

155. President Johnson, Special Message To Congress

March 6, 1968

A forceful statement of a new direction in Indian policy which recognized Indian self-determination was made by President Lyndon B. Johnson in a "Special Message to Congress on the Problems of the American Indian: 'The Forgotten American,'" on March 6, 1968.

. . . . I propose a new goal for our Indian programs: A goal that ends the old debate about "termination" of Indian programs and stresses self-determination; a goal that erases old attitudes of paternalism and promotes partnership self-help.

Our goal must be:

—A standard of living for the Indians equal to that of the country as a whole.

—Freedom of Choice: An opportunity to remain in their homelands, if they choose, without surrendering their dignity; an opportunity to move to the towns and cities of America, if they choose, equipped with the skills to live in equality and dignity.

—Full participation in the life of modern America, with a full share of economic opportunity and social justice.

I propose, in short, a policy of maximum choice for the American Indian: a policy expressed in programs of self-help, self-development, self-determination.

To start toward our goal in Fiscal 1969, I recommend that the Congress appropriate one-half a billion dollars for programs targeted at the American Indian—about 10 percent more than Fiscal 1968.

STRENGTHENED FEDERAL LEADERSHIP

In the past four years, with the advent of major new programs, several agencies have

undertaken independent efforts to help the American Indian. Too often, there has been too little coordination between agencies; and no clear, unified policy which applied to all.

To launch an undivided, Government-wide effort in this area, I am today issuing an Executive Order to establish a National Council on Indian Opportunity.

The Chairman of the Council will be the Vice President who will bring the problems of the Indians to the highest levels of Government. The Council will include a cross section of Indian leaders, and high government officials who have programs in this field:

—The Secretary of the Interior, who has primary responsibility for Indian Affairs.

—The Secretary of Agriculture, whose programs affect thousands of Indians.

—The Secretary of Commerce, who can help promote economic development of Indian lands.

—The Secretary of Labor, whose manpower programs can train more Indians for more useful employment.

—The Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, who can help Indian communities with two of their most pressing needs—health and education.

—The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who can bring better housing to Indian lands.

—The Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, whose programs are already operating in several Indian communities.

The Council will review Federal programs for Indians, make broad policy recommendations, and ensure that programs reflect the needs and desires of the Indian people. Most important, I have asked the Vice President, as Chairman of the Council, to make certain that the American Indian shares fully in all our federal programs.

SELF-HELP AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The greatest hope for Indian progress lies in the emergence of Indian leadership and initiative in solving Indian problems. Indians must have a voice in making the plans and decisions in programs which are important to their daily life.

Within the last few months we have seen a new concept of community development—a concept based on self-help—work successfully among Indians. Many tribes have begun to administer activities which Federal agencies had long performed in their behalf. . . .

Passive acceptance of Federal service is giving way to Indian involvement. More than ever before, Indian needs are being identified from the Indian viewpoint—as they should be.

This principle is the key to progress for Indians—just as it has been for other Americans. If we base our programs upon it, the day will come when the relationship between Indians and the Government will be one of full partnership—not dependency. . . .

[Sections on education, health and medical care, jobs and economic development,

community services, civil rights, off-reservation Indians, and Alaska Natives claims.]

THE FIRST AMERICANS

The program I propose seeks to promote Indian development by improving health and education, encouraging long-term economic growth, and strengthening community institutions.

Underlying this program is the assumption that the Federal government can best be a responsible partner in Indian progress by treating the Indian himself as a full citizen, responsible for the pace and direction of his development.

But there can be no question that the government and the people of the United States have a responsibility to the Indians.

In our efforts to meet that responsibility, we must pledge to respect fully the dignity and the uniqueness of the Indian citizen.

That means partnership—not paternalism.

We must affirm the right of the first Americans to remain Indians while exercising their rights as Americans.

We must affirm their right to freedom of choice and self-determination.

We must seek new ways to provide Federal assistance to Indians—with new emphasis on Indian self-help and with respect for Indian culture.

And we must assure the Indian people that it is our desire and intention that the special relationship between the Indian and his government grow and flourish.

For, the first among us must not be last.

I urge the Congress to affirm this policy and to enact this program.

[*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69, 1:336-37, 343-44.*]

Source: Prucha, P.F. 1994, *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, University of Nebraska Press
Educational Material/Non Commercial