



**Remarks of President Jefferson Keel  
16<sup>th</sup> Annual State of Indian Nations Address  
Washington, D.C.**

Good morning!

I am humbled to serve you – once again – as President of the National Congress of American Indians.

Normally, at this point I'd say: on behalf of the 567 federally-recognized tribal nations and dozens of state-recognized tribal nations that we serve, I'm honored to welcome you here today.

But, last month, six Virginia tribes were finally granted federal recognition. I congratulate the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Upper Mattaponi, Rappahannock, Monacan, and Nansemond tribes on this long-overdue affirmation of their sovereignty.

So now, on behalf of the 573 federally recognized tribal nations and dozens of state-recognized tribal nations we serve, I'm honored to share this message of our power and purpose with members of Congress and the Administration.

The state of Indian nations is **STRONG ... and RESILIENT ... and EVERLASTING.**

We were here before all others... we are still here... We will **ALWAYS** be here.

Like so many others, my tribe, the Chickasaw, was removed from our home in Mississippi in the 1830s. We were uprooted from our homes, driven hundreds of hard miles across the rivers and mountains, enduring unmentionable hardship, losing almost half of our tribal members, to what is now known as Oklahoma.

There, we started over, and we rebuilt our nation. Our love of our culture and our commitment to our values kept us strong, and enabled us to persevere. Today, we proudly call ourselves the Unconquered and Unconquerable Chickasaw Nation. And, we are among the strongest economic forces in Oklahoma.

In every part of this land, we see the enduring resilience of Native peoples.

We are a wellspring of governing ingenuity and local solutions to tough challenges, indigenous knowledge and environmental stewardship, and new jobs and economic growth.

Yet, too often – and for too long – Indian Country has been overlooked.

This must end.

Indian nations have weathered every conceivable storm. We have overcome in the face of unthinkable challenges to our lives and our ways of life. We have stood steadfast in the face of policies meant to disperse and extinguish us.

Today, we say with one voice:

**WE HAVE INHERENT RIGHTS.** Not only were we born with them – we have earned them:

The right to be recognized as equal governments. The right to be seated at the table where key decisions are made. The right to contribute as much to America’s future... just as we are contributing to its present.

We are at an important moment. Our governments and our communities stand on high alert.

For too many years, the echoes of America’s colonial past have continued to reverberate:

Disparaging rhetoric.

Failed policies.

A disregard for the inherent sovereignty of tribal nations.

This is unacceptable.

Our message for our representatives in government is this: **RESPECT OUR RIGHTS.**

See us as equal partners. And uphold the federal government’s trust responsibility to tribal nations. Do so not on your own terms, but on the terms as they have been defined by hundreds of treaties, policies, and legal precedent. That is our standard. That is a non-negotiable condition of our support at the polls on Election Day.

Far too often, people seem to forget just how profoundly Native peoples have influenced the world in which we all live today.

In developing agriculture and building infrastructure... in managing lands and natural resources... in governing and solving shared community challenges... we are – and have always been – innovators and leaders.

I want to touch on a few of these topics, starting with the food Native people put on our tables.

From wild rice and bison to salmon and blueberries, traditional Native foods are not only our way of life but are an economic driver too. Indian agriculture is a 3.2 billion-dollar industry, supporting nearly 72,000 jobs in Indian Country.

And in 2018, NO Farm Bill should pass – UNLESS it includes our priorities to recognize tribal governments as sovereigns and to strengthen Indian Country’s agricultural potential.

Native peoples are also builders and managers of roads and bridges, and other essential infrastructure. These projects are often in rural areas. They connect tribal and surrounding communities with each other, and the rest of the Nation. Tribal infrastructure is American infrastructure.

In 2018, NO infrastructure bill should pass, UNLESS it includes Indian Country’s priorities. It must:

Offer us the same opportunities to raise capital as state and local governments. Invest adequate, equitable funding in our infrastructure needs. And remove barriers to us from making decisions at the local, tribal level. Reaffirm our right to consent to developments that affect our lands and our people.

And in doing so, ensure every community has the infrastructure to thrive in our shared, 21st Century America.

Native peoples are also innovators.

Long before we conducted trade with newcomers, starting in 1492, Native peoples had woven a complex web of international commerce.

The Tohono O’odham was one of many nations to establish a network of trade routes that spanned the entire Southwest. Similarly, when Lewis and Clark arrived on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, they saw the same tools, with the same symbols, that they had seen in what is now North Dakota.

Today, tribes continue to serve as economic engines across this continent. The Chickasaw Nation and the other tribes in Oklahoma contribute Billions of dollars to the state and local economies every year.

In Arizona, Native businesses generate hundreds of millions of tax dollars... and pay 1.9 billion in wages to tens of thousands of Native and non-Native employees.

In Mississippi, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians provides 6,000 full-time jobs through its diverse array of businesses, more than half of which are held by non-Natives. It also has re-invested over \$500 million of its profits in economic development projects across the state.

Not only do these jobs often pay more than other jobs, they’re not going anywhere. You’re never going to read about how they are being moved overseas. Because Native businesses don’t pull up stakes, even when market conditions change. We root our businesses in our local communities—for good.

You want to ‘Buy American’? Then do business with Indian Country.

And when tribal economies prosper, surrounding communities prosper. To that end, Congress and the Administration should adopt the measures that tribal governments have deemed critical to spurring economic development:

Remove the outdated burdens placed on Native businesses... starting with the ones that require us to go to the federal government for permits that tribes could readily furnish. Remove obstacles barring tribes from accessing and leveraging capital.

Pass the Tribal Labor Sovereignty Act, which affirms our right to determine our own labor regulations ... just as city, county, and state governments are allowed to do.

We have the right to build our own economic futures on our lands. On our own terms.

When it comes to our lands and resources, Native peoples were the original conservationists.

Long before the first churches and cathedrals were erected in America, we held relationships of faith and reverence with sacred places across this land. Today, we must work to preserve the sanctity of these places, and in some cases restore access to them, so that they can continue to provide cultural and spiritual sustenance.

Those who argue for the privatization of our lands believe that granting individual property rights will fuel economic development. However, they ignore the impact it would have on our sovereign authority to protect our homelands, economies, and cultural resources for future generations. For these reasons, it is critical that land policies be developed with tribes from the outset, through true consultation and dialogue, on a government to government basis.

We say to policymakers: We have cared for this place for millennia. Seek our time-honored indigenous knowledge and expertise. Recognize our role and value in managing these lands to prevent costly mistakes, and produce better outcomes.

We must remove the barriers that keep us from generating an estimated 1 Trillion dollars through solar, wind, and traditional energy resources. Remove the barriers that prevent us from restoring tribal land bases according to our priorities.

Our lands made the United States what it is. Our wisdom will continue to sustain it, just as our wisdom played a role in creating it.

We know something about governing. We were peoples before "We the People".

Our proven ways of governing informed the governing approach forged by this country's founders. The U.S. Senate acknowledged this fact in 1987, declaring — and I quote — “the Congress, on the occasion of the two-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the contribution made by the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States.” End quote.

Tribal governments have always held a unique place in the American family of governments. Hundreds of treaties and laws, and the Constitution itself — all affirm the inherent sovereignty our tribes possess.

We should never forget that when tribal nations agreed to accept a smaller land base, the federal government promised to safeguard our right to govern ourselves. To enable tribal governments to deliver essential services and provide them ample resources to do so effectively. To help us manage our own lands and resources for the betterment of our communities.

That is the trust relationship embodied in the U.S. Constitution. Every Member of Congress and every federal official is responsible for carrying out that trust. It's not a handout. It's a contract.

And it is best upheld when decisions are made at the local, tribal level, by values-based governments that know the circumstances, challenges, and priorities of LOCAL communities.

Tribal decision making not only benefits tribal communities... it benefits everyone.

For example, the Puyallup Tribe opened up its clinic in the Tacoma, Washington metro area to provide care for the entire community, including non-Native people. My own Chickasaw Nation established a cutting-edge Diabetes Care Center to provide holistic health and preventative care, providing a model for clinics everywhere.

Two decades ago, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes took over management of its timber. The federal government, which manages an adjacent forest, barely breaks even on its timber sales. Meanwhile, the Tribes made 2 dollars on every dollar they spend - profit that they re-invest in their local communities.

That's why every American should make this demand of their own government:

Appreciate and honor the inherent sovereign rights of tribal nations. Respect our right to govern ourselves and our lands. Respect our unique political status as real nations with capable governments, as enshrined in laws, in treaties, and in the Constitution of the United States.

Top-down government has been tried. It's time to go back to working WITH us.

Those are our priorities. Now, I want to share three basic principles to guide decision-making by policymakers to make those priorities a reality.

The first principle is to honor and affirm the federal-tribal relationship.

This goes back to the very beginning of the United States. Tribal governments have always worked directly with the federal government... not through state governments. That direct nation-to-nation relationship must always be maintained. Right now, Congress is thinking about shifting more authority and funding to states, on the theory that states can more efficiently spend those funds. We, too, believe in local decision making. We've been doing it for thousands of years.

The second principle is to engage tribal nations on all matters of national policy that potentially impact them. Not only is it the right thing to do. Not only does it make everyone better off. It is also the LAW. The tribal consultation policies of federal agencies reflect that fact.

Two recent laws illustrate when the federal government takes its obligation to consult seriously – and when it doesn't.

I want to start with the one that failed to meet our standard of consultation – the recent tax overhaul.

For decades, tribal leaders have advocated for the same set of tax priorities. We met often with Members of Congress. We offered thoughtful, pragmatic, deficit-neutral policy proposals. But the bill came together in a flurry. And when the dust settled, Indian Country's top priorities were absent from the version the President signed in December.

That is completely unacceptable.

Today, we call on federal policymakers to consult tribes on ALL major national policies. And to take that responsibility seriously. In 2018, that means setting things right by taking action on Indian Country's tax priorities:

Affirm our authority to regulate taxes and commerce on our lands, with the same degree of freedom that local and state governments enjoy. Allow us to use tax-exempt bonds the same way that other governments do. Exempt tribes from federal excise taxes, in the same way that states are exempted.

All we want is a level playing field. That is only fair, and it's not too much to ask.

Like other governments, tribes are an essential part of building a sustainable 21st century American economy. And we contribute best when we chart our own paths.

The third principle I want to discuss is reflected in the other, positive example of recent legislation passed by Congress. Not only was it a product of meaningful consultation with, and input from, tribal nations, it enacts the proven principle that tribal self-determination and self-governance is the only policy that has ever worked for Indian Country.

I am talking about the Indian Employment, Training, and Related Services Consolidation Act, which expands the tribal workforce development program known as 477 and makes it permanent.

Under 477, tribal nations and Native organizations can choose to consolidate up to 13 federal programs into a single process with a single reporting requirement, while still addressing distinct local needs and priorities. To date, more than 260 tribal nations and Native organizations have taken advantage of 477, enhancing program efficiency and effectiveness and making real impacts in the lives of Native people.

Lives like Nicole Manzano's. At the age of 25, Nicole had been a caregiver for her grandmother for many years. Her grandmother's death was a huge blow, and Nicole had to deal with her grief while building a new life with little work experience. She came to Citizen Potawatomi Work Force and Social Services, where 477 tethered programs gave her access to training in resume building,

applying and interviewing. She got a local full time job, and assistance with gas vouchers, clothing, and basic food until she became financially stable.

Stories like Nicole's prove that enhancing 477 is smart policy. It affirms that the program has been a success – and could be an even greater one. But we shouldn't stop there. We should use this model - which puts tribal nations and communities in the driver's seat, where they belong – as a model to replicate across all other areas of federal Indian policy.

Put simply, tribal self-determination and self-governance works. This is a message that we must continue to bring to those in leadership.

My fellow Native citizens, the most powerful way to assert our right to determine our own destinies is on Election Day. Close elections happen. Just last month, candidates for one Virginia state house seat earned the same number of votes. A tie. They decided the election by drawing a name from a bowl.

The Native Vote can be the deciding vote in dozens of close races in 2018. In fact, the Native vote has the potential to swing elections for federal, state, and local offices across this country.

We will support the candidates who respect the inherent sovereign rights we possess, and who recognize the value we have to offer. Who support tribal sovereignty, self-governance, consultation, and meeting the trust responsibility.

Elected officials must hear our voices and heed our priorities. Because we will be watching. And we will be voting. As one of the fast-growing populations in the country, our vote more and more is becoming a swing vote that candidates must engage.

We have our VOICE and our VOTE, and in 2018 we will exercise it like never before.

As it has been for thousands of years, the state of Indian nations is strong.... and everlasting. We will always be here.

Thank you.