

The Carter disappointment

It's not a time when traditionally Democratic-voting Indian people are automatically in President Jimmy Carter's corner, although he drew the overwhelming Indian vote in 1976. His fortunes with the rest of the citizenry are reflected in his collapsing fortunes with Indian people.

. . . Carter promised during his campaign in a special meeting with Indian leadership in Albuquerque, N.M. to uphold the sovereign powers of tribes and to consult with the leadership on all major decisions affecting tribes if he were elected. His campaign staff issued a list of commitments to tribes just a few weeks before the national elections. Indians voted.

Since his inauguration — unlike any President of either political party since the 1930's — he has announced no public policy on Indian affairs, delaying on appointing a head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for seven months, and has effectively locked out Indian access to the White House.

Carter's White House is taking an ad hoc "task force" approach to top Indian issues such as the Northwest Fish War, the 16 million acre Maine land claim, and the Catawba claim in South Carolina. No policy — just working groups of lawyers who are working out a modicum of compromise. One staffer claimed: "We work on a problem-by-problem basis." That's the politics of pragmatism, not policy. Unless it constitutes a policy itself to have no policy.

. . . A stage-managed attempt to create an instantaneous and artificial "American Indian Forum" several months ago ignored the national Indian organizations and natural political formations among Indian people.

... It's a dark day: without policy, without presidential leadership — and apparently without principle.