

Knowles makes right move in pursuing Guard inquiry

We applaud the decision of Gov. Tony Knowles to appoint a Board of Inquiry to investigate allegations of racial bias and other wrongdoings in the Alaska National Guard. Equally important is the commitment made by Adjutant General Jake Lestenkof to establish an open door policy and make improvements in the Guard's grievance system.

Lestenkof may have surprised some people with his disavowal of any personal knowledge of racial in his new command. After all, he was deputy to Adjutant General John Schaeffer during the Cowper Administration and there were indications of problems even then, which dramatically worsened during the recent tenure of Gov. Walter Hickel.

But Lestenkof's comments show precisely the kind of even-handed resolve that is a hallmark of fine leadership. As the current chief of the Guard, it is incumbent on Lestenkof to choose his words carefully. Even if he had first hand knowledge of discriminatory activities, it is proper that he withhold both comment *and* judgment pending a proper investigation. Such restraint is best for all concerned.

Racial bias is an extremely sensitive subject. For many, perfectly intelligent and well-intended people who happen to be in the racial majority, it can be a blind spot to which only education and patience can restore clarity. Prejudice can also be terribly subtle, requiring considerable finesse to be dealt with effectively.

While we feel that fairness, patience and understanding ought to be accorded to those afflicted with prejudice, it is important as well that they begin to understand how racism affects not only people of color, and everyone else. Whenever racial minorities are disparaged, directly or indirectly, greatly or slightly, society as a whole is diminished, its moral potential unfulfilled. Alaska Natives are right to be outraged that a senior officer of the Alaska National Guard would say, in so many words, that the ANG is nothing more than a welfare system for Natives. Coping effectively with that kind of attitude has now become the first task of Gen. Lestenkof.

We should all be grateful that this inquiry is underway. It should serve to bring light to some nagging problems that are impeding the effectiveness of the Guard in its service to Alaskans. For Alaska Natives, the road to justice has been long and arduous. Allegations of racial bias in the Alaska National Guard, a venerable institution in many villages, make it clear that the struggle will continue. However, the Knowles Administration gives us hope that at the end of this inquiry, the dawn of the 21st century will find us a little closer to the dream of equality.

We have long relied on the commitment and professionalism of Guard members in time of need. The board of inquiry is an investment in integrity and self-appraisal that will help insure a strong, viable Guard for Alaska's future.