

Letters from Here and There

The Catholic University
of America
Washington, D.C. 20017

Dear Editor:

For the past few years I have enjoyed the friendship of many native leaders when they have been in Washington, D.C. and even worked for a couple of months this summer as a volunteer helping the AFN any way that I could. I have usually tried hard to mind my own business and not to impose my ideas on others but that is not easy for a teacher to do. I understand that there is a great deal of confusion about this bill right now and for what they are worth I would like to toss in a few ideas which have arisen from my personal concern over the ultimate consequences of this bill on the future happiness of the native people.

I think that anyone who has been to Washington D.C. knows what happens when a minority is forced to immigrate to the cities. Not only are the streets unsafe but many of these poor people are miserable. I don't like to see that happen to Alaskan natives to the cities either but it is already rapidly coming about and the projects I have seen in Anchorage closely resemble the slums down here. I personally know that many of these people had to move to the city because they became dependent upon cash and they couldn't afford to live in the village where prices were too high and there was too little work. I believe that anyone who thinks about the matter for a few minutes will realize that pumping money into the villages will increase the dependence that many have on cash and may actually cause prices to go higher there. This will in turn result in many moving to the city where they will certainly have problems both economic and social.

Some say this can't be helped but I won't buy that. It can be if native leaders are willing to deliver themselves from the hands of the lawyers and invest in the future of their people. It is so simple; just reduce the cost of living in the villages by subsidizing the cost of transportation of goods to the village. They do that with farm goods down here and in army PX's all over the world. Alaskan natives have really been paying an enormous tax for not having roads and this puts their economic base way out of line with the rest of society. Make the price of bread and stove oil and canned goods the same as in the city and the people will stay in the village. All other programs of welfare, housing and starting industries will cost less and have a better chance of working. It will not put hot money into peoples hands nor substitute for incentive to earn. This plan would work in a village, a region or the entire state. The native people expect to get something for their land and they are going to be disappointed now and mad as hell later on with their leaders and the government if they don't deliver.

Sincerely,
James H. McAlear, Assoc. Prof.

Box 912
Ketchikan, Alaska 99901
December 22, 1971

Dear Sir:

Now that the Alaska Native Land Claims bill has passed and much of the furor surrounding it has died down, I'd like to comment on something that, while only incidental to the Claims bill, is of direct concern to Alaskans with regard to our Congressional delegation.

A couple of weeks prior to passage of the bill, I became concerned about some provisions of the bill as reported in the press. Accordingly, I attempted to call the various members of the delegation to express my concern. With the time difference between Ketchikan and Washington, they were not in their offices so I tried to reach them at home. Imagine my dismay when the operator told me Senator Stevens had a home phone but had requested that the number not be released. The same was true of Senator Gravel. Only Representative Begich had a listed home telephone and I did talk to him at some length.

We in Alaska have always been proud of the fact that, due to our small population, our public officials were readily accessible to the Alaskan man on the street with problems or opinions to talk about. Most state officials are still accessible by telephone and Congressman Begich, in the true Alaskan tradition, seemed most happy to receive my call. But what about Stevens and Gravel? Surely the number of Alaskans who are willing to pay for a call to Washington are not so many that they would become a problem. Or is it that they feel they are somewhat "above" the man on the street or previous office holders? Let us hope other public officials don't begin to follow their example and try to isolate themselves from the public.

Yours truly,
Warren L. Bienek