

Oppression in Fairbanks jails

To the Editor:

After 116 years of American rule, it is really incredible how little understanding of Native Alaskans seems to have entered the Alaskan public consciousness. Although most Alaskans might not know it, the public schools were charged in 1890 with the mission to "Americanize" and "assimilate" indigenous peoples who were, from the Federal point of view, so obviously in need of radical transformation or, as they put it, "uplifting."

The commissioner of education for the territory wrote in 1900, "We have no higher calling in the world than to be missionaries to those people who have not yet achieved the Anglo-Saxon frame of mind."

The Native People were never consulted about what was good for them. Being remade in the image of the White Man was so obviously "good" for everyone, it seemed.

Shocking as this narrow ethno-centric attitude might appear 80 years later, several issues reported in the Fairbanks NEWS-MINER seem to echo these biased attitudes today.

The supposed "failure" of Native students in this school district to meet various standards in national achievement tests represents another attempt to impose the same cultural criteria on an unreceptive minority.

The tests prove only that either Native students are learning something other than what these tests measure or that our schools are failing miserably to provide equal educational opportunity to all students.

To construe the test results as "proof" that Native students, "contaminated" by exposure to a second language or set of cultural values, are "inferior" is not only illogical but blatantly racist. Native parents have been denied the opportunity to determine the curriculum and criteria they want for their children. Federal, state and local agen-

cies have assumed that they know what is best for them, without Native participation in most cases for nearly one hundred years. This is tyranny, not democracy.

The dominant society has been determining the fate of Native Americans for so long that it is not surprising some members of the Native community have become anxious about their fate. Anxiety and frustration give way in time to anger, bitterness and hostility.

After being whipped or having had their mouths washed out for speaking their own language — one of the twenty truly American languages indigenous to Alaska — after having their children removed from their homes, not for hours or days, but for months and even years (in order to "educate" [assimilate] them), after being taught that insofar as they differed from Anglo-European norms they were "uncivilized," their anger is, I believe, understandable.

If this fury has for some erupted in an irrational anti-social or self-destructive act, our society knows just how to deal with such people — LOCK THEM UP!

Our prison population is 40 percent Native, and racists will no doubt cite this as additional "proof" of Native "inferiority."

But only the prejudiced and ignorant can attribute the accelerating cycle of violent and self-destructive behavior among the Native population to anything but the results of a century of deliberate cultural, political and economic injustice. The government has supported and encouraged their cultural extermination and seems willing to imprison or institutionalize the survivors.

We are "helping" the Native People, quite literally, to death.

Now the Native inmates here in Fairbanks, some of whom were sent out of state before their twelfth birthday to be institutionalized in the name of education, are trying to organize a cultural club within the

Fairbanks jail.

All the other major prisons in the state have such an organization and the administrations there recognize these clubs as a legitimate part of their own social and educational programs. If a group of Korean, Japanese, or perhaps German inmates wanted to gather once a week to sing old songs, eat some of their national foods and pray according to their traditions, I doubt if the gathering would have attracted anything like the violent opposition the Native prisoners have encountered here — with five men put into maximum security cells for attempting to gather their brothers for mutual support, encouragement, songs, and stories.

One man, Byron Charles, still is being held without any disciplinary charges officially lodged against him for his efforts to organize such a club.

The survival of Native culture seems to strike the prison administration as a defiant insult: How dare these people persist in their beliefs and customs after all our efforts to "enlighten" and "uplift" them! The mostly unspoken assumptions and tactics that have been employed "outside" are more blatantly and brutally enforced "inside" the prison.

Back in October of 1898, the Orthodox Christian bishop of Alaska Nicholas wrote to President McKinley when American forces had only recently invaded two Caribbean islands, and asked rhetorically, "Will you be acting consistently if, while waging war for liberty in Cuba and Puerto Rico for human rights and liberty, you ignore these things at home, in part of your own country . . .?"

An orthodox Christian pastor in Fairbanks is asking the authorities today the same question. Can any of us recite the last six words of the Pledge of Allegiance without hypocrisy, knowing that this type of policy continues in effect right here in Fairbanks?

Sincerely,

(Rev.) Michael J. Oleksa