

**Remarks of President Brian Cladoosby
15th Annual State of Indian Nations Address
Washington, D.C.
February 13, 2017**

[traditional language opening]

My dear people, we are thanking you for the work that you do... the road we walk to help our people. I thank you.

I thank the Creator for bringing us together: tribal leaders, our trustees from the United States government, my fellow tribal citizens, my fellow Americans...

The Federal election in November marked the end of the Obama Presidency and the most successful government to government relationship Indian people have enjoyed since the formation of the United States.

We welcome President Trump and look forward to working with the Trump Administration to build on the tremendous successes of the last eight years.

As we begin a new Congress and a new Administration, I am reminded that throughout American history... in challenging times and changing times... Native peoples have remained a constant.

We are, in the words of Chief Seattle, "like the stars that never change."

Today, we stand ready to work with you as partners to build a stronger America. To build on the shared history between our nations. And to seize new opportunities to strengthen the relationship between tribal governments and the federal government.

Together, we will lead America into a new era of progress and partnership.

The partnership between tribal governments and the federal government can be described by one word: Trust.

With regard to the relationship between the United States and tribal governments, “trust” is a sacred obligation accepted by the federal government in exchange for the millions of acres of land we ceded that created the greatest nation in the world.

The evidence of our common history is all around us. Alabama, Missouri, and Miami are all names derived from tribal nations.

Utah and Arizona... Seattle and Manhattan... are names inspired by Native people and languages.

This very capital city of Washington, DC, rests on the lands of the Piscataway people and the Patawomeck people – the namesake of the Potomac River.

The unabridged version of this history is not often taught in our schools. It needs to be.

It is not the story of colonists and intrepid pioneers... of cultural exchange and westward expansion into so-called “unoccupied” territory.

It is a story of lands and resources stolen. Families removed from their homelands. Forced assimilation into ways of life that were not our own.

Yet, it is also a story of the resilience of Native peoples and the endurance of tribal governments. For thousands of years, we have had

strong, sophisticated, sovereign governments. America's Founding Fathers recognized this fact.

In 1789, the United States adopted its Constitution, modeled after the great Iroquois Confederacy. It specifically gave Congress the power to regulate commerce not only with foreign nations and states, but also with Indian tribes. It recognized our treaties as the supreme law of the land.

That same year, the new Congress passed one of its most important Acts: The Northwest Ordinance. Among other things, it set forth the principles of our trust relationship.

I want to quote the text of this law. It states: "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed."

Obviously, the young country did not do a very good job of honoring these commitments. Tribes were invaded and disturbed. Many of us were relocated off our homelands. My own tribe had our reservation land taken without our consent.

Despite continuing breeches of these promises, in hundreds of instances, tribal governments entered into solemn agreements with the federal government. My own great great grandfather, Kel-Kahl-Tsoot, signed the Treaty of Point Elliott in 1855.

Through these treaties, tribal nations relinquished significant portions of our original territories. And the federal government became the trustee for hundreds of tribal governments and the millions of acres of tribal lands that remained.

This means, now and forever, that every federal official is our trustee.

It's the sacred responsibility that all of our elected officials share. That is where our story of progress and partnership begins.

From the very start, tribal governments have been on equal footing with state governments. And must remain so today.

In exchange for our lands, the federal government made three promises: To never take our remaining lands without our consent. To safeguard our right to govern ourselves on those lands. And to enact laws that protect our economies, our treaties and our ways of life.

This is the foundation of the trust relationship... on which we have built our modern, government -to- government partnership.

Recently, we worked with Congress to pass the Tribal Law and Order Act and the Violence Against Women Act... to strengthen community safety and tribal justice systems.

And now, tribal law enforcement departments like the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla in Oregon have access to national criminal databases that help them better protect their people.

We worked with Congress to pass the HEARTH Act and the Indian Trust Asset Reform Act... to further empower tribes to make decisions about their lands and their assets.

And now, tribes like Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in New Mexico are regulating wind and solar energy leases on their lands.

We worked with Congress to pass the Indian Health Care Improvement Act... to modernize tribal health care networks and ensure that every

Native American and Alaskan Native receives the health care promised in our treaties.

And now, tribal governments are implementing these – and other – new policies.

These policies work because they provide us the flexibility we need to craft our own, local solutions to our own, distinct challenges. In the process, we are innovating in our governments, revitalizing our communities, and growing our economies.

And we continue to partner with other governments to meet common challenges.

Partnerships like these are especially important in rural areas. More than 70 percent of Indian Country is rural. Indian people know firsthand that quality health care is harder to get outside of the cities.

Native peoples like the Coeur d'Alene Tribe of Idaho have set out to change that. In partnership with the city of Plummer, Idaho they built the Benewah Medical Center. Today, the Center serves thousands of people from Plummer and the surrounding area.

Tribes are stepping up... not only to take care of their own people... but to take care of their entire region.

Indian people define prosperity in many ways: Not just economic, but also spiritual, cultural, and collective prosperity. When tribal nations lift up communities, we want no one to get left behind.

That is why the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Oklahoma built a health care center for the non-Native spouses and children of tribal citizens.

There are countless examples of tribal governments investing in their communities and creating jobs for their own people and those who live in surrounding communities.

The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community – a tribe of just a few hundred – employs more than 4,000... through its retail, gaming, and other businesses.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has been THE economic engine for its region of Mississippi, transforming one of the poorest areas in the country into a growing economy that employs thousands.

Nearly 72,000 tribal farm operators run more than 56,000 farms with a market value of products sold that exceeds 3 billion dollars.

Indian Country stands ready to partner with anyone and everyone who will work with us to help build a stronger America.

So this is what we ask of the new Congress and the new Administration:

Make good on the promise of our trust relationship. Abide by the treaties. Affirm the wisdom of local decision making... by Indian Country, for Indian Country.

Together, we must remove the obstacles that prevent tribes from fulfilling our potential as nations and neighbors. We must ensure that tribes can deploy all of the essential tools that all governments must have in order to build prosperous communities.

Not everyone realizes that most tribes cannot tax sales on their reservations, because of the problem of dual taxation by the states. A few states have reached tax agreements with tribes, but for the most part the states enjoy taxing our reservations without providing services.

We have a great opportunity for the Department of the Interior to issue new regulations that will eliminate the unfair burden of dual taxation on reservation economies.

The new Administration has already scheduled a series of consultation meetings that start next week at Swinomish.

Unlike every state and local government, tribes cannot issue tax-exempt bonds for economic development because the IRS only allows us to use them for public works – like water treatment.

This unfairness is short-sighted and cannot stand. Tribal governments should be able to use the same tools that other governments use every single day.

Congress should include Indian Country in broader tax reform. And when it does, it must give us full authority to generate revenue, access capital, and invest locally.

In a rare moment of bipartisanship, Congress recently passed the General Welfare Exclusion Act recognizing that tribal government programs benefitting tribal members are not taxable by the Federal or state governments.

Tribal governments have demonstrated that when we exercise our innate authority, with adequate resources and autonomy, we will devise local solutions that work for our communities.

We plan and budget our governing operations based on commitments made through the federal trust responsibility. Like other governments, we provide police services, education, fire protection, and a range of core public services for our people.

But tribal self-sufficiency is not merely an integral component of the trust responsibility. It is also an investment opportunity.

Investing in Indian Country has proven, time and time again, to produce high returns. And perhaps no investment has a greater potential upside than infrastructure.

Today, the National Congress of American Indians released an initial report regarding tribal infrastructure investments. It provides tribal leaders and policymakers with data to inform the many ways in which Indian Country is proposing to meet its infrastructure needs.

To us, infrastructure means more than roads and bridges. More than housing and broadband internet connection. It also means education and healthcare infrastructure. Workforce development infrastructure. Data and planning infrastructure to support smart, informed decision-making.

Both Indian Country and rural America, where infrastructure has fallen into a state of disrepair, share a common concern here. Necessary maintenance and new projects have met delay after delay.

Let me be clear. Economic development is important. Investing in community infrastructure is important. And the most important long-term investments are in our children.

Partnering creates winning scenarios. When this Congress takes up infrastructure, it can create American jobs by addressing the 388 million dollar backlog of deferred maintenance of Bureau of Indian Education schools.

Statistics show that when Indian kids graduate from high school and college they become contributing members of society. They break the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. They break the cycle of jail and prison. They break the cycle of poverty and dependence on the Federal government.

Educated tribal members not only make their tribal communities stronger, they also make America stronger.

Kevin Gover, the former Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, once said: "Sovereignty isn't about power. It's about responsibility."

We take that responsibility to our people very seriously. Just as we had long before European explorers and settlers arrived. Just as we always will.

President Ronald Reagan astutely recognized in 1988, and I quote "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. Tribes must make those decisions, not the federal government." End quote.

The federal government should partner with us to remove burdens that tribal governments bear alone.

Our partnership and progress must extend to the issue of energy development.

Colorado does not charge a fee to explore for energy resources on its land... and it turns around permits in two months. But to undertake the same exploration on tribal land includes the additional challenge of the Bureau of Land Management fee of nine thousand five hundred dollars... and takes seven months to turn around the same permit.

The result of regulations like these is that tribes pay more and spend more time... a lot more... for a lot worse service.

This is a missed opportunity for all of America. Indian Country holds 20 percent of the oil and gas reserves. If fully developed, these resources could generate a trillion dollars in economic activity.

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Whether or not to develop their energy resources is a choice that each tribal nation must make – on their own terms and in accordance with their own values and goals. For tribal nations that make this choice, the tools are in place to get started.

Congress created the Tribal Energy Loan Guarantee Program. If the federal government invested just 9 million dollars, it would support up to 85 million dollars for energy projects that would employ people in Indian Country and the surrounding communities.

Congress should back up their investment idea with real investment – and fund the program.

Tribal governments are proving what real investment can accomplish. Decades ago, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe of Colorado created their own Tribal Department of Energy and an economic growth fund. Today, they control the distribution of roughly 1 percent of America's natural gas supply.

Last year, one of the Moapa Band of Paiute of Nevada solar projects began powering more than 100,000 homes in Los Angeles. And last month, the seven bands of the Sioux Nation began construction on one of the largest wind power developments in the entire nation.

These projects are designed with sustainability in mind. Not just environmental sustainability, but also the cultural, spiritual, and economic sustainability of the entire tribal community.

Tribal governments embody the enduring values of Native peoples. We understand that each of our decisions connects our past to our future. We think about the Indian Country we want our grandchildren to pass on to theirs.

Culture matters. It is both who we are and how we govern. That is what makes working with tribal governments different from working with other governments.

Each tribe has its own customs and priorities. And that is why the local tribe must be at the table where local decisions are made – starting at the earliest planning stages.

We have seen too many examples of what happens when tribes do not have a seat at the table.

The Dakota Access Pipeline is one. In that case, the company consulted the nearby city... but not the nearby tribe... and made the mistake of turning sacred lands into a construction site.

Other tribal governments have tried to prevent the worst – only to succeed in stopping the project after hundreds of gravesites were unearthed.

We cannot forget the period in the 1950s and '60s when rivers across the west were dammed for irrigation and power. Hundreds of thousands of acres of tribal lands were flooded. Hundreds of tribal homes were destroyed.

In the Columbia River region, the salmon way of life was threatened. All disturbed without the consent of tribal governments. All in violation of treaties that protected these lands and resources.

One day, the Spokane Tribe in Washington, like so many others, woke up to find that there were no more salmon in their river.

When this happens, no one wins. Not tribal governments. Not the federal government. Not developers. Everyone pays a high price. An unnecessary price.

And yet, there are so many instances in which we see what's possible when Native people do have a seat at the table.

The Blackfeet from Montana partnered with hunters, anglers, conservationists, energy companies, and the Department of the Interior... to cancel more than 40,000 acres of illegal oil and gas leases. By working together, they prevented drilling on the sacred lands at Badger-Two Medicine.

We will continue to work with the Department of the Interior to create lasting solutions.

Partnerships have proven to generate the highest return on investment, for they avoid the high costs of conflict between governments. Work with us to identify and implement win-win solutions.

There is a Seneca proverb that says: "He who would do great things should not attempt them all alone."

Our partnership goes back a long way. Back to the time before the stars and stripes were first sewn into the flag... and before the republic for which it stands was born.

Tribal nations have been a constant. Like the stars that never change.

We stood with you at every critical moment in American history. From the Revolutionary War... to the World Wars... to the Vietnam War...to the War on Terror. A greater percentage of Native people have served and died in the military than of any other group of Americans.

We will always stand with you. We will always fight alongside you. And through our age-old partnership, we will usher in a new era of progress.

God bless you. God bless our Indian Nations.

And God bless the United States of America.

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