

Statement by Assistant to the President for Press Relations Fitzwater on the President's Meeting With American Indian Leaders

December 12, 1988

President Reagan today met with Indian leaders for approximately 20 minutes to review Indian policy and recognize the achievements and contributions of the tribes. The President outlined his 1983 Indian policy statement, which stated a commitment to self-determination on the part of the Indian tribes. "Indians should have the right to choose their own life," the President said, "the right to have a say in what happens in Indian country. Our tribes need the freedom to spend the money available to them, to create a better quality of life and meet their needs as they define them." The President said, "Tribes must make those decisions, not the Federal Government."

Ivan Sydney, chairman of the Hopi Tribe, noted the new Hopi High School recently completed by their tribe. He asked for similar educational opportunities for other tribes and for the creation of jobs after education. "We have the best answers to our problems," Chairman Sydney said. "We need a helping hand, not a handout."

Phillip Martin, tribal chief of the Mississippi Choctaw, said, "We need jobs, an environment to put people to work." He suggested an economic council composed of private sector representatives, the Indian tribes, and the Government to create employment opportunities.

Wilma Mankiller, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, said the administration policy of self-determination works and should continue. "We are looking for a Federal partnership, not handouts," she said. She called for the transfer of Federal resources to the tribal level for determination on how the money should be spent.

President Reagan thanked the tribal leaders for coming to the White House. He praised their commitment to self-determination and their ingenuity in developing private sector opportunities.

The tribal leaders had lunch with Secretary Hodel and other Federal officials before the meeting with President Reagan. The afternoon session was also attended by Secretary Bowen; Ray Combs, Assistant Secretary of HUD for Public and Indian Housing; and Ross Swimmer, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs.