

# Indian Camp Protesting 'Backlash'

By CHRIS KENRICK

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WASHINGTON — On the grassy mall that stretches in front of the Lincoln Memorial, a Cheyenne youth with waist-length jet black hair is explaining to a group of European tourists why the Indians have set up camp in downtown Washington.

Behind him, in a fenced-off grassy area of several acres, a group of tribal elders sit in front of a large teepee while a campfire burns in the steamy afternoon.

It is the "spiritual camp" of the American Indians, pitched here this week to educate Americans about resurgent Indian culture and to protest a "backlash" which Indians believe threatens gains made over the past decade.

Specifically, the Indians see this backlash in several bills that have been filed in Congress and in the activities of groups such as the Interstate Congress for Equal Rights and Responsibilities, a loosely organized group supporting countermeasures against land claims.

To Indians, the backlash threatens recent gains in self-help, favorable court decisions on land claims and fishing rights, and their cultural revival.

Only a few "spiritual leaders" are spending the week at the downtown camp. Another 2,000 Indians are camped 12 miles away at the 1,100-acre Greenbelt Park in Maryland. From there, they can take buses downtown each morning to participate in sacred ceremonies and the lobbying of Congress.

The "spiritual camp" is the culmination of an Indian walk across the continent which began Feb. 11 in San Francisco. Called "The Longest

Walk," it was named to commemorate cavalry-forced migrations of displaced Indian tribes in the late 1800s.

Perhaps a dozen Indians made the entire trek. The walk gave the Indians a chance to explain their cause at camps along the way in Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

"It's a spiritual walk, a peaceful walk, something organized in relationship to our own spiritual beliefs," said Vernon Bellecourt, an Ojibwa from Minnesota and a co-leader of the walk.

The Indians in Washington are emphasizing their spiritual and cultural concerns at least as much as their protest against the "backlash" bills pending in Congress, which several congressional staff members said have little chance of passage.

The American Indian population has grown dramatically from a low of 268,000 at the end of the last century. Today it nearly equals the approximately 690,000 Indians thought to have been in the area now comprising the U.S. in pre-Columbian times. According to Kathryn Harris Tjerina, a staff attorney for the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, Indians now have the highest birthrate of any ethnic group in the country.

With the population rise, Mrs. Tjerina said, has come a cultural "renaissance" for Indians, growing out of the War on poverty programs of the 1960s that enabled native Americans to "break out of their dependency" on the federal bureaucracy.

Although a recent congressional analysis shows that "dependency (on federal funds), not productivity, continues to

rise" on Indian territories, encouraging gains are being made in Indian-run schools, health centers, cultural collaboratives, and tribal governments.

Indians also have made recent gains in court, asserting their land, water, and fishing rights defined in pre-1871 treaties between tribes and the U.S. government.

According to the American Indian Policy Review Commission (AIPRC) report submitted to Congress last year, Indian lands encompass some 60 million acres in 26 states, including 5.3 million acres of commercial forest land, 44 million acres of range land, and 2.5 million acres of crop land. Indians have claims to water and to develop their lands, the report said, and they have rights to share in the fish harvest of the Pacific Northwest.

Indian country also holds considerable mineral wealth — some 3 per cent of total U.S. oil and gas reserves, 7 to 13 per cent of the nation's identifiable coal reserves, and valuable phosphate and uranium, according to the congressional report.

Indians' assertion of their legal claims was bound to collide with economic — some say constitutional — claims of other Americans. The collision has forced even liberal members of Congress who long have supported Indian causes to think twice.

"I believe where tribal aspirations collide with constitutional principles, the tribe's interests must yield," said Rep. Lloyd Meeds (D) of Washington, a longtime Indian supporter who nearly lost his 1976 reelection bid over an Indian salmon fishing rights issue.

Meeds has announced his retirement from Congress at the end of the current session, but is sponsoring legislation to

require the federal adjudication of existing Indian water claims, and redefinition of government jurisdiction over Indian lands.

Indian water rights law currently emanates from a landmark Supreme Court case, *Winters vs. United States*, which held that Indians have paramount rights to all water resources which arise upon, border, traverse, or underlie a reservation in the amount necessary to satisfy present and future Indian needs.

The legislation considered most threatening by Indians is the Native American Equal Opportunity Act sponsored by Rep. John E. Cunningham (R) of Washington. That bill would repeal all existing Indian treaties, do away with Indian fishing and hunting rights, and shut down the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"My bill would restore the independence and dignity of the native American by freeing him from the socially destructive paternalism of the federal government," Cunningham has said.

According to Mrs. Tjerina, the Cunningham bill "doesn't have a chance, and probably wouldn't have been paid attention to at all, but it's so threatening to Indians they felt they must demonstrate their concern."

Indian leaders are discovering the bitter-sweet reality of protest marches — people may support their cause, but the government can turn a cold shoulder.

They say that despite three days of parades and demonstrations they have been largely ignored by official Washington.

"Perhaps they don't want to sit down and face the issue of colonialization, sovereignty and treaty rights," said Vernon

Bellecourt, an Ojibwa who is one of the leaders of the militant Indian Movement.

He said the Indians' reception "cannot even be described as lukewarm. It's been somewhat of a cold reception by members of Congress and the administration."

When they marched to Capitol Hill, Sen. Alan Cranston, D-Calif., was the only member of Congress to address the group. By comparison, two senators spoke one day later to a protest rally composed of traveling salesmen.

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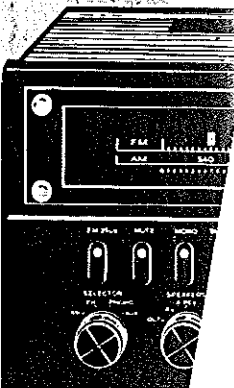
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