

***“The Pride of Our Nations: Many Tribes, One Voice”***  
***5<sup>th</sup> Annual State of Indian Nations Address***  
***Joe A. Garcia, President***  
***National Congress of American Indians***  
***January 25, 2007***  
***Washington, D.C.***

Introduction

On this occasion, I call upon the Great Spirit to be with us. May He watch over the Indian Nations, and protect the United States of America.

Tribal leaders, White House officials, Members of the House and Senate, Congressional staff members, friends and family, and all those listening across the country: on behalf of the sovereign Indian nations within the United States of America and the National Congress of American Indians, I welcome you to the Fifth Annual State of the Indian Nations address.

As I begin, allow me to acknowledge our native brothers and sisters serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. Whether they are fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan, or standing in harm’s way on our behalf elsewhere, they are constantly in our thoughts and we pray for their safe return home.

We gather here today with so many things to be proud of as Native people: our history, our cultures, our languages, our vast contributions to this great nation, and the great progress we have made in the last century amidst termination policies, assimilation policies and even removal...yet here we stand today, gathered, as sovereign nations.

The State of Indian Nations

My friends and colleagues, I am proud and confident in the strong state of Indian Nations today.

This is because Indians themselves take action to make it so.

It has always been this way. It is the story of our people, and our greatest leaders.

We come from a long line of strong and powerful Indian leaders: Chief Sitting Bull, Tecumseh, Vine Deloria Jr., Ira Hayes and innumerable others who have made it possible for us to be here together today. Their battles, their sacrifices, and their intelligence made possible the legacy we have inherited. We have an obligation to build upon their accomplishments and further the legacy that we will leave for our children and grandchildren.

One of the great leaders from Pueblo Country whose legacy guides me, is Po'pay -- which means ripe pumpkin. Po'pay was a proud man who led the charge long ago so that the honor and culture of the Indian nations might be preserved. I am proud that 2006 was the first full year that the statue of Po'pay stood in the United States Capitol, and two days ago I was honored and humbled to sit under that same Capitol for the President's State of the Union address.

### Our Agenda

Just as Po'pay helped unify Indian Nations in Pueblo Country to make possible a greater future, I wish to see Indian Country come together as "many tribes with one voice" to promote progress for our people.

Indian Country is also made up of everyday warriors and leaders who are part of a modern day Native renaissance where Native pride runs deep through strong tribal governance and flourishing cultures. We are making educational and economic strides that are beginning to close the gap between Native people and our non-native neighbors.

I have spent much of the past year as NCAI President talking with our people and have heard a great deal about their needs and hopes for their communities.

With those conversations in mind, our agenda for 2007 includes:

- \* Strengthening Tribal Governance;
- \* Public Safety;
- \* Health;
- \* Economic Development;
- \* Education; and
- \* Natural Resources

### A Quick Look Back at 2006

What we do in 2007 will be built upon our successes in 2006. Over the last year, the Indian Nations made great strides to improve the lives of Indian people and enhance our government-to-government working relationships.

We are expanding our roles and making greater contributions than ever -- beyond our tribal communities.

As an example, consider our ongoing effort to promote Indian voting and Indian

candidates—our program, Native Vote.

Today, 64 Native Americans serve as state legislators in 14 states. This is the most ever.

In 2006, the Native Vote effort was instrumental in electing candidates from both parties. Jon Tester won election to the Senate as a Democrat from Montana. Heather Wilson was re-elected to Congress as a Republican from New Mexico. Both of these candidates have spoken out on issues of concern to Indian Nations; they have been supportive of tribal governments; and they addressed Native issues in their platforms.

With this success in 2006, we have a notable achievement.

Also in 2006, we called on the White House to establish a national task force to fight methamphetamine abuse and trafficking in Indian Country. The Administration and Congress responded, and federal agencies are now cooperating with tribes, NCAI, and national Indian organizations to battle this deadly problem. Our collaborative efforts have put us on the right path.

We must continue to work together and bring greater attention to all the issues that are critical to the health and well-being of tribal communities, such as health, education, economic development, and resource management. Underlying all of these topics, is the strength of tribal governments.

### Strengthening Tribal Governance

As tribes take on more responsibilities, we find that we need to improve the way our tribal governments function. Today tribes are governments with budgets and responsibilities comparable to state governments, and we have become much more self-sufficient than we were in the past. As I traveled the country this past year, I heard from many tribal leaders about their efforts to improve the effectiveness of their governments.

Too often tribes are saddled with federally-imposed models of governance that do not fit our traditions and cultures. It is time to address the barriers caused by these mismatched governments.

Many tribes, such as the Crow and Osage Nations, have engaged in internal reform, and are developing constitutions that reflect their unique cultures, traditions, and communities in a way that enhances the effectiveness of tribal governments.

Tribes are updating their codes and regulations to deal with the challenges of today. These changes are transforming tribal economies, improving the health of tribal members, and even saving lives.

The increasing capacity of tribal governments positions us to better address the important needs of our communities.

Let me begin with education. Education is the foundation for building strong, independent nations. Our youth are the future of our nations and it is critical that we prepare them to govern and to hold these distinguished roles. Our nations must be equipped with the resources needed to ensure that Native children are given the same opportunities in education that are afforded to their non-Native peers.

President Bush, in his State of the Union Address on Tuesday, acknowledged the importance of preserving local control in education and called for the flexibility of local leaders to bring their schools into the forefront. Leaders in Indian Country know the importance of incorporating traditional cultures and language into school curricula. It has been proven that Native students achieve higher academic success in an environment that incorporates their local customs and traditions.

A population that is academically and culturally prepared for the rigors of leading our people will help guarantee that our tribal nations endure for generations.

### Public Safety

Improved governance will also help us do a better job of meeting basic needs such as public safety. Tribal leaders are particularly concerned about the escalating threats related to drug trafficking and border security in Indian country and the ongoing shortage of law enforcement, tribal courts, and detention centers to address these rising demands.

Our communities still do not have the resources needed to protect our people.

Patrolling Indian lands is a daunting task for law enforcement. The police-to-citizen ratio in Indian Country is less than one-third of that in other communities. The result of this drastic understaffing is that most communities end up with just a few officers on duty for each shift. A fact that is made more startling when you consider these officers may be charged with patrolling an area the size of the State of Connecticut, as is the case for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.

Too often, in many Native communities, when a violent crime is committed, it takes law enforcement officers hours just to get to the scene of the crime. Evidence is lost and sometimes criminals escape justice.

According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Country has just over 2,500 law enforcement officers, yet needs over 4,400 officers, resulting in a gap of nearly 2,000 officers.

Indian Country lacks the resources needed to protect Indian people and that, my friends and colleagues, is unacceptable.

The rate of violent criminal offenses against Indians is more than two times higher than towards the rest of the population, and 1 in 10 American Indians will experience violent crimes against them in their lifetime. We have to collaborate to reverse these statistics.

I call upon the Administration and the Congress to work closely with tribal nations to provide the necessary resources so that our tribes can do their part to ensure not only our own safety but also the safety of all Americans.

### Health Care

Third of the six points on the agenda is health care.

As I said in my State of the Indian Nation speech last year, we went to Congress in 2006 to seek reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

We came close to passage, but time ran out.

Therefore, this item remains on the agenda, and it is more important than ever.

Both the Administration and Congress have acknowledged, for yet another year, the importance of good health care in the U.S. It is time for Congress to fulfill its obligation to Indian Nations and update our health care system.

I commend Senator Byron Dorgan, the new chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, who is working on legislation to increase clinic hours and doctor availability on reservations and encourage more low-cost health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

But the battle from last year is still underway. When we win it, we will see the Indian health care system brought into the 21st century to address matters at the heart of family and community life: mental health, substance abuse, youth suicide, and the challenge of attracting and retaining health care professionals of the first rank.

### Economic Development

Indian Country is a world of economic extremes.

There are a handful of tribes who have greatly prospered economically; but there are many, many more who are still struggling to develop sustainable economies.

The work that tribal leaders have done to strengthen tribal governments has gone a long way toward increasing our capacity to build our economies. But persistent barriers remain.

Many of the federal policies that impact tribal economic development were put into place at a time when tribal governments did not have the capacity that we have today. These policies need to be revisited, and tribal governments need to have access to the same tools for economic development that exist for other governments.

We need clear policies of respect and support for tribal regulatory authority and self-

governance.

We need improved telecommunications penetration and consistent tax code treatment of tribal government pension plans.

We need access to bond financing to the same extent that it is available to state and local governments.

And we need to make sure that tribal governments are included in their rightful place in the national Streamlined Sales and Use Tax agreement.

Indian Nations take pride in the progress we have made toward achieving self-sufficiency, but now it is time to take the next step forward and remove the structural barriers that keep most Native people from achieving the standard of living experienced by their non-Native neighbors.

Tribal leaders will be joining with federal policymakers at an important Summit on Indian Country economic policy this May in Phoenix. I look forward to sitting down with federal policy-makers, tribal leadership, and private-sector representatives to have frank conversations about what changes can be made to make a real difference for tribal economies. I thank Administration officials and the U.S. Department of Interior for seeing the need for such forward-thinking, high level talks and look forward to working together to develop strategies to overcome long-standing barriers.

### Natural Resources

Inseparable from economic development are the natural resources that our Nations have to offer. Our traditions teach us that we must respect Mother Earth—to be protective and resourceful with what she has to offer.

We must work together to preserve wildlife and wildlife habitat and be an example to the global community that showing respect and taking care of the environment is something that can no longer be overlooked. We must continue to be good stewards of the natural resources our lands have to offer.

Tribes recognize the importance of balancing natural resource and economic development with sustainable conservation principles and they have been at the forefront of many successful conservation initiatives.

The White Mountain Apache tribe is managing one of the world's most successful sustained-yield timber businesses.

In Alaska, tribal leaders have formed the Yukon River Intertribal Watershed Council to protect the environment and integrity of the Yukon River Watershed and the cultures and tribes that depend upon it. Our brothers and sisters from the north are using this council to serve as a model of self-determination and governance in deciding how to use and preserve

this largest and most intact ecosystem in the world.

President Bush, in his State of the Union Address, called for cuts in U.S. gasoline consumption by up to 20 percent in the next 10 years, in part by focusing on a range of renewable and alternative fuels. Tribes can be great players in this initiative. Indian Nations across the country have a vast renewable energy potential, and many of them are leading the way in developing wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal energy sources.

In 2004, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians completed construction of a 10,000-square-foot, 15 million dollar, 8 mega watt cogeneration facility. The project enabled the tribe, including all of their recreation and entertainment facilities, to go completely off the grid and operate independently from the local utility that serves the area.

The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon is planning a biomass energy generation plant that is expected to be under-construction next summer. The plant will generate up to 15.5 Mega Watts of renewable energy available for sale. That is enough energy to provide over 15,000 homes with continuous renewable electricity.

Tribes are playing our part to lessen our nation's dependence on foreign oil through the development of renewable energy. With federal support, we can share in this responsibility and be good energy partners for America.

I call upon Congress to adopt legislation that will create a Production Tax Incentive that will allow Indian tribes to develop alternative energy sources in an economically feasible manner.

Tribes are a natural player in this process. We are the original stewards of the environment and our natural resources.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, 2007 will be a year of challenges and opportunities, and we are moving forward to address matters of strengthening tribal governance, public safety, health care, education, economic development, and energy and natural resource management.

I look to 2007 with confidence because the state of the Indian Nations is strong -- stronger than it ever has been.

We are a nation of character and profound tradition. As we become more self-sufficient and make economic progress, we will do so only within our traditions, and as an expression of the character we learned by example from our ancestors.

We seek progress, but that is not our only goal. First and foremost, we seek to preserve our way of life, and to send along our ways to the generations that will follow.

More than a half-century before the founding of the United States, Po'pay, the Great Pueblo leader, did not know what was in store for the Indian Nations. But if he was certain of anything, it was that the Indian way of life would survive. He knew leaders would stand before the Indian Nations long after his days—in 1800, in 1900, in 2007 and beyond, and those leaders would honor the Indian past and stand ready to work and sacrifice for the Indian future—just as Po'pay had done.

In that spirit, I look forward to what these strong and proud Indian Nations will achieve in this great new year.

Thank you.