

Rivers Presents Side On Claims

Message from Congressman Ralph J. Rivers to the
Northwestern District Democratic Convention at
Kotzebue, Alaska, June 25, 1966

Mr. Chairman, Delegates and fellow Democrats:

The House of Representatives is now in the process of winding up action on a number of important measures prior to a scheduled two-week 4th of July recess. As several of my pending bills are in line for action, I find it impossible to get away from my congressional duties here in Washington, D.C. to join you in person at this convention, much as I would like to. I do expect to be in Northwestern Alaska about the middle of July.

Since I can't be with you personally on this occasion, I take this means to extend my warm greetings and best wishes to all of you and to convey my message in writing in the same text as though I were there to speak to you in person. Recalling my recent visit to Kotzebue and my look at the fine new improvements in that growing community, and recalling the warm hospitality which I received while there, I doubly regret my inability to attend this convention.

As a life-long Democrat who has been in public service at all levels of government over a period of many years, I realize the efforts and dedication to the general welfare of all of you—delegates and others who are present at this Democratic convention. Your presence here confirms the historical role of the Democratic Party as the party of the people, the party of progress, and the promoter of the public interest.

Now on the more personal side, I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight in regard to my position on the subject of aboriginal land claims—a subject vital to all of us and to all of Alaska. I assume all of you are aware of the fact that the Arctic Slope Native Association has publicly stated that I have "advocated the extinction of all Native claims by national legislation" and that "this makes (me) unworthy of a single Native vote."

At best, this is an example of over-simplification and careless misunderstanding stemming from the fact that this organization did not first ask me for any clarification of my remarks as previously reported in the TUNDRA TIMES of November 19, 1965. There was nothing in that article which denied the justice and advisability of appropriate allotments of public land surrounding each village in any given area. Furthermore, the article did speak of payment for settlement of the claimed land rights. Obviously, a newspaper interview could only cover general outlines and could not reflect my thoughts as to the details.

So, for the record, here are my more detailed views.

I have always felt that, under the doctrine of occupancy and historic use, each Native village should have ample public land assigned to it to meet community needs and growth and to enable area economic development. Such allotment or transfer of land to the village could be in partial satisfaction of its claims based upon occupancy and historic use. The claims to acreage beyond the area conveyed to the village could be paid for by the federal government in cash to the village, for community purposes, or to the villagers on a per capita basis—whichever they wish.

Working in this direction and to help secure expeditious action so that our Native citizens all over Alaska would not have to wait 30 years for a settlement—as have the Tlingits and Haidas in Southeastern Alaska—I asked the Department of Interior, three years ago, to submit an overall plan with a draft of proposed legislation providing for a fair and just settlement of Native land claims all over Alaska. As yet, the Department has been unable to come up with such a plan. Recently Senators Bartlett and Gruening and I met again with Department of the Interior officials to press for action.

Thus, instead of working against my fellow Alaskans who are Natives, as charged by the Arctic Slope Native Association, all my efforts have been directed toward helping them. The only way my view differs from that of the Association is that I don't agree with their demand that an area so vast as the 96 million acres north of the Brooks Range—or, in fact, similarly over-large areas elsewhere—should be entirely set aside for the exclusive use of any group of Alaskans. I fear that such withdrawals of vast areas of public land would divide Alaskans, cause ill-will, hamper general development in our new state, and prove to be a wrong policy in the long run.

Regarding the published endorsement of my opponent in the Primary Election by the Arctic Slope Native Association, I have read my opponent's reported response which was—"I am flattered to have the endorsement of this group." I would feel the same way about such a valuable endorsement. The question is—What would he do for them in return? Would he, for example, work for transfer to them of the entire 96 million acres north of the Brooks Range for their exclusive use? If he has made such a commitment, he should publicly promise such action in a statewide release and thereby precipitate a clear-cut issue in his primary race against me to obtain the Democratic nomination for Alaska's sole seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

For my part, I promise to work for a balanced solution of this difficult land problem, beneficial to our Native people yet sufficiently compatible with the general public interest to be legislatively feasible. As we all know, legislation is the art of the possible. Accordingly, I will work for results most favorable to our Native people within the bounds of the possi-

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ble. It is my studied conclusion that instead of legislative success, only prolonged strife and deadlock can come from demands for massive land grants for the exclusive use of any particular group. Thus, it seems to me that a more moderate approach will be necessary in order to obtain a generally acceptable solution. Securing such a result would be to the benefit of all concerned.

Over the years I have had the interest of our Native people at heart. I have worked hard for them by sponsoring legislation in their behalf and pleading their cause before executive agencies. As examples I cite the following: Passage of a bill to make natural gas available as fuel for the people of Barrow; passage of a bill to authorize townsites and the appointment of townsite trustees for communities located on mineral land within the Navy's Petroleum Reserve No. 4 and authorizing issuance of unrestricted deeds to the occupants of the lots within such townsites, including Barrow and Wainwright; and passage of a bill to authorize per capita payments to the Native people of Southeastern Alaska—the Tlingits and the Haidas—of the money about to be awarded to them by the Court of Claims as compensation for extinguishment of their land claims by virtue of the establishment of the Tongass National Forest.

I am now sponsoring in the House bills to obtain more and better housing for our people in rural communities, and to effectuate more freedom and a better life for the people of the Pribilof Islands. I am also making progress on a bill to authorize conveyance of unoccupied Federal land within the townsite of Barrow to the City of Barrow.

On the administrative front, I spoke for my fellow Alaskans when I protested vigorously against Department of Interior action which would have stopped our Eskimo people from hunting migratory birds for food during parts of the year. In the course of events, I also helped persuade the Bureau of Indian Affairs to build boarding school facilities to be operated in connection with the William Beltz Vocational School near Nome; I helped the people of Nome, many of whom are Native, to get a public water distribution system and necessary sewers; I have encouraged the BIA to do more in regard to public health by providing improved facilities such as the fine new hospital at Barrow; I have emphasized the need for an adequate high school program to afford an opportunity for every young person graduating from primary school in the villages to get a high school education; just lately I urged that the regulations governing the administration of the Indian Allotment Act be revised and liberalized to make it easier for individual Natives applying under said law to get 160 acres, either in one tract or up to four smaller tracts. The Secretary of Interior has recently issued such liberalized regulations.

In closing, I would like to leave with you this thought: My record of effort and constructive results in behalf of ALL of my constituents—from one end of this vast state to the other—should speak for itself. It is a record of which I am proud. Add to that record the value of the congressional seniority which I have attained through my years of continuous service as Congressman and you already HAVE a U.S. Representative experienced in the complex workings of the Congress, known and respected by his colleagues on both sides of the aisle, and holding the power and influence which comes only through such long service, experience and seniority.

Thank you, fellow Democrats and fellow Alaskans.