

# **The State of Indian Nations Today: Mapping a Course for the Next Seven Generations**

*Presented by the National Congress of American Indians*

*Tex Hall, President*

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Dosha, Leaders of the United States and Indian Nations, members of the press, and friends of Indian Country—my greetings and thanks to you for joining us at this truly historic moment. Since the time of George Washington, Presidents have offered an annual message to Congress, highlighting our country's successes, and mapping a course forward through the challenges of the day. Today, I am proud to offer this, the first ever State of the INDIAN Nations address.

Tribal leaders from many of our traditions are guided by the principle that a community's leaders must consider—and are responsible for—the consequences of their actions through the seventh generation to come. Seven generations ago, the U.S. was engaged in forced removal of tribes to the lands west of the Mississippi. Today we carry the wounds of that legacy. But today, we have choices before us—this nation, and the leaders of Indian tribes throughout this land, must shape our future course to ensure that Indian tribes and this nation as a whole will face a brighter course seven generations into the future.

I am proud to stand before you today not only as Chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nations, but as the 18<sup>th</sup> elected President of the National Congress of American Indians, an organization which for 60 years has been this nation's largest and most representative organization of tribal governments. I come before you, alongside the leaders of tribes and tribal organizations from throughout Indian Country, to provide our perspective on the State of the Indian nations today, seven generations after some of the darkest days our people have faced. We have come through extraordinarily trying times over these two centuries, and we have emerged strong. Native Americans are the fastest growing segment of the population by percentage—in the face of policies aimed at ensuring our destruction, we have chosen survival. Now we seek not just to survive but to thrive.

A few months ago, Navy pilot John Bennett Herrington made history as the first Native American in outer space, aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavor, carrying with him a Chickasaw Nation flag to honor his heritage. This image is a strong symbol of where Indian and Alaska Native people stand at this point in history—soaring into the uncharted potential of our future, with our strong cultures and unique way of life firmly in hand.

Today, Indian Country is in transition. Our options as individuals have broadened. Our capacity and complexity as governing bodies have deepened. Tribal leaders 100, 50, or even 10 years ago didn't face the same challenges—and did not have the scope of opportunities we enjoy. Our tribes' cultural traditions and unique ways of life remain a deep thread through our daily life. But our generation of leadership is charged with leading our people into an entirely new era with our core life ways intact, recognizing that the contexts of our lives have changed in some ways from those of our ancestors—just as most Americans live very differently than their grandparents did.

Unfortunately, we have come to realize that many of our fellow citizens do not know enough about Native America today to separate fact from fiction, past from present, or reality from stereotype.

Somewhere between the romanticized images of our history and these sensationalized images of our contemporary existence, the truth is waiting to be told, and only we as Indian Nations are able to clearly offer forth that truth. It is for this reason that we come before you today.

I want to raise three of the major issues that occupy our hearts and thoughts as tribal leaders today, so that our fellow Americans can come to better know our realities and stand with us as we seek to build a stronger future for our people. These three concerns are before us: our future survival as independent, self-governing peoples; our ability to move out of poverty and unemployment to meaningful development in our economies; and the well being and quality of life of American Indian and Alaska Native people in this nation for the next seven generations to come.

- **Tribes' survival depends on maintaining our unique relationship to this nation as independent, self governing peoples, and it is of utmost importance to tribes to secure fairness in these relationships.**

**Sovereignty** – One of the most important things to understand about American Indian tribes is the simple fact that tribes are governments—not non-profit organizations, not interest groups, not an ethnic minority. We are one of only three sovereigns listed in the U.S. Constitution, alongside the federal and state governments. We provide many of the same services to our people that state governments do: tribal fire departments, tribal police, tribal schools. We make governmental decisions to protect public safety, stimulate our economies, and ensure a bright future for our young people. Our tribal courts work to ensure that the rights of all are protected in our communities.

**Self Determination** – After generations of disastrous federal policies toward Indians, policies including forced removal, forced assimilation, and termination of tribal identity, America officially recognized, during the Nixon administration, that the best decision-makers for Indian Country are tribal governments themselves. Under that self-determination policy, tribes have been increasingly able to re-take control of our own destinies.

**Sovereignty Protection** – But, as tribal governments, we face a troubling impediment in our ability to protect our citizens and provide basic services. I'll give you just one example. Recently on my reservation, the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, the tribal police pulled over a man who was driving drunk on a reservation road. When the man, a non-Indian, saw that it was a *tribal* officer who had stopped him, he said, "You have no jurisdiction over me!" And he pulled away. "*No jurisdiction over me!*"—and with that, a drunk driver is back on the road, because he is white, and the courts have ruled that the tribe does not have jurisdiction over non-members of the tribe on their reservation. This is an unacceptable and dangerous injustice, period.

We need Congress to help clarify the authority of tribes to set and enforce laws on the lands they govern in order to protect public safety, for the sake of Indians and non-Indians alike within reservation boundaries. We are particularly concerned about domestic violence. Recent statistics from the Department of Justice show that the rate of domestic violence against American Indians is more than twice the rate for the nation – and 75% of the incidents involved a non-Indian offender. We need the ability to protect women and children in our communities from domestic violence.

We are deeply concerned about recent Supreme Court decisions which have clouded these historical relationships, and blurred the lines of jurisdiction at the borders between state and tribal lands. At the same time, many state governments have pushed for increased jurisdiction, encroaching on the long-established sovereignty of Indian nations, or in other words, the right to govern ourselves without state interference.

In talking with tribal leaders throughout the nation, I have found that perhaps the number one issue facing tribes today is this jurisdictional confusion. Tribal leaders have made clear their commitment to protecting the civil rights of non-Indians when they enter our reservations or conduct business. I call on Congress and the President to work with us to develop legislation to address this most pressing problem. These clarifications will benefit everyone, as effective law enforcement for Indians and non-Indians alike will once again be possible on our lands.

***State-Tribal Relations*** – We are good neighbors. Many tribes and states have already developed ways to set aside jurisdictional debates in favor of cooperative relationships that respect the autonomy of both governments. Intergovernmental cooperation often is both cost-effective and serves the best interests of all involved. For example, the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho met with state leaders after difficult jurisdictional clashes on the reservation, where three-quarters of the residents are not members of the tribe. State and tribal leaders have joined together in an agreement that emphasizes settling jurisdictional conflicts between the tribe and the local governments without resorting to litigation.

***Trust Responsibility*** – When you consider that every acre of this country once was under care of the tribes and provided for our people, it is easy to understand what is called the “trust responsibility.” When these lands were taken from tribes, the U.S. gave its solemn promise to protect the rights of tribes to govern themselves, and to provide for the health, education, and well being of tribes. That commitment, the “trust responsibility”—is *not* a hand-out, but a *contract*—and that contract has been broken time and again by the federal government. It is time for the U.S. to honor those promises.

In his time with us in this world, Martin Luther King Jr. wisely said, "In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." The Indian wars are long over. We have many friends throughout this nation. We pray that our friends will not be silent as year after year this trust continues to be ignored and eroded. Mr. President, we know that your burdens are many, but we ask that among them, you defend the integrity and honor of this Nation, make good its word—affirm the U.S. treaty promises to tribes. Restore that trust for the sake of the future of Indian people—and for the sake of our nation’s soul.

**Trust Reform** – Over the past year, one of the issues that has consumed us in Indian Country has been the ongoing effort to secure meaningful reform of the badly mismanaged trust accounts held by the federal government for individual Indian accountholders and tribes. The history of this issue is extraordinary complex, but in essence, the U.S. government appointed itself as our banker and resource manager many generations ago—and ever since, they've been losing track of our money. Today, the system is such a mess that independent estimates suggest that billions of dollars that belong to Individual Indian people and Indian tribes have been lost by the federal government. Fixing this system will not be easy, and it will, unfortunately, be expensive. But it simply must be done.

This is an issue of basic survival to many of our people. Glitches in the system hurt our people immensely—for example, many of the folks in my area of the country rely on the grazing checks they receive for leasing of their lands, a process that the federal government oversees. With the grazing season ending in early fall, checks have usually been received before Christmas, and are heavily relied upon to carry families on lean incomes through the holiday season. But the past two Christmases have been bleak ones for many of these families, as these checks have been delayed and still haven't arrived this year for many.

Somehow, the federal government manages to get Social Security checks out monthly to millions of Americans, effectively calculating complex formulas based on age, days a recipient worked, disabilities, marital status, and any number of additional factors. It has managed this information for decades without fail. Mr. President, what failure of will has caused the system managing monies that belong to American Indians to be so much less efficient?

This is not a problem born in this Administration—but the solution should be. Albert Einstein once said, "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." The problems we face in this arena rest squarely in antiquated thinking that Indian Country need not be at the table when decisions are made impacting Indian lives. We must move beyond that old way of thinking if we are to solve this crisis.

To tribes who have seen this issue fester for decades, the bottom line in any reform effort must be accountability. Please understand that as you seek to reorganize trust management, we are watching with eyes that have seen similar efforts fail in the past. They have failed because they lacked accountability—clear standards, measurable performance goals, oversight by an independent body with power to act when those standards are not met. It is time to do what is right and accept the fiscal responsibility for fixing this problem that has been so many years in the making—before more damage is done. To this end, I propose a two day summit this summer between tribal leaders and leaders within the Administration and Congress to build on the progress we have made in conversations to this date and come out with a concrete map for how to proceed together in fixing this problem that so troubles us all.

- **The second overarching concern we face in Indian Country today is the need to move out of a century of poverty and unemployment toward meaningful development in our economies.**

***Economic Development*** – We have heard a great deal in recent months about the need for “economic stimulus” and we commend the President for his strong statement of interest in the economy during his State of the Union address. But we have been troubled to see that neither the Administration’s plan nor congressional democrats’ counter-proposal addresses the need that exists in Indian Country for sustainable, *comprehensive* economic development.

With more than a quarter of Indian people living in poverty, and unemployment rates on reservations more than double the population at large—13.6% on average, and over 80% in some communities—there is no group of people with a more urgent economic crisis than American Indians. Our infrastructure, roads and bridges, telecommunications connections, and access to training often cannot support our best economic plans. Traditional sources of capital such as lending, banking, and bonding are all but non-existent on reservations.

The piecemeal Indian Country development efforts of the past have been mere band-aids for a seriously suffering sector of the economy. We need a strong, coordinated, creative, comprehensive plan to truly bolster our economies. I call upon our friends in Congress and the Administration to join me in advancing a meaningful *Indian Country* Economic Stimulus Package. We ask you: don’t leave us behind in the economic recovery. Join us in enhancing tribal infrastructure and bringing 100,000 badly needed new jobs to Indian Country by 2010.

Vibrant reservation economies not only help tribes, but increase the economic health of America as a whole. In many cases tribal businesses employ many more non-Indians than Indians. In numerous regions, we are integral to the economies of towns, counties, and states. The Mississippi Choctaw literally have to bus people onto their reservation to fill the thousands of jobs they have created. The tribe is not only the largest employer in the counties it encompasses, but one of the five largest employers in the state of Mississippi. The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe in southwestern Colorado is the largest employer—for both Indians and non-Indians—in the Four Corners area. Strong tribal governance structures have been recognized as key to effective economic development in areas that have consistently struggled for economic stability.

***Infrastructure*** – But the challenge remains—How can we duplicate the success that a small handful of tribes have seen in the vast majority of tribal communities, where roads are in terrible shape, telephone service is not available to many and even fewer have access to computers or web connections? To pave the way for job creation in tribal communities, we must build the physical and technological infrastructure of our reservations.

While states spend an average of \$4,000 to \$5,000 per mile for road maintenance annually, the federal government spends only \$500 per mile for roads in Indian Country. The

disparity adds up to a massive barrier to economic development, with many tribes lacking any way to transport the employees, customers, and goods that fuel healthy economies.

Many Americans will find this hard to believe, but while the rest of the country is seeing the arrival of DSL and wireless communications systems, many tribal communities still wait for the arrival of basic telephone service! Nearly a quarter of rural Native American households - 23.4 percent - have no telephone service. And a larger proportion functions without 911 operator assistance and other basic communication necessities. These facts transcend inconvenience—the lack of communications infrastructure poses a very real public safety threat when emergency services must be summoned quickly, and creates a crippling barrier to economic development.

Tribal lands are grossly underserved by electricity services –14.2 percent– nearly a sixth—of Indian households have no access to electricity. This shocking shortfall is ten times greater than the 1.4 percent of American households that lack access to electricity nationwide. Tribal community residents are generally at the lowest income levels in the nation, but pay a much greater portion of their income for electricity than the rest of the nation. Tribes have a wealth of energy resources—oil, gas, coal, and hydropower—but the non-tribal utilities that own both the power plants and power lines generally use them to export revenues away from tribal communities.

A majority of tribal communities are also experiencing public water supply problems. Just last week the Department of Health and Human Services released a statement indicating that 8 percent of Indian homes lack running water, compared to less than one percent of the non-Indian population. The \$20 million increase requested by the Administration for sanitation construction in Indian Country is an important step toward addressing this problem—but the need continues to outpace the resources available. Forty percent of households on the Navajo Indian reservation have no water except what they themselves haul in. This process greatly increases the risk of waterborne disease. Thirty-three percent of tribal homes, fully one-third, lack adequate solid waste management systems. These statistics are a point of shame to this nation. In 2003, no American should be without access to clean water, telephone service, electricity, or passable roads. I urge Congress and the Administration to join forces to assist tribes in putting the necessary infrastructure in place as a key component in their economic stimulus efforts.

**Gaming** – Perhaps one of the most misunderstood elements of tribal economic development has been the success of a small handful of tribes in developing tribally sponsored gaming enterprises. Just as many states have developed lotteries to fund a range of government functions, tribal government sponsored gaming enterprises are *required by law* to support critical governmental functions such as law enforcement, education, and health care. These revenues have enabled tribes to build new schools where children previously attended classes in substandard trailers, and have brought jobs and the revenues to diversify suffering reservation economies.

Unfortunately, these stories may not sell magazines—so the media often paints a misleading picture. Despite what sensationalized media reports suggest, only a very small handful of

tribes have had extraordinary success in this arena. Of the more than 560 federally recognized tribes in the nation today, just over 200 have some form of governmental gaming facility. Only a dozen or so have generated the kind of wealth that can truly transform a tribe's economy. The majority of tribal casinos that do exist are like my tribe's small venture in North Dakota. It is no Caesar's Palace, but our small casino provides precious jobs to our people, extraordinarily important to the local economy for our entire area. The Chief Executive Officer of my tribal government was a waiter 10 years ago – he now has a master's degree and an excellent career because of opportunities presented by our tribal casino.

Those few tribes that have found extraordinary success have sought to invest in a better future for all of Indian Country through institutions such as the Native American Bank, which provides a vehicle for tribes to invest in other native communities that lack access to capital. But just as successful economic growth in the state of Minnesota does not translate to economic revival for Alabama, economic success in some pockets of Indian Country does not alleviate the desperate economic conditions that still exist for the large majority of tribes.

Indian gaming has provided jobs and economic activity in a number of tribal communities where no other options were available to address the extreme conditions of poverty and unemployment. But gaming is certainly no panacea for the majority of tribes, and for many, not even a viable option. We need other options for comprehensive and sustainable economic development in Indian Country.

**Taxation** – Taxation is key to funding governmental activities at all levels of government, and represents a key tool by which state, local, and TRIBAL governments generate revenue or seek to draw business by limiting taxation. But recent efforts by some states to impose state taxation on sales to non-Indians in reservation communities threatens to cripple tribes' ability to set economic policies. This wrong-headed idea constitutes dual taxation, and would simply make an already uphill battle for tribes more difficult. Creating dual taxation would cripple the already limited economic development options available to tribes and stamp out any of the embers of economic growth we have managed to kindle.

Let me illustrate. While Delaware's tax-free shopping may draw Maryland shoppers into the state, the governor of Maryland would never seek to force Delaware to collect and remit Maryland taxes on sales to out-of-state shoppers in Delaware to "recoup (its) lost state revenue." Yet unbelievably, many states seem to view transactions on tribal land as "lost revenue" in their untiring search for things to tax. My friends at the Wind River reservation—which suffers a crushing 70 percent unemployment rate—tell me that the state of Wyoming takes \$150 million from their tribe in oil and gas severance taxes—but returns only \$50 million in services. Such efforts to treat tribes and tribal businesses as an untapped resource for state taxation are a dangerous precedent. The revenues can do little to fill cash-strapped state coffers, and do a great deal to crush tribal economic opportunity.

**Welfare Reform** – A key component of any effective economic stimulus package for Indian Country should be ensuring that welfare recipients who desire to be self-sufficient have adequate job training, social support services, and employment opportunities. In a time of

state fiscal crises and federal cutbacks, the reauthorization of welfare reform is critical—tribes need the opportunity for direct federal funding for these efforts—we know best what works in our communities.

***Bureaucratic Impediments*** – In our efforts to move out of poverty, we as Indian people must also grapple with more than our share of bureaucracy. Can you imagine buying a home and having to wait years for the loan to close, or the title to be transferred? Indian people don't have to imagine it. We live it. For example, I purchased a 40 acre allotment adjacent to my ranch back home over two years ago—and since that time, for over two years— I have been waiting for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to clear the title on that land. I ask you, how on earth can tribes and individual Indian people spur lasting economic development if we can't secure timely processing of simple land transactions? I believe reform of title processing is one straightforward effort that can go a long way toward improving economic development in Indian Country. Tribal leadership is anxious to engage in reform of bureaucratic processes to ensure efficiency in this arena. Mr. President, we know that you are no fan of bloated bureaucracy. Surely we can work together make real improvements and enhance the efficiency of the government's dealings with Indian people—this can be done simply by funding the Indian Tribal Regulatory Reform and Business Development Act of 2000, signed into law two years ago with the help of our mutual friend, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell.

***Housing*** – One of the areas most deeply impacted by these bureaucratic delays is in Indian Country's housing. I learned recently that Americans lost a collective \$4 trillion in the stock market last year—but they gained \$2 trillion in home equity. Homeownership has reached all time highs for most segments of the population, with more African Americans and Latinos owning their own homes than ever before. Indian Country has felt the same economic losses the nation as a whole has felt in recent years—but families in Indian Country have been largely unable to benefit from homeownership, that one bright spot in our economy. Homeownership is virtually impossible where there is little access to mortgage lending, and the complications of trust land transactions have hurt home buying in reservation communities.

Housing non-profits are virtually nonexistent in Indian Country, and private mortgage lending is scarce. Because of these barriers, federal programs provide the primary source of housing construction in Indian Country. Mr. President, 40 percent of the homes in our tribal communities are overcrowded and have serious physical deficiencies. The comparable national average for such unacceptable living conditions is 5.9 percent, almost seven times lower. More than 220,000 homes must be constructed to ease current crowding and sub-standard housing issues, and large-scale upgrades in sewer, water, and power infrastructure are badly needed.

Recent developments have laid the foundation for huge improvements in these shortfalls in pilot programs and pocket initiatives. With continued commitment to expand upon on these advancements to reach all of Indian Country, we have a good chance of turning around these statistics and ensuring safe, affordable housing options for the next generation. But we must stay the course, and we need your help.

- **The third overarching concern for tribes today is ensuring the well being and quality of life of our people today and for the next seven generations.**

**Health** – American Indians and Alaska Natives have a life expectancy 5 years less than all other races in this country. Our mortality rates from diabetes are more than three times the national average. These are lives, our children, our parents, our wives and husbands, not statistics to us. Until we have the resources to combat the epidemic impacts of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, suicide, and alcoholism—each disproportionately severe in Indian Country—our very existence is at risk.

In spite of this disproportionate health care need, today the per capita expenditure for American Indian and Alaska Native medical services is less than one-third of the average annual expenditure for individual Medicaid assistance, and is even less than our per capita health expenditure for federal prisoners. The documented need for new construction of health care facilities in Indian communities exceeds \$1 billion, with a backlog for maintenance of existing facilities exceeding \$500 million. A strong federal commitment to make good on old promises to provide resources for services, prevention programs, and health care facilities is badly needed to turn around the troubling health statistics in Indian Country. To this end, I call on Congress to pass the Indian Health Care Improvement Act reauthorization and fully fund its programs, actions that will significantly improve Indian health care delivery and increase tribal self-determination.

**Education** – As a former school superintendent, I recognize that economic stability in Indian Country depends on how well we prepare our young people for the future. We take very seriously the President’s call that no child should be left behind in our land of promise and opportunity.

Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and Department of Defense schools are the only two federally operated school systems, and depend on adequate federal appropriations for their school instructional budgets. The Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, once a shameful tool of assimilationist federal policies, are now tribally operated in many cases, offering an important tool for tribes to revive and pass on the traditions, cultural values, and native languages those institutions once sought to destroy.

But many of these schools are in terrible disrepair. In my travels throughout Indian Country, I have seen schools with exposed asbestos, leaking roofs, lack of electricity or even telephone lines. I have spoken with school administrators near tears because their transportation budgets cannot begin to address the actual cost of keeping their buses running on the mud-rutted, under-maintained roads that are the norm in reservation communities, and they face no choice but to dig into their scant classroom dollars. These dollars are precious few—Bureau of Indian Affairs schools are allotted just over \$3,000 for each student annually. That is less than half of what other public schools spend on average per student. How can we recruit and retain quality teachers under such conditions?

Tribes have prioritized education in their communities, and there are signs of improvement—college enrollments and graduations are up. Our children are becoming doctors, lawyers,

teachers, scientists, journalists—even candidates and politicians. Still, About 50 percent of American Indian students never finish high school. 50 percent! In some parts of the country the dropout rate is 90 percent or more. This is by far the highest dropout rate of any population in the United States and it has absolutely got to stop. The percentage of American Indian high school graduates who do go on to college is 17%, compared to the national average of 62%. We have to turn these statistics around—and fast. We have to create productive learning environments for our students, and draw upon culturally relevant curricula that can re-engage the minds of our youth. We need to build on the successes seen in overall academic performance for Indian students where schools have implemented language and culture immersion programs—building self-esteem and a sense of pride in young people that improves their capacity for learning on all fronts.

Mr. President, we invite you and the First Lady to visit our schools and see first hand some of the innovative efforts underway, as well as the challenges brought by decades of underfunding in these schools. We invite those of you in the public who want to get involved in Indian Country to come teach in our schools—the learning will no doubt be mutual.

***Environmental Protection*** – Tribes are deeply concerned about the environmental health of this country, and of tribal lands in particular. At least 170 tribes are located within a 50-mile radius of 432 EPA highly toxic “Superfund” sites. Other tribes struggle with efforts to secure return and clean up of federal sites such as the Hanford Military Reservation, tribal lands taken and utilized for nuclear weapons research and development. The toxic substances at these sites detrimentally impact human health as well as cultural and ecological resources. Few tribes have access to funding to cleanup these contaminated sites, but nonetheless they continue to engage actively in partnerships to protect these lands.

***Homeland Security*** –The Native peoples of this nation have always referred to our place of origin as our homelands. We have a great deal of experience in working to preserve our homelands. One of the missions of the newly created Department of Homeland Security is to coordinate federal programs with state and local governments—but a vital component in this effort to protect our homeland is missing, and that vital component is Indian people and tribal governments. The Department of Homeland Security’s mandate overlooks us.

This major error must be corrected—tribal governments bear a solemn responsibility for surveillance and law enforcement in protecting vast tracts of land, international borders, numerous sensitive facilities, power transmission lines, dams, oil and natural gas pipelines, highway and rail systems, sensitive military sites, and over two million people. Yet none of the funds that the federal government has directed to every state in this nation for emergency response and homeland security efforts are directed to tribes. We are willing to shoulder our shared burdens, but we must be included in the shared resources as well.

Without full participatory rights for tribal governments, a national homeland security strategy is incomplete, leaving entirely vulnerable vast tracts of our international borders and lands equivalent to the size of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Washington, D.C. *combined*. Tribal governments stand ready to work with the Department of Homeland Security, and

with our state and local counterparts to ensure the safety and well being of all citizens of this country – the true homeland of all Indian nations.

**Veterans** – I am a patriot, and as an American Indian tribal leader, I believe in this land and it's potential. Indian people have been defending this land for 500 years—and a higher percentage of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian people have served in the U.S. armed forces than any other racial or ethnic group in this country. Let me say that again: Native people have served this nation's armed forces at a rate higher than any other group. Native people also carry the proud and costly distinction of being the most decorated group in this country's history. These veterans put their lives on the line for this nation, and we owe them a special debt of gratitude, especially as we set policies which impact on their lives.

Corporal Robert Moran is an excellent example of the tremendous legacy of selfless sacrifice—in war and back at home in their communities—by Native veterans. A member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe who served 13 months in Vietnam on an elite Special Forces reconnaissance team, Private Moran was listed as “killed in action” during the war. In reality, separated from his unit and wounded by enemy fire, Private Moran was able to hold off attackers for four hours—an ordeal he narrowly survived, and from which he still suffers significant post-traumatic stress. Corporal Moran now works as the Native Telehealth intern at an innovative telemedicine program that is providing treatment for veterans like himself who are attempting to deal with the long-term emotional consequences of war. Before this clinic, veterans in Corporal Moran's tribal community had to endure a seven-hour roundtrip drive to the nearest VA hospital.

**Conclusion** – Mr. President, members of Congress, and neighbors in this great land we share, American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments look forward to working with you to ensure our mutual strength and well-being as a nation. As a leader myself, I understand the difficulty in balancing a broad range of needs with a limited set of resources—but this year as you consider whether to pass and fund the Indian Health Care Improvement Act reauthorization, whether to provide adequate funding to improve transportation infrastructure in Indian Country, as you make decisions that will have a direct impact on the self-determination and future survival of Indian Nations, please consider what we have given up for this nation—in land, in labor, in lives. We do not exist today in a void—our past and our future span out from us in this moment, telling the true story of who we are and what we can be. If you do not remember the past—painful and sometimes shameful as it may be—you cannot rightly lead us into the future.

What will be our legacy seven generations from today? Will this generation finally end the poverty that has plagued Indian nations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Will this generation choose to close the gaps in education and opportunity for Indian people? Can this generation carry our traditions, our languages, and our lifeways safely into a new era with strong, self-determining tribal governments? I believe it can. We look forward to a bright future for the seven generations to come and beyond, with roots in the past, flourishing in the future, if only we can work together today. Masehgedataz—I thank you.

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