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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
AMERICAN INDIAN LEADERS

THE EAST ROOM

3:15 P.M. EDT

Let me welcome each and every one of you to the White House this afternoon. I am extremely happy to have the opportunity to meet with you individually as well as collectively and I am very proud to have the distinguished leaders and the elected representatives of America's Indian tribes here in the East Room of the White House.

I looked over your schedule and I hope from the distinguished speakers that spoke with you that you have had an informative briefing session, not only with Secretary Kleppe, but the others -- those who were responsible for some of the Government Indian programs. I think it is vitally important that you tell us what your problems are, what your needs are and then we can be fully informed as to the right policies and the right programs.

Let me take just a few minutes to talk with you on a personal basis, to let you know of my personal concern and for the needs of Indians and native Americans. The Federal Government has a very unique relationship with you and your people. It is a relationship of a legal trust and a high moral responsibility. That relationship is rooted deep in history, but it is fed today by our concern that the Indian people should enjoy the same opportunities as other Americans, while maintaining the culture and the traditions that you rightly prize as your heritage.

That heritage is an important part of the American culture that we are celebrating in this great country in our Bicentennial year. Your contribution has been both material and spiritual. Your ancestors introduced settlers not only to new foods and new plants, but to Indian ways of life and Indian values which they absorbed.

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This is a year for all of us to realize what a great debt we individually and collectively owe to the American Indians. Today, you are concerned about such serious problems as poverty, unemployment, crime, poor health and unsuitable housing on Indian reservations. I share your concern. I am hopeful about the future and about what we can achieve by continuing to work together.

The 1970s have brought a new era in Indian affairs. In the last century, Federal policy has vacillated between paternalism and the threat of terminating Federal responsibility. I am opposed to both extremes. I believe in maintaining a stable policy so that Indians and Indian leaders can plan and work confidently for the future.

We can build on that foundation to improve the opportunities available to American Indians, and at the same time, make it possible for you to live as you choose within your tribal structure and in brotherhood with your fellow citizens.

We have already begun to build. My Administration is supporting the concept of allowing Indian tribes to determine whether they and their members, in addition to being under tribal jurisdiction, should be under State or Federal civil and criminal jurisdiction.

I have directed the Departments of Justice and Interior to draft legislation which would accomplish this goal efficiently, effectively and within adequate guidelines. They have solicited the views of the Indian community in preparing their recommendations which I will soon send to the Congress.

I am committed to furthering the self-determination of Indian communities but without terminating the special relationship between the Federal Government and the Indian people. I am strongly opposed to termination. Self-determination means that you can decide the nature of your tribe's relationship with the Federal Government within the framework of the Self-Determination Act, which I signed in January of 1975.

Indian tribes, if they desire, now have the opportunity to administer Federal programs for themselves. We can then work together as partners.

On your part, this requires initiative and responsibility as you define your tribal goals and determine how you want to use the Federal resources. On the Federal Government's part, self-determination for Indian tribes requires that Federal programs must be flexible enough to deal with the different needs and desires of individual tribes.

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In the past, our flexibility has been limited by the lack of effective coordination among departments and agencies offering a wide variety of programs and services to the Indian people. Programs serving both reservation and non-reservation Indians are spread across half a dozen different Cabinet Departments involving agencies ranging from the Economic Development Administration to the Federal Aviation Administration.

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As many of you know, this is Ted Marrs' last day on the White House staff. Ted's service as White House Liaison for Indian Affairs has been invaluable to me as President and to the Cabinet officers and, I am confident, to the Indian community.

With his departure, I will announce shortly the name of a person who will assume Ted Marrs' duties in the Office of Public Liaison in the area of Indian Affairs. This appointee will be an individual with responsibility to work with the Cabinet officers, with the Office of Management and Budget, with the Domestic Council and with my Legal Office to encourage the improved coordination of the various Federal agencies and programs that currently serve the Indian population.

As an additional step in this direction, I am also sending a memorandum to the heads of all Cabinet departments with Indian responsibilities, directing them to give priority attention to the coordination of Indian programs. These two actions will help to insure that one and one half billion dollars spent annually on Indian programs and services will be spent efficiently, with cooperation and without duplication.

An important task we can help you with is the challenge of economic development of your lands. I congratulate you on the initiative that you have shown. I pledge encouragement. I pledge help in your efforts to create long-term economic development.

Many Indian reservations contain valuable natural resources. There must be the proper treatment of these resources with respect for nature, which is a traditional Indian value. My Attorney General has established an Indian resources section whose sole responsibility is litigation on behalf of Indian tribes to protect your natural resources and your jurisdictional rights.

Indian leaders and the Indian people have gained an increasing skill in managing these resources so they benefit your tribes and our nation as a whole. I wholeheartedly and unequivocally pledge our cooperation in working with you to improve the quality of Indian life by providing soundly managed programs and a stable policy.

We can make the rest of the 1970s decisive years in the lives of the Indian people. Together we can write a new chapter in the history of this land that we all serve and this land that we all share.

I thank you very much.

END

(AT 3:25 P.M. EDT)