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Eskimo Administration in Alaska

The year 1966 may prove, in retrospect, to have been a major watershed in the development of Eskimo administration in Alaska. During the 1966 political campaign, the Eskimo voters were courted as they had never been before. The approaches ranged all the way from the tour of bush communities by one unsuccessful candidate for Congress accompanied by a rock and roll band ("I'm bringing you something you want: Fun.") to the promise of the successful candidate for Governor to create a State Department of Native Affairs. An incumbent U.S. Senator authored an Alaska Native Housing Act to improve village conditions and an amendment to the Fur Seal Act to establish a townsite and local government for the Aleut community of St. Paul. Following installation of the new state administration, the Alaska State Housing Authority shifted from its past almost exclusive preoccupation with the problems of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and, to a lesser degree, the other urban centres of the state, to a new emphasis upon the housing and community development problems of Alaska's remote areas (i.e., native and primarily Eskimo areas). The Federal Field Committee for Alaska Development and Planning diverted a major portion of its 1966-67 and 1967-68 research and planning budgets to western and northern Alaska (the areas draining into the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean) and, with the funding of special appropriations and a Ford Foundation grant, the University of Alaska expanded programs dealing with native education both in local schools and at the university. Plans for the establishment of a system of regional high schools better to educate the young people in the remote parts of the State were launched.

This sudden awareness on the part of the non-native Alaskan of the Eskimo and other native people, and the outburst of activities attempting to deal with their problems was no accident, but the culmination of a longer development process which raised the Eskimo from political impotence to political power. Although the Eskimo, as well as all other native people, long had the right to vote in national and local elections, until faced with induction into the armed forces or invited to join the Alaska Territorial Scouts (forerunner of the National Guard) during World War II, the Eskimo was virtually uninstructed in these matters. The Alaska Statehood movement of the 1950's accelerated his political education and several Eskimos were elected to, and served with distinction in, the Alaska Territorial Legislature. But it was not until the approach of the mid-1960's

that anything like broad and effective leadership and political organization began to take shape.

In 1962, *The Tundra Times* was founded and edited by a deceptively quiet-spoken Eskimo, Howard Rock. The writing in this new publication, however, was not the quaint pidgin-English featured by earlier Eskimo "journalists" for the merriment of the white man. This was a voice speaking with dignity, edged with anger when necessary, for the aspirations and rights of the Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut. A new breed of leader began to develop among the young men who had their aspirations raised by exposure to more outside experience and formal education than their fathers had received and who are determined not to suffer the fate of their fathers in a world which appeared to find them superfluous. Traditionally living and functioning in small isolated groups, the Eskimo began to learn from the more politically experienced southeastern Indian the importance of union. Regional native organizations began to multiply around the rim of the state, from the North Slope to the Gulf of Alaska and in the upper reaches of the Yukon and Tanana rivers, for the purpose of protecting native rights in land matters, to protest the adverse effects of the proposed two billion dollar Rampart hydroelectric project, to demand greater self-determination for the residents of the Pribilof Islands. But land was a cause common to all and in October 1966 eight separate associations (four dominantly Eskimo, one Aleut, and three Indian) joined together in the united front of the Alaska Federation of Natives.

By mid-1966, the new native groups by right of aboriginal use and occupancy had submitted, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, title claims to public lands covering approximately 290 million acres of Alaska's 375 million acres, and requested monetary compensation for lands already selected by the State of Alaska or granted to homesteaders and others. At the same time, under the terms of the Alaska Statehood Act, which allows it to select a total of 102 million acres from the public domain, the State of Alaska had applied to the Bureau of Land Management for a total of 17.8 million acres, obtained tentative approval to 7.9 million acres, and been granted patent to 5.2 million acres, most in areas of native claims. In view of the resulting conflict between bureaus in his department, the Secretary of the Interior called a halt to final approval of all land selections within claim areas and halted oil and gas leasing on federal lands to which the State had given tentative approval. The lifting of the freeze will be made when the

Congress of the United States passes a bill defining the rights of the native claimants.

On 16 June, 1967, a bill prepared by the Department of the Interior was introduced in the United States Senate which would empower the Secretary of the Interior to select lands for native groups (not to exceed 50,000 acres each) to be held in trust for 25 years either by the Secretary or a trustee selected by the native group and approved by the Secretary, and to settle monetary compensation claims on the basis of land values at date of Alaska's purchase (30 March, 1867). Native spokesmen objected to the acreage limitation on the grounds that additional land would be required to maintain a traditional way of life, and to the 1867 land valuation on the grounds that compensation at today's market values is needed to develop the resources so that their communities will be economically viable in the future. Underlying all objections, however, was opposition to the additional power over their future that the bill would give the Secretary or the trustees. Accordingly, a bill proposed by the Alaska Federation of Natives was introduced in the United States Senate on 26 June, 1967 which would bypass the Department of the Interior by giving the U.S. Court of Claims jurisdiction not only "to hear, examine, adjudicate, and render judgment in any and all claims" which Alaska natives have against the United States, but would also give the court jurisdiction over both monetary compensation and granting of land titles.

The economic and political impact of the land freeze and the delay in the determination of native rights was immediate and far reaching. The intent of the Alaska Statehood Act to provide the new State with income from land resources during its critical period of initial development was thwarted. The cloud of the widespread title fight also threatened to put a damper on planned petroleum explorations in areas involved. Isolated native claims in the past could be ignored for many years by the non-native Alaskan community (the recently settled Tlingit-Haida claims were initiated in the 1930's, the unsettled Aleut claims for compensation for lands withdrawn for reservations immediately after World War II, the Minto Village in 1951, etc.), but with most of the State now covered by claims advanced by well-organized native groups, a threat has been posed to the fiscal base of the entire State and its future economic development which makes rapid settlement a concern of all Alaskans. It also put the non-native community on notice that the Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut are a political force to be reckoned with. They are not only now

fully aware that they have the right to vote and otherwise participate in the political process, but they have found their political voice and an economic weapon which could prove more effective in advancing their causes than the economic boycott and violence used by the Negro minorities elsewhere.

The time required to arrive at a settlement of native land claims is uncertain and will be determined by the willingness of all parties to work toward reasonable solutions. If the issues at stake were simply land titles or compensation for settlement of claims, it would be difficult enough. But much more is at stake — nothing short of a basic adjustment of the balance of political power within the State of Alaska. It is too soon to draw any conclusions concerning the emerging Eskimo leadership, the true extent to which they speak for their people, and their ability to develop and survive. It is not known if the recent appearance of "Eskimo Power" buttons is intended merely as a passing political joke or if it is serious. But Eskimo political power is a fact and its impact appears to be launching a revolution in Eskimo and other native administrations in Alaska. The Eskimo is demanding that he be a partner in the process, not merely a passive subject.

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