

Other Voices—

Generous With Whose Land?

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The New York Times' editorial on July 19 entitled, "Generous With Whose Land?," pinpointed the general feeling of the native people of Alaska in regard to the U.S. Senate version of the native land claims bill it passed recently. Outside of Senator Fred Harris and Senator Edward Kennedy, the senators, it is clear, are still infused with the idea that there is no life like the Lower 48 is leading. Assimilate! That is the watchword. The way the bill was passed, it would be the first step toward assimilation of the native people which, in doing so, would be forced to shed their fine traditions that have given them spirit and strength through the ages.)

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The Senate's proposal for settling the claims of Alaska's native population is too limited to be an act of national generosity and too narrowly conceived to be a social breakthrough. It would give to each of the state's Eskimos, Aleuts, and Indians some \$12,000, a third of which he would get in the form of services and two-thirds in shares which should yield him a few hundred dollars a year in dividends and which he could sell in 12 years.

Both money and services would no doubt be welcome but they are not what the natives by and large need or want. The money, which incidentally goes only to those living at the time the measure becomes effective, would not last, and the life of the villages is not essentially based on money in any case. What the native wants is land for hunting and fishing, land that he has a right, after millennia of occupation, to think of as his own and not as a gift from Washington.

On this score the bill is far less than adequate. At present the natives of the village of Minto, for example, have some 750,000 acres over which they roam in the course of earning their livelihood. Under the Senate bill these villages would be guaranteed as their own communal property, no more than 50,000 acres, which is totally inadequate for support. True, they might be free to hunt and fish in the surrounding area—but in time they probably would not. At best they would have to compete in such areas with white hunters up for the sport; at worst they could be denied access entirely. The free roaming that the Indians of the West were vaguely promised turned out to be no freedom at all as the white man closed in.

Perhaps the gravest criticism of the bill is that a well-meaning effort to break up the pattern of native enclaves and absorb the villages in to the general culture and economy of the state, it would seriously weaken a way of life that the Government has neither the need nor the right to destroy.

Expanding the land grant to forty-million acres, as the Alaskan Federation of Natives asked and Senator Harris of Oklahoma fought to do, would typically give Minto villagers the assurance of some 325,000 acres. That is half their present hunting territory, but ample to preserve the environment their ancient culture requires. A grant of forty-million acres, by the way, would be no more than one-ninth of the state's area.

By improving considerably on the Senate's generosity, the House can do a unique service. It can make the United States the first country to offer a minority people the respect of one civilization for another rather than the condescending opportunity to assimilate.