

Reagan's Indian policy no help to us

By Tony Kaliss

Recently, President Reagan's first Indian Policy Statement placed Native Americans in the Administration's bigger picture. "The nation's economic health — and that of the tribes — depends on adopting this administration's full Economic Recovery Program" The message was restated from the Interior James Watt: Indians should be given "freedom . . . liberty . . . their rights" and once liberated they will "go out and get a job."

In five words between hyphens and with a plea for liberation the Administration proposes to place the future of Native American peoples in the hands of free enterprise. Yet it was protection from the unrestrained forces of free enterprise that tribes expected when they made treaties with the United States in return for which they gave up most of their land base. This established the unique relationship Native Americans have with the federal government for their survival as peoples and nations, a relationship the Administration seems neither to understand nor recognize.

Over the years yet another form of dependency, strongly opposed by the tribes, was created by federal policies of paternalism, forced assimilation and outright greed for the remaining Indian-held resources. The Reagan Administration would end this dependency by cutting "socialistic" programs of aid to tribal governments and by removing barriers to the operation of private enterprise on the reservations. Tribes will survive by selling their remaining natural resources, and, as the Bureau

of Indian Affairs states, "the private sector [will be] the major development force on Indian reservations as elsewhere." Ken Smith, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, sees "a silver lining" in the budget cuts since they will force tribes to move in this direction.

Survival as a people is threatened when the Administration proposes to reduce or end important parts of programs that provide basic support for tribal government, community services, and education and health services to tribal members.

When the role of tribal government is reduced to "fostering an atmosphere of governmental stability that promotes confidence and attracts private sector capital," and the Secretary of the Interior believes Indians are held against their will on reservations by tribal officials enriching themselves on federal Indian programs, it indicates little understanding of the importance Native Americans attach to their remaining lands and to their sense of being a people.

The Administration has yet to show it recognizes the federal commitment to the survival of Native Americans as peoples. References to such a right were deleted from a draft of the Indian Policy Statement, and, while praising Nixon's 1970 Indian Policy Statement, Reagan's Statement nowhere repeats nor suggests Nixon's affirmation of the federal responsibility for "the integrity and right to continued existence of all Indian tribes and Alaska Native governments."

By restricting the federal government's trust responsibility

to things, natural resources and funds, the Reagan Administration can justify cutting services for off-reservation tribal members and non-federally recognized tribes and causing on-reservation education, health, and housing services to take a back seat to the process of "liberating" Indians and their resources.

The Administration does state a strong commitment to tribal self-government and a government-to-government relationship with a number of tribes.

But by stressing that tribal governments are just like any other governments the Administration neatly sidesteps both the special role that tribal governments have — as the expression of tribal existence — for the survival of the tribe and the federal government's responsibility for ensuring survival.

After the tribal resources have been sold off in the attempt to survive termination by budget cut — the Reagan plan for economic development — the last act of tribal self-government could be self-termination.

Since the days of the fur trade Native Americans have been willing to find creative ways of working with the private enterprise system and the government in power, but not at the cost of their survival as peoples.

But survival is possible only if the U.S. honors its special relationship with Native peoples and provides the necessary funds to make that relationship more than words on treaty paper.

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