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James A. Joseph, undersecretary for the Secretary of the Interior, speaks to the Alaska Federation of Natives convention

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

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Song by Peter LaFarge

James Joseph said it is a continuing challenge both for Alaska Natives and for this administration to foster a kind of partnership that our founding fathers envisioned in their efforts to form a more perfect union to establish justice and to promote general welfare. He said as you have demonstrated working with the Department of the Interior, the administration and the Congress, the American Revolution was not so much an event in our nation's past as it is a process of fulfillment which leads into the future. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act is an outstanding example of your sensitivity to what the fulfillment of our national goals require. He said they have been convincing in their presentations to the Department, lobbying effectively in the Congress, and demonstrated exceptional skills using the judicial system to block unwanted actions and to guarantee justice. One of the reasons they have been so successful is the fact that they have tried to resolve conflicts rather than intensify them. At a time when many Americans don't propose alternatives to the policies they criticize, the Alaskan Natives have shouldered full responsibility to abdicating policies they dislike. He has been pleased to find that their representatives know what they are against and also what they are for. They in the Department of the Interior appreciate this and they are working in the department to maintain good relationships which have been established. He wants to give them insight into the philosophy of his department and their approach to their responsibilities for Indian affairs. He said when Cecil Andrews was chosen to be Secretary of the Interior in the Carter administration he said that one of his first goals was to create the position of assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian affairs. Last month Forrest J. Gerard who is a Blackfeet Indian was sworn in as the first assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. The occasion was historic not because it symbolized the changing of the guard in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It reflected the beginning of a new era in the department of the Interior. The days in which the BIA was in but not an equal part of the Department of the Interior were over. In the past the commissioner of Indian affairs had to report to an assistant secretary and worked through that assistant secretary to form policy or get needed action by the department. The assistant secretary to whom he reported had many other responsibilities. A spokesman for the Indian interests was not directly in the policy making loop. Now there is a spokesman for Indian affairs in that loop. Forrest Gerard now sits in the highest councils of the department where his major responsibility is to represent the best interests of Indian programs and policies are being made. Joseph said they are fortunate to have a Secretary of the Interior who fully recognized this need and who feels strongly about the trust

responsibilities of the department. They were fortunate that Forrest Gerard was available to become assistant secretary. The process represents a decisive break with the past. It is a new era in which they hope the future of Indians will largely be determined by Indian people. In selecting Gerard he consulted with Indian leaders to gather recommendations. It was their support which led to the nomination of Gerard. One of Gerard's first concerns is to deal with organizational problems within the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The objective is to come up with an affective organization to carry out the trust responsibilities of the federal government, to strengthen tribal government, and to deliver services through BIA programs or by self-determination mechanisms initiated by the tribe. To accomplish this a task force with representatives from the NCAI, the NTCAA, business and non-profit communities and Alaska Natives. The Department of the Interior and the BIA will soon be reviewing the organizational structure. It will also consider recommendations of American Indian policy review commission and other studies of the way the Bureau meets its responsibilities. The BIA comprehensive study and the changes should be fundamental and not just cosmetic. He said changes will be implemented in an orderly fashion to minimize hardship on relationships between Indians and BIA offices. He said he will talk about how the Department views its responsibilities in regards to Alaska Natives in particular. He said they have a unique responsibility and opportunity in regards to the human resources of Alaska. Alaska Natives are relatively isolated from an industrialized society and centers of government. This has allowed the Natives to maintain some of the values and traditions considered important. He talked about BIA's attitude and actions in the past. The Alaska Natives were somewhat protected by geography. This administration intends to treat Native Americans with the dignity and respect that is their due. He commented on the ban of subsistence harvest of bowhead whales. He pointed out the impact this would have on Eskimos. Although the decision and final analysis of the United States government did not reflect the approach recommended by the Eskimos and the Interior Department they are looking for other ways the hunt can continue. The design for a quota is a difficult problem. He hopes for a design based on need. They have been working with Eskimo leaders and they appreciate the cooperative spirit and the depth of understanding they have shared with them. The Department of the Interior has no jurisdiction over whaling but they will continue to be advocates for Eskimos with the agencies that do have responsibility. The issue of subsistence in Alaska can't be resolved by applying across the board policies. They must have cooperation of Natives, state agencies, and federal agencies to achieve a system which will enable residents of Alaska to continue their traditional use of subsistence resources. The cultural and nutritional values associated with centuries old indigenous populations can't be ignored or subjugated to other concerns. In Alaska there is an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past. The federal government has an opportunity to preserve and not destroy the cultural heritage of its people. He intends to do everything in his power to enhance this opportunity. He intends to foster sensitivity to Alaska Native rights and needs at local and national levels. He said indigenous populations are an integral part of the ecosystems where they live. He discussed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and implementation. He talked about the different technical resources as of the Department that will be made available. He said it is important to point out that ANCSA is a Native statute. It is intended to promote Native well being. It is a contract between Alaska Natives and their government. He said Guy Martin told Congress recently that the Settlement Act is a Native bill providing for a full and fair settlement of legitimate claims. The Department of the Interior is undertaking a review of the implementation of the Settlement Act. The review has the support of the state, land use planning commission, the Alaska congressional delegation and others. The central point of their effort in

this review is the conveyance of Native land selections as soon as possible. All issues are getting detailed attention. He listed a range of issues affecting ANCSA implementation that will come to his personal attention. By the first of the year the Department will be prepared to take a broad range of actions to make the settlement a reality. He talked about self-determination action in Alaska. The progress is good but there are administration problems such as tribal definition. He looks forward to coming up to Alaska to see self-determination in action. He said human rights are most important. In the past Alaska was so lightly populated there was plenty for all. There was relative isolation from the influence of growing populations and industrialization. Today a world growing short of natural resources looks with envy at Alaska. Just a generation ago there was little concern outside of the villages and now they must be concerned about what is occurring throughout the world. The culture has changed, some for the good and some for the bad. He said there will be more changes and how it will be dealt with is a test of survival of your way of life - you can retreat or isolate yourselves from the encroachment of population and technology. They have in their d2 proposals tried to protect and conserve a good deal of wildlife, cultural and scenic resources, but they have not intended to lock up the state. He said their challenge as leaders of Alaska Natives is to seek ways of preserving the best of your culture while benefitting from the best of modern technology. He told them whether their heritage lives depends on their determination and their wisdom in preserving their culture. He said the Department of the Interior is committed to being their advocate. They believe in self-determination because they believe in them. He said in today's complex world survival requires interdependence and no man and no culture is an island. They value the close working relationship with the Alaska Federation of Natives. They want to maintain and enhance that relationship. He said they need allies for the struggle ahead. It is a difficult time for Indian Affairs, but they in the DOI are just as indignant about injustice as those that are the victims. They are pleased that some Indian lands once thought to be worthless have turned out to be valuable.

Song by Joan Baez