

**The Timeless Promise of America:  
Renewed Hope in Indian Country**  
8<sup>th</sup> Annual State of Indian Nations Address  
Joe A. Garcia, President  
National Congress of American Indians  
February 10, 2009  
Washington, D.C.

**Introduction**

*Tribal leaders, Members of the Administration, Members of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, Congressional staff members, Indian organizations, friends and family, and all those listening or watching across the country:*

As we gather here in this historic museum next to the U.S. Capitol, I call upon the Great Spirit to be with us, to watch over the Indian Nations and the United States of America.

Let us begin by pausing for a moment to honor our veterans, heroes and warriors in the United States Armed Forces who stand in harm's way at this hour—stand on our behalf—to protect freedom and our liberty.

**[PAUSE SILENTLY, HEAD BOWED, FOR ABOUT 15 SECONDS]**

Thank you.

## **The State of the Indian Nations**

My term as President is coming to an end, and as I stand before you today for this, the last time I deliver this annual address, I am proud to report that the State of Indian Nations is more promising... and more hopeful... than it has ever been in this new era of self-determination.

There were goals that seemed distant, but we have reached them.

There were strides that seemed too great, but we have made them.

And though there is always more work to be done and more victories to be won, we will achieve them, as well.

The work goes on. It goes on together.

We are propelled forward not merely by our own efforts but also by the character of our great people... by our ancestors... and by our history. We are borne on the backs of great men, great times, great deeds, and great tradition.

If we want true wisdom, we must begin by tending our roots, for they are the source of our character, and of whatever wisdom we hope to know.

Every accomplishment we make is an expression of the heart of the Indian Nations.

These successes are more than the preservation of our culture. They are the tools with which we change lives.

What is our success, really, if it does not change a human life?

Our success has been monumental:

- We have helped lead the White House anti meth initiative, helped gain the President's signature on legislation honoring Native Code Talkers from World Wars I and II; and have made improvements in our tribal courts, advanced our agenda for children, and found ways to use environmental initiatives to help tribes boost their economies while preserving mother earth.
- And three months ago, Native Americans made history on Election Day by participating in the democratic process in record numbers. We saw first-hand that when candidates show they care about Indian issues, Native people support them at the polls.

My brothers and sisters, with an open hand and a full heart, I thank you for all your effort and support, and I congratulate you on all we have accomplished together. These kinds of successes happen when we look to our culture... our history... and our ancestors to guide us in all that we do.

Today, Indian tribes are re-building our nations in ways that honor our ancestors and cultures while meeting the demands and leveraging the opportunities of the modern world.

To witness the revitalization of Indian Country is to witness the promise of America, fulfilled.

But as we begin this new era of transformation and revitalization for our nations, we must also keep in mind the stark realities we face:

- While the United States faces an economy in recession, great swaths of Indian Country have been in an economic depression for decades. Many of our communities comprise the poorest counties in the country.
- In every relevant program area for Indian issues—from education and public safety to the environment, infrastructure, and health care—federal funding lags behind the average for the rest of the United States.

## **Our Hope for the New Administration**

The President has given us good reason to believe he will include Indian Nations as he talks about a new spirit of hope and change.

During the campaign, President Obama pledged to appoint an American Indian policy adviser to his senior White House staff, and to host an annual summit at the White House with tribal leaders to establish a practical agenda for tribal communities.

As a candidate, he visited New Mexico and met with Pueblo leaders on several occasions.

He traveled to Montana and was adopted by the Crow Nation.

In his election-night victory speech, and on his whistle-stop tour to Washington, President Obama acknowledged Native Americans.

That is why we embrace the promised White House summit between tribal leaders and the Obama Administration.

Before assuming his cabinet post, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar met with tribal leaders and pledged to work hand-in-hand with us to address the challenges we face.

So when the President says that Indian Nations are a priority for his new Administration, I take him at his word. I look forward to new respect for tribal sovereignty, and a new focus on the importance of nation-to-nation relationships.

I look forward to Indian Country's greater inclusion and greater respect in this new vision for America and there is still much work to be done. So today I present our agenda in four areas:

- We seek a place at the table for Indian Nations in the economic recovery of this great nation;
- We seek transformational improvements to health care;
- We call for a fundamental, federal commitment to public safety; and
- We seek a new federal priority for the education of the children of Indian Nations.

## **Economic Recovery**

The first priority of our agenda is ensuring that the Indian Nations are included in the economic recovery.

The economic downturn is having a dramatic effect on the ability of tribal governments, like other governments, to administer basic functions. We call upon Congress and the new Administration to fully support Indian Nations in the American Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan for investment in tribal government infrastructure.

Many Alaska Natives are seeing the impact of the recession more than most. George Lamont, a tribal administrator in Tuluksak, Alaska, fears many tribal members may have their electricity shut off said because of the crisis and their inability to pay their bills due to high fuel costs.

They are having to chose between heating their homes and putting food on the table. Some say, if it weren't for school lunches, their kids would be starving. As dire as this situation is, federal assistance is not available.

The Tribal Government Economic Recovery plan includes vital support for shovel-ready projects that will create over 50,000 local jobs that could help families such as this. When tribes flourish, the whole region around them will also flourish.

Most Americans are unfamiliar with the kind of economic difficulty we're facing today. But eight of the ten poorest counties in the United States are home to Indian reservations, so to many

of those in Indian Country, this kind of economic suffering is—sadly—nothing new at all. For instance, economists forecast the unemployment rate will peak at 8.4 percent during this recession, potentially the lengthiest downturn since the Great Depression for the nation. Yet, Indian Country has had the highest unemployment rates of any other ethnic group—far higher than even the projections for the rest of the country.

In fact, 15 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native adults were unemployed in 2003 compared to 6 percent of the total population. The unemployment rate for American Indians on reservations in the U.S. was 22 percent in 2000 compared to the unemployment rate during the Great Depression at 25 percent.

We have a long history of improving our situation through our own efforts and self-determination. But the far-reaching effects of this downturn limits the impact of what we can do alone. Our need is as great as that of the rest of the nation, and we are truly an economic engine and prime investment that is being underused in this difficult time. Economic recovery in America must mean recovery for all Americans.

Congress is set to pass this week the American Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan, a bill that would include funds for tribes to build roads, schools, health care facilities and other infrastructure needs vital to life in Indian Country.

We ask only for what we have been promised in treaty and in law: support for the basic services that other Americans expect

on a daily basis: education, and health care, and keeping our streets and homes safe.

## Health Care

The second of my four points is health care.

One of the oldest treaties between the federal government and Indian Nations makes provision for providing health care. When the federal government fails to do their part, Native people have nowhere else to turn.

Ten years ago, Congress allowed the authorization for the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to expire.

For ten years, the federal government has failed not only to do the right thing, they have failed to uphold their obligation. The result is that Native people are suffering.

Reauthorization of this law would address the most basic elements of health care: doctors and nurses, mental health professionals, addiction counselors, and the medical equipment, facilities, even buildings required to provide even the most fundamental services.

It is heartbreaking to imagine that our leaders in Washington do not care, so I must believe that they do not know.

So allow me to paint a picture for you of healthcare in Indian Country. Take the story of 66 year old Cheyenne River Sioux tribal member Leonard Moses Fiddlerof. He died on New Year's Eve in the midst of confusion while an ambulance service was ordered not to take him to the hospital. Reports say the doctor on call told the ambulance drivers to take him back to his residence

or dump him in a ditch simply because there wasn't money to pay for his care.

Then there is Ta'Shon Rain Littlelight, a 5-year-old Crow girl from Montana who died in her mother's arms the night before she was to visit Disney World through the Make –A- Wish foundation, because her cancer was not diagnosed early enough.

And behind the stories are the statistics:

- Our infants have a death rate 40% higher than that of the majority of Americans
- Native youth are twice as likely to commit suicide.
- Our people battle the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes in the world.
- The life expectancy of Native peoples is five years less than that of other Americans.
- Most Indians see a doctor only when things have gotten so bad that they have to go to the emergency room.
- And if you walk into an emergency room on the reservation, it's like stepping into a clinic from 1975 – not a modern facility at all.

These statistics are an injustice. I implore the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress to reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act this year and send it to the President for his signature.

## **Public Safety**

I now address the need for fundamental change in all branches of federal government to enhance tribal public safety.

American Indians suffer violence far more often than the general population, and the numbers are stark.

The rate of aggravated assault against American Indians and Alaska Natives is roughly twice that of the country as a whole.

While crime rates have been falling in low-income communities throughout the United States, the crime rates in Indian Country are going up.

U.S. Attorneys have the sole authority to prosecute felony crime on most reservations, but between 1997 and 2006 they declined to prosecute 65 percent of all reservation cases. This compounds the problem—especially in comparison to the rest of the country. U.S. Attorneys turn down these cases twice as often as for all other federal crimes.

In fact, federal prosecutors respond least to the kinds of crime that affect Indian reservations the most: aggravated assault, domestic assault, sex crimes and drug crimes.

There is no simple reason for crime, just as there is no simple solution. But there are things that can be done to make daily life safer for Native people, to get crime rates under control, and there are things we can do to help keep young people from falling into criminal activity in the first place.

Public safety is the top budget priority for Indian Country and congressional appropriations should reflect that as well. We simply need more resources for officers and equipment.

Today we have released the Indian Country FY 2010 budget request which includes specific recommendations for public safety as well as the entire federal budget.

But there is something else Washington can do: Congress should take a hard look at the complicated and sometimes conflicting jurisdictional issues that make it difficult not only to prosecute crime but also to prevent it.

We are committed to working closely with the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to find and implement fundamental changes to make this happen, and I call for the Administration's commitment to that action.

## **Education**

Finally, I want to talk about education. I urge the new Administration to make it a priority to support greater academic success and educational growth for the children of the Indian Nations.

Native students are in crisis. American Indian and Alaska Native children continue to fall behind their peers. According to the recent National Indian Education Study, American Indian and Alaska Native students scored significantly lower than their peers in reading and math in both fourth and eighth grades.

Since 2005, Native students have been the only students to show no significant progress in either subject.

Ninety percent of Indian children are enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, but ten percent attend schools in their tribal communities.

These schools are supported solely by federal funds through the Bureau of Indian Education and have been overlooked and neglected for decades, most severely so in recent years.

And now our Native youth face some of the highest high school dropout rates in the country.

An investment in better schools will have a ripple effect on well-being and economic strength throughout Indian communities.

People who finish high school have a higher chance to earn more money and are typically more consistently employed. When those young people go on to college, their income and employment is enhanced even more. And when they finish college, the rates are higher still.

To ensure that Native students—from pre-school to college—meet the same challenging academic standards as other populations and experience the benefits of a quality and supportive education, the federal government must support sound educational facilities, culturally appropriate curricula, and opportunities for higher education.

More than 40% of American Indian college students are the first generation in their family to attend college.

A fifty-three year old single mother and grandmother, Sara Yazzie received her associate of arts degree in the law advocate program at Crownpoint Institute of Technology in New Mexico in 2005. She hopes to put her education to use serving her community by becoming a Navajo Nation tribal judge.

During the self-determination era the numbers of American Indian and Alaska Native post-secondary students has doubled and Ms. Yazzie should be proud to be part of that outstanding statistic.

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## **Conclusion**

As I think of the state of Indian Nations, I know that the spirit of our people is strong—but the needs of our people are great.

I am excited by the promise of a new day in Washington. Our new President has said that we must “be the change” we have been waiting for.

With all my heart, I believe this is the true and right thing to do. I hope that, as the President says, the waiting is over, because Indians have been waiting a long, long time for the government’s actions to meet our own.

We strive to create better tomorrows for the sake of our children and our grandchildren, and for all who will come after us.

If we cannot leave them something that is better than what we had, then our efforts are in vain. This is why we must take action, as we always have.

I am proud that we are people not just of hope but of action.

As the men and women of Indian Nations, we are carrying our part of the load and bearing our share of the burden. Yet our goals cannot be reached without the federal government honoring its long-standing, historic, and—yes—sacred commitment to us.

We look forward to meeting with White House officials at a summit to establish priorities for the agenda of Indian Nations;

I call on this new Administration and new Congress to end our wait for change by responding to the things I have talked about today.

To fully support investment in Indian Country as part of America's the American Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan for investment in Indian Country;

To reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act After a decade of delay, and send it to the President for his signature,

To institute fundamental change in all branches of federal government to enhance tribal public safety; and

To uphold the sworn federal obligation to help educate our Native youth.

We seek a better world for Native people, but we also seek to more fully participate as citizens of the country we love, the United States of America — our home.

With these new winds of change in the land, and a new Administration committed to positive change, I sense a great opportunity for us all.

## **Conclusion: The Lincoln Canes**

In closing, let me leave you with a hopeful thought.

I sense a connection with this new Administration that I could not have anticipated, and it is even more relevant as I begin my final year as President of NCAI while President Obama begins his first year as the President of us all.

I am Ohkang from Ohkay Owingeh. Over 150 years ago, in 1858, the U.S. recognized the sovereign rights of the Pueblo Nations to the land granted us by Spain 200 years before.

On this occasion, Indians from 19 pueblos of New Mexico came to Washington, D.C., to meet with President Abraham Lincoln. He presented each Pueblo with a silver-headed cane engraved with Lincoln's name and with the year, 1863.

We call these the Lincoln Canes. They symbolize recognition of sovereignty, authority and honor. We are proud to carry them into history as a constant reminder of the great bond between our people and America herself.

President Obama has often cited President Lincoln as a model for his own time in Washington.

As President Obama strives to unite America in these troubled times, I ask this: To think often of the Indian Nations, to answer the call of Native peoples, and to uphold the commitment to all of us just as President Lincoln did in a time of even more profound and difficult American change.

What a marvelous connection we have to this young and exciting new President... president Obama and to America.

I call upon the Great Spirit to be with us all, to bind us together, and to lead us, through both wisdom and action, to the greatness that is before us in this stirring time – and always.

Thank you.

**END**