American Indians and a highly-regarded Minnesota Indian leader.

Cook compared for TUNDRA TIMES the situation confronting Alaskan Natives since passage of the land-claims bill to similar land-rights disputes across the nation.

“There was great support here for settlement of the Alaska claims,” he declared, due to stateside Indian awareness of the complexities of such settlements.

But, he claims, Alaskan Natives face difficult times in their attempt to gain cultural and economic autonomy.

Cook accuses the federal government of “a planned program of termination of Indian country,” and suspects that the recent Alaskan claims settlement may be part of that plan.

“In 20 years, Alaskan Natives will be paying taxes on all that land. Now, 20 years isn’t enough time to build a solid economic base, particularly when you consider that money goes about half as far up there as it does down here,” Cook

explained.

He pointed to the predicament of the Menomonee Indians of Wisconsin, who lost their entire land holdings through tax forfeit — lands which Indian groups are presently demanding be restored to the tribe.

“Half of the territory held by Indians 100 years ago is gone,” Cook continued, “down from 84 to 44 million acres.”

“I’m not sure,” Cook questioned, “that Alaskans are aware of the viciousness of the corporate and economic interests of this nation.”

The “consumptive mentality” of corporate interests is frequently supported, he maintains, by federal policies which cooperate in the exploitation of Native resources, “both human and natural.”

Despite his gloomy view of the Alaskan claims settlement — which Cook charges was a sop to the “conscience of white America, which was vicariously satisfied that justice was being done, by the charade of investigations and hearings.”

The Indian leader praised the shrewd political maneuvering of Alaskan Natives, singling out as noteworthy the establishment of the Arctic Slope Borough.

“The only way to protest against excessive taxation in the future is through political power — Native legislators and senators,” Cook contends. “In lieu of a solid economic base, we must develop political strength.”

Turning to issues of national scope, Cook described the part that Native Americans played in the Democratic convention.

“We had 26 Indians at the convention. Alaska and Minnesota, with five delegates each, were tied for first place,” Cook said.

“And we had excellent internal communications.”

The Native caucus presented to the convention a strongly-worded document calling for an

“end to the cultural genocide practiced on Indians through sophisticated means,” which was resoundingly approved.

Cook attributes this unified action to a new coalescence of feeling among Native Americans.

“We’ve passed through tribalism, ethnocentrism. We are beginning to shed tribalism for greater issues, for issues affecting all Indians.”

He called this new feeling of unity a “renaissance” of cultural awareness which has “been speeded up by the visibility of Indian leaders and Indian organizations.”

A new coalition of NCAI, the National Indian Youth Council, the National Tribal Council and the American Indian Movement — dubbed COINS (Coalition to Organize Indians and Natives) — was described as one such umbrella organization aiming at improving communication and cooperation among the various groups.

Cook admits that there are still divisions — “young and old, small and large reservations, urban and rural, radical and conservative” — but he contends that issues of land, water, hunting and fishing rights, as well as taxation disputes, supercede these and other traditional divisions.

Such unity extends to and includes Alaskan Natives, according to Cook. He noted that establishment of the Alaska Federation of Natives forged a decisive link in the chain of communications between stateside and Alaskan Natives.

“Prior to the formation of AFN, there was really nothing unified to communicate with,” he pointed out. “AFN is now generally recognized by Indian leaders here — just walk into



LEON COOK—Young, dynamic and outspoken is the current president of the National Congress of American Indians Leon Cook. Cook successfully introduced the Native Rights plank at the Democratic National Convention in Miami, Florida which passed almost unanimously. — MINNEAPOLIS TRIBUNE Photo

Presently serving as assistant director of urban affairs and consultant in Indian affairs to the Minneapolis School Board, Lee Cook divides his time between that job and his understaffed NCAI office in Washington, D.C.

His involvement in the Indian rights movement is of long standing and he has worked for Indian goals through the Community Action Program, the Economic Development Administration (of which he was senior field coordinator for the Southwest) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (for which he was Deputy Director of Economic Development).

He is a full-blooded Chippewa from the Red Lake Reservation, Minnesota’s only closed reservation.

Cook described a major problem now facing Indian organizations, traditionally stronger west of the Mississippi River, as their attempt to draw support from Eastern and Southeastern tribes.

Although they are “much less devitalized religiously and culturally,” these tribes have participated but little in national Indian organizations.

“That’s one reason why we (the National Congress of American Indians) are holding our annual convention in Sarasota, Florida,” he explained.

Cook touched briefly on other issues: continuing support for tribes engaged in boundary disputes, support for restoration of the Menomonee land, attempts to establish taxation authority on reservations, struggles to define adequate hunting and fishing privileges, dozens of local issues despite which, Cook envisions a new surge of unity among Native Americans.



Jim Boudreaux brings Santa Claus to town.



It’s not just that Jim put together the Anchorage Christmas Parade or the servicemen’s Christmas Dinner Program, but as president of the Anchorage Jaycees he helped bring Santa to 100 children who were treated to a free holiday shopping spree. Kids are important to Jim, and Jaycee projects like the Junior Fish Derby, which brings area youngsters out to vie for fish in a specially-stocked lake, emphasize the things that are important to kids. As staff accountant for Atlantic Richfield, Jim deals in pretty high finance, but he’s knowledgeable about other money matters, too, through work on Jaycee projects like a benefit nightclub performance for the retarded children’s association, or raising funds for the Children’s Zoo.

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