



Fourth Annual

State of the Indian Nations

The National Congress of American Indians

Joe Garcia, President

February 2, 2006

The National Press Club, Washington, DC

“The Four Great Steps”

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 fourth annual State of the Indian Nations address. I welcome tribal leaders, Administration officials, members of the House and Senate, national Indian organizations, friends and family who have gathered here in Washington D.C.; and the many who are listening across the country.

The state of the Indian Nations today is strong. Over the past year, many of our people have withstood devastation in the form of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, losing everything they had. Our prayers are with them.

Many of our native brothers and sisters are wearing the uniform of the U.S. Armed Forces today. They are fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, or are serving our country in other places here and around the world. Our prayers are with them, too—and so is our undying gratitude.

Strength, triumph over adversity, the will to succeed—the Indian Nations stand strong today. We are growing more self-sufficient, more economically developed, more politically active; and as always, steadfastly committed to the stewardship and defense of our home, the United States of America.

At the same time, this confidence is matched by an acute awareness of our problems. We know that if you want change, you have to do the work yourself; relying only on the others to the extent of their promised commitment.

The spiritual outlook of the Indian nations is found in The Four Directions, each represented by a different color, a different animal and a different meaning. Everything in the world comes from the four directions—these four powers. And they must be in balance.

The meaning of each direction varies among tribes, but consider the tradition of the Pueblos. North is blue or green — conflict and tension. West is yellow — and the condition of man — in darkness and in danger — standing before the unknown. South is red — peace, resolution and rest. East is white — victory, sunrise, clarity. Man must turn to each of these four directions to solve a problem.

Today I borrow from that tradition to describe the task before the Indian Nations. We face four areas of great challenge. And we must meet each of them in order to move our nation forward.

Number 1: Public Safety;

Number 2: Healthcare;

Number 3: Education and the Economy; and

Number 4: The Trust Settlement.

I call these The Four Great Steps—the agenda for the Indian Nations.

Just as the Four Directions provide a map for the soul, The Four Great Steps define the challenges we face as tribal governments—the needs we must meet and overcome to improve the lives of those of us of the Indian Nations.

NUMBER 1: LAW ENFORCEMENT

First is public safety. The problem, simply stated, is this: We have the will and the abilities, but we lack the means. The inability of border tribes to stem the flow of illegal aliens passing through their communities is a profound problem. Some aliens may want no more than entry into our country, but there are others who cross to engage in drug trafficking and other crimes. The results for our communities are increased murder rates, higher rates of theft, more rapes and beatings, and the fear among many of even going out.

This is unacceptable. We want to implement a long-term solution to the problem that is more than simply stopping those we can catch and send back, and letting the rest get through.

We want to do more, but we do not have the means. We are largely on our own because of limited financial assistance from the federal government. The government's responsibility to us in this way is mandated, and we are prepared to work with them. But they must give us the tools to do so. According to the Justice Department, the typical Indian Country police force has no more than three officers responsible for patrolling an area the size of Delaware. So we must do more to protect our families.

We want to help in other ways, as well. In particular, we want to do more to protect American Indian women, who suffer greatly from domestic violence. Homicide is the third leading cause of death for Native women. Seventy percent of American Indians who are the victims of violent crimes are victimized by someone of a different race.

Methamphetamine is a poison taking Indian lives, destroying Indian families, and razing entire communities. In 2005, Jesus Sagaste-Cruz was convicted of conspiracy and distribution of methamphetamine. He knew that enforcement was lax on tribal lands. And he figured he could use that to his advantage. In his case, it did not work. But in too many others, it does.

The remedy begins with more resources, but that is only part. It also includes streamlining the system we use to get those resources.

On the matter of border control, federal policy requires tribal governments to apply for Department of Homeland Security funding through state and local governments. This does not work. I call for a direct line between our tribes and Homeland Security in this matter.

For domestic violence, I am proud to say that President Bush and the Congress have already taken action to help, with the recent reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. We call upon Congress to fully fund this life-saving legislation.

In the war against methamphetamine, the answer is numbers: We need more officers to fight back.

Overall, we must have increased manpower, realistic funding, and improved communication.

NUMBER 2: HEALTHCARE

Second of the Steps is healthcare: Because of inferior healthcare, the quality and length of life for American Indians falls well below the rest of the U.S. American Indians have a life expectancy five years less than the rest of the country.

A typical American Indian is 650 percent more likely to die from tuberculosis, 420 percent more likely to die from diabetes, 280 percent more likely to die in an accident, and 52 percent more likely to die from pneumonia or influenza than the rest of the U.S. population.

Native American healthcare is often no more than emergency treatment, which means that our people are getting care only when they can't wait anymore. There's little preventive healthcare and little education for healthier living.

Healthcare expenditures for Indian are less than half what America spends for federal prisoners. Let me repeat that: Healthcare expenditures for Indian are less than half what America spends for federal prisoners.

And remember that there are real people behind these numbers. The Ute Mountain Ute tribe in Towaoc, Colorado, recently lost three tribal elders in a van accident because the only way these elders could get dialysis was to drive two-and-a-half hours each way to the nearest hospital with the right equipment. What they needed wasn't close enough.

Because of this, I call upon Congress and the President to uphold their historic and contractual obligation by reauthorizing the tribally proposed Indian Health Care Improvement Act during this session of Congress. This legislation is no less than the framework for the Indian healthcare system. It will bring our outdated and inadequate system into the 21st Century — addressing mental health, substance abuse and youth suicide, and support for attracting and retaining qualified healthcare professionals.

Basic things such as in-home healthcare are becoming commonplace. But they are not yet a common part of the system of Indian healthcare. They ought to be.

NUMBER 3: EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

The third Great Step is education and the economy: As it now exists, the Indian education system is inadequate to meet our children's needs. This in turn drags down our economy, whose infrastructure already lags behind the rest of the country.

Education, the skills and abilities that our children learn in school, is the foundation of the economy. And the Indian education system is lacking.

Only half of Indian students complete high school. Only 13 percent of American Indians hold bachelors or graduate degrees, less than half the national average.

We know from academic studies that Indian children flourish when their classroom experiences are built on our tradition, language and our culture. The No Child Left Behind Act allows for this kind of education, but the resources to actually make it possible have yet to be appropriated.

The remedy, of course, is to fully fund this part of the No Child Left Behind Act. I am confident that this culture-centered approach will work because I have seen it work.

In 1994, the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative began connecting students with elders in the community; and creating a passion for learning by showing students how to explore science and history in light of their cultural heritage.

It worked. Over a 10-year period, student performance went up. Test scores improved and drop-out rates declined.

And this didn't require blue-ribbon panels or years of research. It helped as soon as it was begun: turning the unique position of the Indian Nations into an asset by making Indian children proud of where they come from.

I call on Congress to appropriate the funds to complete, what is for Indian Country, a part of the No Child Left Behind Act that we cannot afford to miss.

Education is a pillar of the economy. Another pillar of the economy is government. Just as state and municipal governments are obligated to provide vital services and promote growth, so are tribal governments.

Though federal spending for Indians has lost ground compared with spending for the U.S. population at large, tribal self-governance has proved that federal investment in tribes pays off. Between 1990 and 2000, income rose by a third and the poverty rate declined by 7 percent. And a Harvard study shows that these gains occur with or without gaming. Tribal governments have worked hard to put laws in place that promote economic activity and Indian reservations are the next great opportunity for the American economy.

But this is only a beginning. Real per-capita income of Indians living on reservations is still less than half of the national average. Unemployment is still double what it is for the rest of the country. And the poorest counties in the United States are on tribal lands. So we still have yet to join the success of the rest of the nation.

Because of our often remote location relative to superior professional services, it is crucial for us to join the telecommunications revolution of distance learning, telemedicine, public safety, e-commerce, and electronic government. Not enough Indians have access.

Housing conditions for many Indians have reached the crisis point. Four in ten Indians are under-housed. To avoid going homeless, many are forced to crowd several families into a single-family structure. I've seen up to eighteen people stuffed into a three-bedroom house.

More than one in eight Indians lack access to safe drinking water. More than one in twelve lack access to basic sanitation. This is humiliating, degrading, and medically unconscionable. It is wrong, and it has to be brought to an end.

We are sovereign, independent, self-sustaining nations. But as I have noted before, our mandated relationship with the United States Government puts us in a precarious position. Our success is dependent to a large extent on the Governments' respect for tribal rights to self-determination and self-sufficiency. NCAI's fiscal year 2007 Indian Country Budget Request outlines some visions tribes have for meaningful federal investment in Indian Country.

The success of Indian Country in self-governing and managing their resources warrant continued federal investment in tribal self-determination. And this does work.

Native Americans are becoming homeowners at an increasing rate, 39 percent more from 1997 to 2001. Last year, President Bush signed the Energy Policy Act of 2005 to assist tribes in the development of energy.

I am grateful to the President for this support—because it supports our cultural commitment to natural environmental harmony, and our belief that we must be caretakers of the land we cherish. We look forward to working with the Administration on the implementation of the law in the same spirit.

NUMBER 4: THE TRUST SETTLEMENT

The fourth and final Step is the trust settlement: The fact that the Cobell litigation remains unsettled impedes our progress with the federal government on nearly all other issues.

This litigation has dragged on for ten years and recent decisions indicate that it will be delayed many more years, with diminishing chances of a favorable outcome. This litigation is diverting money from other needs and creating an environment in the Administration that makes it hard to move on to other issues.

The solution is straightforward: let's settle Cobell fairly and quickly, and then let's move ahead. We want Congress to deal with this in good faith and then allow us all to put it behind us. Whatever the settlement turns out to be, the ongoing years of delay will cost millions in lost opportunity. Let's move on.

CONCLUSION

As Indians, our lives are defined by our history and our rich cultures.

We believe in elevating virtue to a way of life. We believe in family, tradition, and self-determination. Our tribes exist as nations with sovereign and independent governments. And we are keenly aware of the challenges we face in providing for our people.

I believe the way to meet those challenges is through these Four Great Steps: Public Safety; Healthcare; our economy and infrastructure and the education of our young people. And finally, the speedy achievement of a reasonable trust settlement.

The state of the Indian Nations is strong. This is a plan for making it stronger. And I am confident that this will happen.

Most of you here know that from where we are today, it is only a few blocks to the newest memorial on the Mall, the National Museum of the American Indian. The exhibits inside tell our story. But the Museum's presence on the Mall itself, in the last unoccupied ground before the Capitol, shows the world the unbreakable bond between the Indian Nations and the United States of America.

Our fates are bound together. This is where we belong.

Just as the Four Directions show a way to live, these Four Great Steps show a way to grow. I look forward to seeing this progress for the benefit of us all.

Thank you.