



**Remarks of President Brian Cladoosby
14th Annual State of Indian Nations Address
Washington, DC
January 14, 2016**

A MOMENT OF PROGRESS AND PROMISE

I thank the Creator for bringing us together. My fellow tribal leaders, members of Congress, members of the Administration, Veterans of the U.S. armed forces, friends and partners gathered here, and watching from home ... thank you for joining us for the State of Indian Nations address.

On this day, we meet at a moment of progress and promise in Indian Country. Progress made possible by tribal self-determination. This Administration – and a growing number in Congress – understand that when tribes forge their own paths, Indian Country benefits and America benefits.

Two days ago, President Obama delivered his final State of the Union Address to talk about America’s progress. He said “But such progress is not inevitable. It is the result of choices we make together.”

This morning, I want to reflect on the progress that Indian Country has made, in the face of the challenges we have inherited... and recognize the promise we can seize, by strengthening the self-determination that tribes have always had.

When our ancestors first welcomed European settlers to this continent, indigenous nations had formed a wide range of strong and sophisticated systems of governance.

The Wampanoag, the Muscogee, the Anishinaabe, the Ottawa alliance... all existed long before colonies and states and, ultimately, the United States. There were six tribal nations in the Iroquois confederacy. This will sound familiar to you: Civilian representatives, chosen to serve in a central government, with separate military leadership. Benjamin Franklin said, in so many words: If the Six Nations can do it, why can’t the colonies?

This indigenous framework became America’s framework. As the U.S. government took shape, it continued to recognize the self-determination and independence of tribal nations.

The Constitution puts it plainly. It gives Congress the power, and I quote, “To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian tribes.”

That’s WITH foreign nations. AMONG states. And WITH Indian tribes.

But our right to retain our powers of self-government is not just printed in the text of the Constitution. It has also been affirmed in laws, executive orders, and Supreme Court decisions. Thomas Jefferson wrote to President George Washington – and I quote – “Indians [have] full, undivided and independent sovereignty as long as they choose to keep it, and this might be forever.”¹

This history isn’t taught in most schools. But it should be. Because the relationship with tribal governments was central to the early growth of the United States.

Back then, tribal nations had a valuable resource – land. The United States declared itself to have territorial authority over our lands – and through hundreds of treaties and other agreements, tribal lands were placed in TRUST by the United States government. That is how the United States became our trustee.

It promised to protect and uphold our right to govern ourselves; to support the right and ability of tribal governments to care for their own people; and to help us manage our remaining lands and resources in our best interests. These are not mere agreements. These promises are treaties between nations. Under the Constitution, they are the supreme law of the land – and always will be.

That was the beginning of our relationship. It was based on respect and full of promise – just as it is today. But our relationship hasn't always been so promising.

We have inherited an anguished history that should not be ignored, but understood – so it will never be repeated. Our history produced generations of trauma, poverty, and abuse that we are still fighting to undo. Tribes removed from their homelands. Families forced across the country. Lands and resources stolen – despite the guarantees of treaties, laws, executive orders, and judicial decisions.

Our rights, our needs, and our hopes for the future were denied, or ignored. Many thought tribes would disappear. They thought our cultures would vanish. They believed our people would assimilate.

That way of thinking is carved deeply into the dominant American psyche. It's carved into old, outdated federal policies. It's even carved into stone. Over the Senate entrance of the United States Capitol, there is a marble frieze. A massive sculpture, called "The Progress of Civilization."

It begins with Indians beside a grave. In the middle is a pioneer, lady liberty, and a soldier. It ends with waves of grain representing fertility, and an anchor representing hope. Here is how the Architect of the Capitol's official website describes it: "Indian chief, Indian mother and child, and Indian Grave represent the early days of America."

That sculptor thought a grave represented the fate of tribal nations. It just goes to show: He knew nothing of the resilience of Native people!

We have not disappeared, and we are not victims. We have persevered. We are survivors and we are growing stronger every day. We are thriving 21st century governments, built on self-determination. Yes, our ancestors were central to America's early days. But we are also central to America's present – and vital to its future.

Progress is not built on the graves of our people. It is built with our people and by our people.

I would like to take a moment to recognize those leaders of the past, Ernie Stevens Senior, Wilma Mankiller, Wendell Chino, Joe DeLacruz and so many others. Through their efforts, tribal self-determination returned to the forefront of federal policy.

In 1970, President Nixon addressed a joint session of Congress and said: "On virtually every scale of measurement – employment, income, education, health – the condition of the Indian people ranks at

the bottom. The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions.”

Nixon urged Congress to empower tribal governments to do what is best for tribal citizens. And forty-six years later, we have proven the wisdom of his conviction.

The Pueblo of Isleta now runs its local elementary school – for the first time in over a century, taking it over from the federal government. In those hallways and classrooms, Isleta students are now immersed in their language, their values, and their traditions.

Likewise, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla have reshaped their child welfare system to strengthen families. Now, seventy percent more Umatilla children are thriving with their families in their homes and communities.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes developed new skills training, job placement, and professional mentoring programs. The impact? They cut their unemployment rate in half. As one caseworker put it, “When adults are productive in a family, it makes for happy children.”

And the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa have an Assisted Living Residence, where an elder can lead an independent life – in the comfort of her or his own community and culture.

This is what we see, after forty-six years of progress under tribal self-determination. Slowly but surely, America is re-learning who we are and what we are capable of. Outside of government, a tide of respect is building. Leading companies are engaging with us, partnering with us, and standing with us.

Adidas recently announced it would offer funding and design talent to help schools choose new, more respectful mascots for their athletic teams. Already, nearly a hundred schools have reached out to Adidas.

Meanwhile, the state of California banned the R-word – the name of the Washington football team – in public schools. The *Seattle Times* did the same in its newspaper. I urge other states and companies to join them as they see us for who we are.

Today, we are growing our economies, preparing students to succeed, delivering high-quality health care, and solving the unique challenges facing tribal communities. Today, we are proving that our governments are far more effective than other governments in meeting the needs of our people.

That was the promise our elders dreamed of, and the vision that President Nixon saw back in 1970.

But if we want to make tribal self-determination the prevailing federal policy in this century, we have much more work to do.

We need to modernize the trust relationship. We need to replace antiquated laws and regulations with policies that trust and empower tribes to govern. We need a relationship based not on paternalism and control, but on deference and support; a partnership where tribes continue to meet their own challenges and chart their own path forward.

It's not enough to have a seat at the table. It's not enough to be involved in decisions. We need policies and processes that recognize tribes as true partners in governing. Because Indian Country is the source of solutions that work for Indian Country.

During this administration, we have worked on a bipartisan basis to fix what was broken, build on what works, and create what is needed. There are countless examples.

We fought for governmental parity by passing the Tribal General Welfare Exclusion Act unanimously – so that when we receive a basic tribal governmental service, it's not taxed as extra income.

We fought for health security by passing the Indian Health Care Improvement Act – so we could strengthen preventative care and modernize tribal care networks.

We fought to restore our jurisdiction by passing the Tribal Law & Order Act – so tribes can more effectively investigate crimes, prosecute criminals, and strengthen public safety.

We fought to protect Native women by strengthening the Violence Against Women Act – empowering tribes to prosecute any lawbreaker – Native or not – who commits domestic violence on tribal lands.

We fought to empower tribal control over tribal lands by partnering with the Department of Interior to amend leasing and Right of Way regulations.

I could go on and on. While there are many legal and ethical reasons to strengthen tribal self-determination there is also a practical reason: it works. President Obama has certainly embraced this concept – as President Nixon did. We expect the next president and the next Congress to work with us, to build on this progress.

In this election year, I invite any candidate, of any party: come to Indian Country. See for yourself: tribal nations are building brighter futures for their citizens – and all Americans. While Indian Country is still recovering from generations of damaging policies, more than four decades of tribal self-determination have launched our resurgence. Today, tribal nations are innovating – and leading the way.

With the 2016 election season well underway, the national dialogue is taking shape. I want to touch on four important areas where tribes are contributing to that dialogue: Community security; economic equality; education, health and wellness; and climate change. These are challenges that affect every American – Native and non-Native. They are areas where tribal nations have made significant progress – and our entire nation can, as well.

Let's start with community security.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians created a robust judicial system that incorporates traditional Choctaw values: preserving the peace and respecting personal dignity. Their system features special teen and healing-to-wellness courts that are strengthening their community.

It's one of many examples from decades of tribal government success in building capable systems to enforce our laws and administer justice. America can build on this progress by providing better alternatives to incarceration, well-grounded rehabilitation, and, most of all, effective crime prevention. Let's create restorative justice centers based on Native concepts.

The recent decision by the Justice Department to accept jurisdiction of the Milles Lacs Ojibwe -- under the Tribal Law and Order Act -- is a great step toward improving public safety, and addressing the problems caused by Public Law 280. But our job is still not done. There are so many more reservations that need this federal help with law enforcement, particularly in California.

We call for reauthorization of the Tribal Law and Order Act. Congress should fully fund important juvenile justice programs, efforts to collect accurate and relevant data, and preventative services for all families in Indian Country.

Today, Native women and children experience the highest rates of violence in the country. Tribes need full authority to protect them from harm caused by non-Indians on tribal lands. Across America, states and territories receive direct assistance from the Crime Victims Fund – and it's time that tribes do, too.

Working together, we can secure our communities.

Second, let's talk about economic equality. Tribes are building more equitable, more robust economies.

Take the tribes in the Idaho region. Five tribal nations are among the state's top employers. They boost Idaho's economy by more than 650 million dollars a year – supporting twice as many workers as they employ directly.² It goes to show that when tribes are empowered to govern ... our communities and neighbors are safer, healthier, and more prosperous.

America can build on this progress by empowering tribal governments to eliminate the gaps that persist in income, jobs, and education.

Tribes should be able to collect taxes without placing extra burdens on local businesses. We call on the Department of Interior to amend The Indian Trader regulations, eliminate dual taxation in Indian Country, and empower tribes to invest in the infrastructure and services that make economic development possible.

In addition, tribes must be able to issue tax-exempt bonds. They are an indispensable tool that every other modern government uses to seed private sector growth. Tribal governments must be treated the same as state and local governments on labor issues. And we must ensure that all tribes can restore their local land bases. I want to thank this Administration for partnering with us to achieve this goal.

Third, tribes are looking after the education, health and wellness of their communities. Education is a promise made in exchange for our land. We have more work to do, to ensure that tribal governments are directing the education of their youth – especially on schools located on tribal lands.

We can do this by incorporating tribal culture and language into the classroom; by acknowledging the role of tribal education departments in Indian education; and by ensuring that students have adequate, safe, and modernized schools and environments in which to learn and thrive.

By working together, we can deliver economic justice while meeting a goal we all share...to give every child a chance to succeed, so that students like Dahkota Brown can achieve their hopes and dreams.

Wellness is also critical to achievement. Look at the Chickasaw Nation Medical Center's cutting-edge Diabetes Care Center. Its holistic health and preventative care programs are providing a model for clinics everywhere. America can build on this progress with investments that strengthen the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of every tribal community. For more than a decade, Nike's N7 Fund and others have partnered with us to support fitness programs.

But more can be done. We are asking the federal government to permanently reauthorize the Special Diabetes Programs for Indians, so that tribal communities can continue to combat this disease.

At home, my own Swinomish Tribe recently became the first in the lower 48 to bring oral health care to our people through Dental Therapists. We commend Alaska Natives for being the first to do this. I am confident that others will follow their lead.

Broadly speaking, America needs to do more of what works and less of what doesn't work.

When funding through the Indian Health Service hits delays, it creates uncertainty for clinics, hospitals, staff, and patients. We call on Congress to provide advanced appropriations for the Indian Health Service. We also call on both the Administration and Congress to relieve our communities of the financial burden they will bear under the Affordable Care Act's employer mandate. This simple fix will go a long way to secure the health of our citizens and make sure our kids grow up in healthy communities.

Last – but certainly not least – is the threat of global climate change, which threatens not only food security ... but all of humanity. Some deny this threat even exists. But Indian Country is on the frontlines. We have seen it. Our tribal scientists and elders are documenting rising tides in the Arctic, altered migration patterns, unpredictable harvest times, and the worst droughts in recorded history.

Native scientists and policymakers are working to address these challenges and prevent even worse calamities. Nations from Blue Lake Rancheria to the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe are crafting ambitious plans to limit their carbon footprint, and reverse the impacts of climate change on their lands.

And in Paris, tribal leaders were proud to take their rightful place among leaders of nations. They shared their scholarship and their indigenous knowledge, and helped the world reach a historic agreement. We ask for the establishment of a permanent Climate Adaptation Task Force, in collaboration with tribal leaders.

In discussions about how to mitigate the effects of climate change, manage natural resources, and protect our sacred places, Native peoples stand ready to serve as experts and partners. Together, we can combat climate change.

Consider all we are achieving today. At every level of government, more and more leaders are seeing that the path to a brighter future for America runs through Indian Country. Imagine how much further we will go, as the next class of American legislators and policymakers further strengthen tribal self-determination.

But let's be honest: Progress will not continue on its own. WE must drive it – in the halls of our governments... in our relationships with our communities... and in voting booths across the country. That is how we honor those who came before us – and those who will follow.

I think about my dad who is 82. He carries the Indian name of his great grandfather, *KelKahl-Tsoot*, who put his X on the Point Elliot Treaty in 1855.³ And I think about my grandchildren, the seventh generation since the signing of that treaty. So much has changed in that time.

This is the question before us today: Where do we want Indian Country to be in another seven generations. How about seventy generations? What progress will we make to help them achieve their promise?

It is up to us. ALL of us. Just as it always has been.

Thank you for your time. May the Creator bless you, bless the United States of America, and bless Indian Country.

Thank you.

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¹ <https://books.google.com/books?id=-QkLsa7eMnoC&lpg=PA137&ots=Y9pJF7LiHL&dq=The%20Indians%20had%20the%20full%2C%20undivided%20and%20independent%20sovereignty%20as%20long%20as%20they%20choose%20to%20keep%20it%2C%20and%20this%20might%20be%20forever.&pg=PA137#v=onepage&q=The%20Indians%20had%20the%20full,%20undivided%20and%20independent%20sovereignty%20as%20long%20as%20they%20choose%20to%20keep%20it,%20and%20this%20might%20be%20forever.&f=false>

² “In total, the five tribes of Idaho directly employ 4,641 employees, collectively making them one of the top 10 employers in Idaho.” Also: “When the estimated impacts are aggregated, the sum of all of the direct, indirect, and induced effects in 2013 for all tribal activities (see table on next page) are: [...] 13,840 jobs”

http://media.spokesman.com/documents/2015/02/Idaho_tribes_economic_impact.pdf

³ <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/02/01/brian-cladoosby-nmais-meet-native-america-series-158972>



Founded in 1944, the National Congress of American Indians is the oldest, largest and most representative American Indian and Alaska Native organization in the country. NCAI advocates on behalf of tribal governments, promoting strong tribal-federal government-to-government policies, and promoting a better understanding among the general public regarding American Indian and Alaska Native governments, people and rights.

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