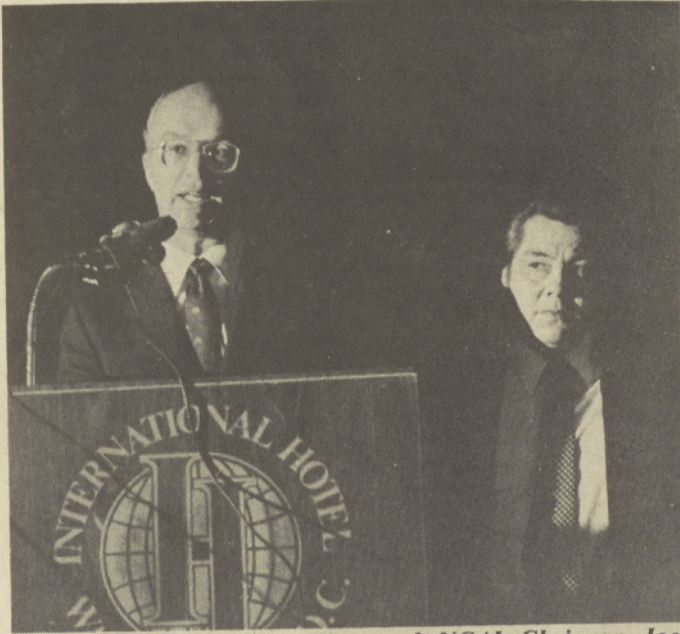


# James Watt addressing NCAI Executive Council



Interior Secretary James Watt and NCAI Chairman Joe DeLaCruz.

**Remarks of Secretary of the Interior James Watt To the National Congress of American Indians Executive Board Washington, D.C. January 25, 1983.**

Thank you for letting me come. I spoke to your Bismarck group and had not intended and never planned that I would speak today. Ken was going to share with you some things, and yet because of the confusion I thought it was important that I appear.

There has been tremendous abuse, tremendous confusion and there need not have been any. I have traveled and I've visited some of the reservations—not all of them. But I have listened for two years. Joe (DeLaCruz) says he doesn't know whether his remarks had an impact on the Indian policy—Joe they did. We heard and we listened.

I'm the first Secretary of the Interior to have ever visited the Navajo Reservation—the largest reservation. I cannot believe that one who carried the trust responsibility for the Indian people would not have visited the largest Indian reservation. But I was told that I was the first to visit it and the first to address their congress.

I was the first Secretary of the Interior to visit the second largest tribe—Cherokee Indian Nation. We met with all the chiefs of the Oklahoma tribes at Tahlequah, I was the first Secretary to go to that Indian country and I listened and I listened intently and I've taken the abuse of a few who were there seeking political attention and headlines and notoriety, but those were the few.

Most of the Indian leaders I have met have a compassion in their heart for their people. And I've worked with those people, I've listened and yet you folks have been abused. And if my words have caused hurt—and I understand last night from the visits I had when I was with the several hundred that were there at that CERT (Council of Energy Resource Tribes) meeting that some have been hurt and I apologize for that hurt.

But I don't apologize for the message because the Indian people of America have been abused by the United States Government for too many

years and we've got to bring about change. Now that change is only going to come in one way and that is that the Indian country leaders have got to carry their message to the Congress of the United States. I have a trust responsibility, Ken Smith has a trust responsibility, and our people have a trust responsibility. We will not be calling for major reform of anything. We will carry out the duties and obligations set forth

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in the treaties and the statutes of this country. But that's not good enough. I don't think that's good enough. The problems are there.

Now other political leaders have chosen to sweep the problems under the rug and pretend they don't exist. They have put them there and said, “well things are getting better, a little bit more money here and a little bit more money there, but things will get better.” They have not gotten better. And there's only one way to bring about change in America. And that's to call attention to it and be honest enough to face up to the truth. And the truth is that Indian governments—the tribal governments—have been abused by the United States Government for decades if not a hundred years. And that needs to be changed and I cannot change it alone. Congress must do it. And we've asked for some changes.

Both Ken and I have focused our attention within the law and within the treaty obligations to bring a response to the message we've heard from the leadership—the elected tribal leadership. And we've tried, and in some areas we have been marvelously successful and in some areas we haven't even dented the surface.

But one of the issues that I learned when I bounced along the roads when I was on the Navajo Reservation, Peter McDonald—I know he sent me on the worst roads he could find, but he did it anyway. And because of our leadership we put in the President's program

a provision that will provide a hundred million dollars a year to build roads on Indian reservations. (Editor's Note: BIA will receive \$75 million in FY 1983 and \$100 million a year for the next three fiscal years). You have never had that before. We've listened, Joe.

We focused our attention on water. For those tribes from the Western part of the country particularly, water is the crucial issue. And I've not seen another Administration ever be willing to face up to the water problems, but we have. And we move at the pace that the tribal government has asked us to move. We will not force anything on them. That's the President's statement of yesterday and last week.

We've focused on education; I think the root problem. I appreciated Linda's (Miss NCAI) remarks last night as well. Linda talked about the future generations. If we have compassion, if we have a heart for Indian people we've got to bring about change. We've got to bring about better education. When I look at the unemployment and the other social problems, we've got to address those problems.

Now yesterday I had what I thought was a very successful meeting with Joe, your chairman. I met with the chairman of the tribal chairman's group, Phil Martin, and I met with Wilfred Scott. I

thought we had a good meeting. We dictated a letter. In fact I sent the three of them a letter that they helped me dictate. It's nice to get a letter that you helped dictate because then you're sure it says what you want it to say. And Joe it said what you wanted it to say. And said that we would be glad to work with you as you folks identify the problems.

As we work with the elected tribal leaders and others from tribal governments we will address the problems. And that Ken Smith and I will dedicate the time to work to solve the problems. But we will carry out our trust responsibilities. We'll try to bring change, but the burden is yours. You must identify the problems, you must bring forward the solutions.

When you've identified those problems to me as I have traveled and as I've visited with you in Washington, meeting after meeting after meeting, we've heard. And Ken Smith chaired the working group that wrote the Indian Policy that was submitted to the President for his approval.

And, yes, Joe, we tried to get to announce it in October in Bismarck. I thought I was going to announce it then. Then we tried to get different meetings together, but the President was determined that he would have input. While Ken is principally responsible for writing it and did most of it—and he did listen to Joe and he listened to the others. And by the way, for the press, Ken Smith is the first Indian from a reservation to ever head the

Bureau of Indian Affairs cause we believe in reservations. That's Indian land, not Federal land, that's Indian land. And it should stay that way and there should be no bureaucrat in Washington running that, it's your land.

But the President wanted to have input in that, he wanted to be involved in that policy. He'd make commitments in the campaign to different Indian groups and he wanted to be sure that his Indian Policy reflected those promises and those commitments and he saw to it that it does.

We will deal on a government to government basis. We will honor your elected officials and we will see that our energies are given to bring about the solutions that are needed. And Joe and Phil and Scotty have agreed to help identify the leadership from Indian country. And let me tell you, most of it is going to come from Indian country, not from Washington, D.C. And we will bring about the changes that you want brought about at your pace.

But there must be change if we're going to give Linda and her future generations some of the opportunities and changes that some of us who are older didn't get. And I'm not happy when I look at the record of what this Federal Government has done to and with the Indian people. And while I spoke out

right, isn't it—under the rug and try to put on a lid and say, “let's hope that nothing happens in Indian country.” I want something to happen in Indian country. I want to solve problems. I want to help people. Now I have drawn the attention of America to the multiple problems and maybe I used some unartful language, buy boy, I got attention.

The problems are yours friends. We will respond, we will carry out our trust obligations. And if you want to change those, it's your show. We will be responsive, we will respond to your initiative. No other Secretary has ever given you the platform that I have given you in the arena. I'm not important in the course of history, but I'm concerned about those young Indian people that need an education, that need to be given an opportunity for jobs, that haven't even been born and that will be born as we prepare for the 21st Century.

Let me talk to you about education. I was supposed to take 8 minutes and run, but, boy, you have got me wound up here, I want something to happen.

Education, I believe in public education. I don't believe in government education. I think that those people living on the reservation are better able and have more concern about their children to run their schools than does some government official in Washington, D.C. I believe in local schools. And you look at the record of the BIA school system and it's not as good as it should be. I don't care how good you think it is; it is not as good as it should be. And I would like to have better education and I think that Indian government leaders, those who live on the reservation, have a better understanding for the children on that reservation than do a bunch of people like me here in Washington. And that's the challenge I give to you. To me the most important issue is education.

And we've addressed some problems and we've had some marvelous successes. We've had some stunning failures. But friends, you're given a golden opportunity, and let me just say something here based on what I've had to go through the last few days—if this opportunity is not picked up by Indian leadership I don't know that you'll ever get another Secretary of the Interior to address the Indian Problems. In fact, if these problems are not picked up and solved with the introduction I've given you to the Congress of the United States, the forces on the Hill will sweep it under the rug like they've done for the last several decades. Don't let them do it. Your people deserve better than the Federal government has given them. Your people deserve a chance. They deserve an opportunity. The problems are severe. I'm willing to address them with you. I'm not willing to address them without you.

*Thank you very much.*