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Morris Thompson, John Heffle

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

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Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Morris Thompson, said the American Indian tribes across the country have an opportunity to alter or change their relationship with the United States government. New legislation recently passed by Congress opens the door for tribes to have more voice and authority in their own affairs if they so choose. He said he is concerned that the Indian and non-Indian communities realize the importance of the changing roles that is taking place between the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and tribal people. He wants to discuss the issues of the Indian Self-Determination Act. He said the new act has been called the most important piece of legislation affecting the American Indian since the 1930s when the Indian Reorganization Act took place. President Ford called it a milestone when he signed the bill into law earlier this year. It is a milestone that is a long time coming in the 200 year relationship between the government and the first Americans. Historically the government through the BIA and other agencies has provided services to Indian people, but the government has dictated how the services would be delivered and what they should include, who would benefit and how much would be spent. Indian tribes had very little influence or participation in the policy making decisions. All that can be changed if the Indian people want to change it. The unique thing about the Act is that tribes can take it or leave it. If a tribe doesn't want to change any part of its relationship with BIA or other agencies it doesn't have to. Participation is voluntary. If the tribe wants to take part in planning, directing and administering federal programs on its reservation it now has the authority to do so. Regardless of what a tribe decides to do the Act specifically states that no changes will be made in the governments trust responsibility. This has been a major concern of the Indian community. The trust responsibility means the government is responsible for protecting Indians lands. Federal attorneys on behalf of the tribes are obligated to protect tribal assets from those who would exploit the resources. Under new legislation the governments trust responsibility remains intact. Thompson said this isn't simple. There are many complexities to the law. This type of legislation is never easily put into operation. There are some budgetary and personnel restraints and a certain amount of red tape. No one is looking at the Act to serve as a panacea or cure all for all the problems facing Indians in America today. They are aware of this in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They are committed to the changes implied in the Act. They want to smooth the way for Native Americans to assume leadership roles in their own governmental operations if they desire. For the first time in more than 200 years that the U.S. government has been dealing and negotiating with Indians there is now legislation on the books that allows for maximum Indian participation in programs and services now being conducted by the federal government. He said two roads lie ahead with many side paths. Any tribe may elect to follow either one and may cross back to the

other. These changes can be implemented at any time. Today is the time for learning, thinking and decision making. Tomorrow is whenever and whatever the First Americans want it to be.

Jeff Kennedy said John Heffle heads the Association of Interior Eskimos and their affiliated Aqua Corporation. Their association picketed the BIA in protest of the lack of services due their organization. Heffle comments on Thompson's comments about the Indian Self-Determination Act. Heffle said he disagreed with Thompson. Heffle said they never said the Act includes Eskimos and Aleuts. The Act was made to benefit the Indian but they have been trying since they implemented the act when it was finalized. They have not had results with pre-contract work. He talked about the wording of the Act. Heffle said he has spoken at meetings and sent letters to include Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts in Alaska when the word tribe is used. He talked about the wording about village and regional corporations. He thinks the Act ties them to the BIA and the village and regional corporations when they are only stockholders. They are setting up bureaucratic governments with Indian groups. He said the government states that the word Indian is used for administrative purposes only. He said they are slowly removing these people's identity. He said the BIA has been a detriment to the American Indian. He said the basic purpose of the Bureau and this act was good, but the finalization is lousy. He said Congress never appropriated the money for this Act. John Heffle commented on the history of the relationship between the Association of Interior Eskimos and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Jeff Kennedy asked if the Association was competing with the Tanana Chiefs Conference for BIA services. Heffle said he has tried to get them to talk about having liaison officers from board to board and with FNA but they didn't go along with the idea. They are not seeing any disagreements with the aims and goals of TCC or FNA. They want to preserve and perpetuate the Eskimo cultures and traditions. Because they are in the Interior he doesn't think the BIA should forget these people. Their Association is a non-profit group. He talked about getting water for the people in the Eskimo village [in Fairbanks] after eleven years. He said recently they formed Ukluuk [sp.?] Development which is a profit-making entity. He talked about the lack of response from the BIA. He discussed more issues with the Act and being forced to change their ways. He said Congress may have had good intentions, but this will keep the Indian under the BIA.

St. Lawrence Island singers.

John Heffle comments on the Association of Interior Eskimos picketing the BIA offices in Fairbanks. He said the members of their tribe felt after meetings that they were ignored. He said he is a tribal leader and the BIA doesn't recognize this. He said they get empty promises without resolutions. He said it appears that they have gotten beyond the impasse. He said nothing is gained by violence. He feels that AIM hurts itself. He said they only want to go forward.