

September's Swing To Sovereignty

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"We will look at the whole bureaucracy with regard to the handling of Indian affairs and shake it up, and shake it up very good. Frankly, when you look at how we have handled the Indian problem over the history of this country, it is a disgrace. And much is due to the fact that the bureaucracy feeds on itself, defends itself, and fights for the status quo and does very little, in my opinion, for progress in the field."

RICHARD M. NIXON (September 25, 1971)

WASHINGTON, D.C.—(AIPA)—The overture of the Indian sovereignty revolution is suddenly and unexpectedly complete after a series of unprecedented September events.

Tenuous and fragile as that revolution for self-rule remains, its impact on policy-makers in the nation's capitol was stunning. For in the first time in this century the nation's scattered Indian peoples rallied over common causes in a rare political alliance and set the White House itself on a different course.

The most visible effects of that alliance are a new Indian Water Rights Office to be established in Washington, D.C. a national advisory board of reservation and urban peoples to counsel the Indian Bureau and Interior Secretary on Indian policies and programs, and a pledge by Interior to the National Congress of American Indians and the National Tribal Chairmen's Association that they will review the BIA budget for next year before its approval by Interior Secretary Rogers C.B. Morton.

The invisible effects are the subtle shifts in personal relationships of those in authority in Indian affairs here, while personnel reassignments remain in the offing.

In the brief period of a single month's time, both urban and reservation Indians appeared to coincide in common causes of concern, appealing both to the nation and its architects of Indian policy in an unparalleled series of developments. September's developments were these:

—The NCAI initiated a policy assault on the White House in the first week of September, charging the administration with a breach of promise in six major areas of national Indian concern, and stating that until the President reasserted his announced policies both in terms of programs and personnel, the faith of American Indians was "shaken."

—The new association of elected tribal leaders (NTCA) gathering in the Navajo bailiwick of Window Rock, Arizona, on September 10, heard Navajo Chairman Peter MacDonald lacerate "old-line appointments" within Interior and the Bureau. MacDonald also assaulted some recent appointees by name within those agencies who appeared to him to be stalling—and in some cases reversing—announced policies concerning Indian sovereignty.

MacDonald, an articulate Southwest leader whose political star is rising rapidly across the country, further proposed an Indian "truth network" nationwide to accost federal officials around the country in their public appearances with the "alternate truth" of Indian realities.

MacDonald proposed independence of the Indian Bureau from Interior, under "receivership" status in the Executive Office of the President as long as Indian existence and Indian rights were imperilled by conflicts of interest within the Interior Department. MacDonald stung Morton appointees by labelling them a "Super BIA" at odds both with the nation's Indians and Commissioner Bruce's innovative new Indian team, and demanded dismissal of the Super BIA as a cardinal feature of the administration's sincerity on its announced Indian policies.

—Militant actions in the lobby of the Bureau on the morning of September 22—a symbolic citizen's arrest of Deputy Commissioner John O. Crow for a series of alleged offenses—thrust the administration into a flurry of bad press and a paroxysm of self-doubt.

Police violence witnessed by the press (at first barred from the building) and the insistence by Bruce that charges against the 26 arrested Indian persons be dropped and Interior assist in their early release extended White House worry into late-night sessions with Interior. Traditionally conservative tribal chairmen then in the city endorsed the militant action by the American Indian movement and the National Indian Youth Council, and declared an unprecedented unity of purpose with the activist Indian young.

—The capstone to the edifice of policy revaluation was a White House request for position papers and program particulars concerning specific areas of Indian protest. Those areas were defense of Indian water rights, personnel matters relating to the hiring and promotion of Indians within top positions in the Bureau, the letting of contracts concerning Indian operation of social institutions such as schools and projects, and the construction of roads linking the political, social, educational, health and economic centers of of reservations.

In a special Interior press conference Oct. 4, Morton

(Continued on page 7)

Sovereignty...

(Continued from page 2)

announced implementation of all of the above areas except personnel. A Bruce memo concerning Indian preference is currently in Interior's Solicitor's Office for review of the matter. Changes of Washington personnel, however, are in the works, to be announced shortly.

Tribal and organizational Indian leaders, meanwhile vowed to monitor the apparent reinstatement of the Nixon Doctrine, and the activist leaders pledged a sharp eye on Washington to detect any slippage.

Personnel changes in the coming weeks will be one one significant clue to the implementation of Indian sovereignty nationwide; whether, in a phrase from the MacDonald speech in Window Rock, Indians will remain on a collision course with the government, or pledges become performance.