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IV

ALASKA'S NATIVE POPULATION AS AN EMERGING POLITICAL FORCE

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The depressed economic and social conditions of the Alaskan native peoples (Indians, Aleuts, Eskimos) coupled with their explosive rates of natural population increase during the 1950's and 1960's and the prospect of limited employment opportunities in their traditional activities and places of residence have been analyzed in articles of *Inter-Nord* N° 8 and N° 9. Until very recently there was little popular awareness of these tragic conditions, understanding of their alarming implications for the future of all Alaska (not just the unfortunates involved) or concern that something be done about it. This was all changed dramatically by political developments which surfaced in 1966 and 1967 and suddenly made the plight of Alaska's native citizens a concern of all of its citizens. This sudden awareness and outburst of activities attempting to deal with native problems was no accident, but might be interpreted as the culmination of a longer development process which raised the Eskimo from political impotence to political power in less than a decade. All native groups are involved in these recent developments, but it was the political awakening of the Eskimo which appears to have given force and weight to the movement.

Political Development of the Alaska Eskimo. In terms of numbers the Eskimo is the most important of the Alaskan native groups (approximately 53 % of the total 1960 native population), but because of their isolation both geographically and socially, their remoteness from major economic developments (excepting sporadic defence activities), the lack of any tradition of union or co-operative action beyond small family groups, they have exerted very limited political influence. In contrast, the numerically inferior Tlingit and Haida of southeast Alaska very early understood and adapted themselves to American politics. In 1913 they organized the Alaska Native Brotherhood and then the Alaska Native Sisterhood (women had the vote in the Territory of Alaska before it was granted

generally in the United States) and made these effective instruments in Territorial politics and in dealing with the federal bureaucracy. Through understanding, association and a strong unity of interest they were able to exert political weight far beyond that indicated by numbers.

During the 1930's and 1940's the ANB and ANS conducted missionary activities among the Eskimos, Aleuts and interior Indians, but aside from bringing in the Indians at Copper Center, were unsuccessful in attempting to broaden their base to include all Alaska natives. The achievement of politically necessary elements by the Eskimo seemed impossible without basic changes in their way of living, their aspirations and their knowledge. Such changes were taking place, of course, but the extent and rate of changes could not be reliably assessed. World War II and its aftermath, including the achievement of statehood by Alaska, not only brought the twentieth century to the Eskimo and the younger Eskimos to its « outside » manifestations, but political education was accelerated by these events. All Alaska's native people had the right to vote and otherwise take part in political activities from the beginnings of the organization of Alaska as a territory, but it was not until faced with induction into the armed forces and invited to join the Alaska Territorial Scouts (the forerunner of the present National Guard) that the Eskimo was seriously instructed in the nature and rights of his position as a United States citizen. During the war the Scouts companies and units in the villages with weekly drill and instructions provided a concrete evidence of this and became the first political rallying points for these people. The Alaska Statehood movement of the 1950's accelerated this political education

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and several Eskimos were elected and served with distinction in the Alaska Territorial Legislature. The William Beltz Vocational School at Nome is dedicated to the memory of an Eskimo carpenter who rose to political prominence during this period and was not only an outstanding representative of his own people, but also a political statesman on matters of broader interest.

Despite these pioneering developments of the 1940's and 1950's, however, it was not until the 1960's that anything like broad and effective leadership and political organization began to take shape among the politically impotent Alaskans of the north and interior. The Association on American Indian Affairs alerted the Eskimo, Aleut and interior Indians to the dangers to their futures inherent in the State land selection provisions of the Statehood Act and plans for large-scale public development projects such as the Rampart Canyon dam (the reservoir would have inundated most of the lands of 1,500 interior Indians and adversely affected the traditional way of life of Indians and Eskimos downstream) and private leasing of vast tracts of oil and gas lands in the Arctic, informed them of their legal rights and educated them in matters of political organization and tactics. In 1962 The Tundra Times was founded and edited by an Eskimo, Howard Rock, and became an effective means of informing the non-native community and voicing the protests and hopes of the native community.

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 were determined to survive and see their people become a vital part of the larger world beyond the village. At first on a scattered basis, new native associations began to appear in response to what were considered to be outside threats or to advance local developments. The Aleuts on the Pribilof Islands sought greater self-determination in matters involving their future as the labor force for the harvesting and processing of the lucrative fur seal resource. The upper Yukon Indians demanded a voice in decisions involving the proposal to construct a two billion dollar power project at the cost of the loss of virtually all their lands. The Eskimo in the northwest and Arctic was disturbed by the impending oil and gas rush onto what they considered to be their lands. Despite local differences in specific matters, land rights 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.

Native Land Claims and the Land Freeze. By mid-1966 the new native groups by right of aboriginal use and occupancy had submitted title claims through the

Bureau of Indian Affairs to public lands covering approximately 290 million acres of Alaska's 375 million acres (this rose to 370 million acres by April 1967) 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 had been granted patent to 5.2 million acres, most in areas of native claims. In view of the resulting conflict between bureaux 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 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 June 16, 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 settle monetary compensation claims on the basis of land values at date of Alaska's purchase (March 30, 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 their communities will be economically viable in the future. Underlying all objections, however, was opposition to the additional power over their future 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 June 26, 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 judgement 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 effects of the land freeze and delay in 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 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 is a political force to be reckoned with.

Emerging Native Political Power. 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. This was evidenced by the reactions of the non-native Alaskans during the last two years (1966 and 1967). During the 1966 political campaign the Eskimo voters were courted as they never had been before. The approaches ranged all the way from the tour by one unsuccessful candidate for Congress of bush communities accompanied by a rock and roll band to the promise of the successful candidate for Governor to create a State Department of Native Affairs. U.S. Senator Bartlett 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 centers 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 dominantly Eskimo 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 to better educate the young people in the remote parts of the State were launched.

It is too soon to draw firm conclusions as to the long-run form this new native political movement will take or to predict that its recent record of successes will be continued. The new leadership has not had a test which would reveal the extent to which they speak for all or a majority of their people or their ability to develop and survive on the general political scene. This will probably have to await the final solution of the land issues. Much will depend upon the rank and file development within the associations themselves, the extent to which the associations become democratic means of political expression for the native people rather than tools in the hands of political opportunists. Whatever the next steps, however, they cannot be a return to the conditions of the past. Eskimo and native political power is a fact, and its expression a statement that these people are unwilling merely to be passive objects or victims of programs allegedly promoting development. For the short-run, they have at hand in the land issue an economic weapon which already has proven more effective in advancing their political and social status than the economic boycott and violence used by the Negro minorities elsewhere.