

Alaskan Hickel No Pal of Eskimos

By Drew Pearson
and Jack Anderson

Several Senators, both Republicans and Democrats, are taking a close look at the man whom Robert O. Anderson, head of Atlantic-Richfield Oil, recommended to President-elect Nixon as Secretary of the Interior.

Gov. Walter Hickel is a close pal of the big oil companies, but he is no pal of the Eskimos and Indians. Yet as Secretary of the Interior, he will handle the affairs of all American Indians and indirectly influence the lives of the Eskimos.

In this connection, the most interesting incident in Hickel's career was his crackdown last summer on an Eskimo fishing cooperative at Kuskokwim, where he used state police and state officials to try to prevent an Eskimo co-op from selling its salmon catch to a Japanese freezer ship.

The full story of what happened is difficult to believe. It shows, however, that the Governor resorted to highhanded methods. His men tried to board the ship, until the Japanese captain refused to be intimidated. Then they buzzed the ship with a plane. Again the ship refused to be scared away.

Hickel then claimed that the ship was entering Alaskan waters without authority. The State Department, however,

ruled otherwise. It stated that the ship had been cleared by the American consul in Kobe, had been inspected by U.S. Customs, Health, Immigration and the Department of Agriculture, and was entitled to pick up Alaskan fish.

Hickel also publicly claimed the ship was violating the North Pacific Fishing Treaty. Again the State Department said no.

OEO Encouragement

The story of Hickel's shocking behavior dates back to 1967, when Alaskan Eskimos, who had been netting around \$500 a year from their salmon catch, organized a cooperative with the encouragement of Sargent Shriver's Office of Economic Opportunity. They were aided by the Alaska State Community Action Agency and the Alaska Legal Services, which works for OEO.

First, they built a small cold storage plant at Bethel, where their fish could be stored to be marketed at higher prices later instead of selling immediately at the whim of Seattle buyers. The latter have taken advantage of Eskimo fishermen by buying salmon at around 15 cents a pound with no extra price paid for roe. Toward the end of the fishing season, furthermore, the Seattle buyers move on to other areas, and the Eskimo fishermen are left with no market at all. They must dry their

catch and eat it themselves during the winter.

However, the cold storage plant at Bethel, built by the Kuskokwim Co-op, mysteriously burned down. So this year the Eskimos, with the help of Alaska Legal Services, signed a joint contract with Mitsubishi International and Kyokuyo Hogeit Ltd. The contract provided for buying the entire salmon catch of the Kuskokwim Eskimos at a price of 33 cents a pound for dressed king salmon and 23 cents for dressed silver salmon. This was double the price previously paid by Seattle middlemen. In addition, salmon eggs were to be purchased for 40 cents a pound.

But when the Akitsu Maru arrived to pick up the salmon catch last June, Hickel reacted as if he were faced with another Pearl Harbor. Completely ignoring the fact that his own Anchorage Natural Gas Company sells liquid gas to Tokyo, he seemed to think it was against the law for Eskimo fishermen to sell fish to Japan.

Secret Conference

When the captain of the Akitsu Maru refused to be intimidated by Hickel's 10 man task force of state officials, the Governor called Mitsubishi officials, into a secret conference in Juneau.

"We asked that representatives of the Eskimo co-op sit in on the conference," said William Jacobs of the Alaska

Legal Services. "But we were refused. It was a star chamber proceeding."

"After representatives of Mitsubishi and the Japanese co-op had sat with the Governor for three hours," said Jacobs, "they came out and handed us a note that they were not going to buy any more fish. We have sued the Japanese for breach of contract, but it will take a long time to iron this out in the courts. Meanwhile, the Eskimo fishermen, who thought they had a contract to sell all their season's catch, are now left with a lot of spoiled fish on their hands. They flew several planeloads to Anchorage, but 4000 pounds spoiled before they could get it frozen."

The Eskimos of Kuskokwim will now have to go back on Federal and state relief to last out the winter. Had they gone through with their plan to sell their total catch to the Japanese, they would have made about \$2000 a year per fisherman.

During the same week, Hickel was bulldozing the Eskimos, the House Appropriations Committee in Washington voted \$1,700,000 to aid Alaska native fishermen. Of this, \$683,000 was for "welfare assistance to Alaskan natives affected by a tragic drop in the catch of fish" last summer. As Secretary of the Interior, Hickel will be in charge of distributing these funds to the fishermen he intimidated last summer.

© 1968, Bell-McClure Syndicate, Inc.