

## President Obama's Tribal Nations Meeting

President Obama's written promise that he would meet personally with the leaders of the 564 federally recognized Tribes was delivered to the Tribes on Oct. 14 during the 66<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Congress of American Indians in Palm Springs, Calif.

As promised, the historic White House Tribal Nations Conference with the president and the federally recognized Tribes was held in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 5, 2009.

Because of the expected number of attendees, the meeting was held at the Department of Interior. I arrived at 6:45 a.m., joining hundreds of people who were already waiting. The meeting started at 9 a.m., chaired by Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar.

Newly elected NCAI President Jefferson Keel of the Chickasaw Nation introduced President Obama – to a standing ovation.

I appreciated the thoughtful way the president addressed critical Indian issues, especially because of his many other pressing demands, i.e., the devastation of our nation's economy and health systems, the urgent need for decisions on Afghanistan and other issues around the world.

Despite these pressures, the president took the time to commit himself to address critical Tribal issues and the strengthening of the nation-to-nation relationships between the federal and Tribal governments.

I would like to share with you some highlights of the president's remarks. He said, in part:

"It's now been a year since the American people went to the polls and gave me this extraordinary privilege and responsibility. And part of what accounts for the hope people felt on that day, I think, was a sense that we had an opportunity to change the way Washington worked; a chance to make our federal government the servant not of special interests, but of the American people. It was a sense that we had an opportunity to bring about meaningful change for those who had for too long been excluded from the American Dream."

"... We know the history that we share. It's a history marked by violence and disease and deprivation. Treaties were violated. Promises were broken. You were told your lands, your religion, your culture, your languages were not yours to keep. And that's a history that we've got to acknowledge if we are to move forward."

"... We also know our more recent history, one in which too often Washington thought it knew what was best for you. There was little consultation between governments ... I know that you may be skeptical that this time will be any different ... And I know what an extraordinary leap of faith that is on your part ... and that's why I want you to know that I'm absolutely committed to moving forward with you and forging a new, a better, future together. It's a commitment that's deeper than our unique nation-to-nation relationship. It's a commitment to getting this relationship right, so that you can be full partners in the American economy, and so your children and your grandchild-



Delores Pigsley

## Chairman's Report

dren can have an equal shot at pursuing the American Dream.

"I promised you a voice on my senior staff in the White House so that you'd have a seat at the table when important decisions are being made about your lives, your nations and your people. And that's why I appointed Kimberly Teehee of the Cherokee Nation as my Native American policy advisor; and Jodi Gillette of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to work directly with all of you. That's why Secretary Salazar and I selected Larry Echo Hawk of the Pawnee Nation to serve as Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs here at Interior ...

"I promised you we'd host this conference to develop an agenda that works for your communities because I believe Washington can't – and shouldn't – dictate a policy agenda for Indian country."

"... Today's summit is not lip service. Today's sessions are part of a lasting conversation that's crucial to our shared future ... If we're going to address the needs of Native Americans in a comprehensive way, then we've got to mount a comprehensive response."

"... A major step toward living up to that responsibility is the Presidential memorandum that I'll be signing at this desk in just a few moments ... The memorandum I'll sign directs every Cabinet agency to give me a detailed plan within 90 days of how – the full implementation of that executive order and how we're going to improve tribal consultation. After all, there are challenges we can only solve by working together and we face a serious set of issues right now."

"... We face our economic crisis, in which we took bold and swift action, including in your communities. We allocated more than \$3 billion of the Recovery Act to help with some of your most pressing needs, like rebuilding and renovating schools on reservations across the country ... We provided more than \$100 million in loans to spur job creation in tribal economies ... And we made sure my budget included significant increases in funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian

Health Services and other agencies that have critical roles to play ...

"But if we're going to bring real and lasting change for Native Americans, we need a comprehensive strategy ... Part of that strategy is health care. We know that as long as Native Americans die of illnesses like tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes, pneumonia and influenza at higher rates than the rest of the population, then we're going to have to do more to address disparities in health care delivery."

"We invested \$500 million under the Recovery Act to strengthen and modernize the IHS and that's why my budget proposes an increase of 13 percent in IHS."

"When it comes to creating jobs, closing the opportunity gap and leaving something better for our future generations, few areas hold as much promise as clean energy. Up to 15 percent of our potential wind energy resources are on Native American land and the potential for solar energy is even higher ... Under Secretary Salazar's leadership, we're looking for new opportunities to ensure that you have a say in planning for the transmission grid. We're streamlining and expediting the permit process for energy development and transmission across tribal lands. We are securing tribal access to financing and investments for new energy projects. And thanks to the Recovery Act, we've established an Energy Auditor Training Program that could prepare Native Americans for the green jobs of the future."

"But the future of Indian Country rests on something more: the education we provide our children. We know that Native Americans face some of the lowest matriculation rates and highest high school and college dropout rates. That's why the Recovery Act also includes \$170 million for Indian education – and \$277 million for Indian school construction. And that's why my budget provides \$59 million in advanced funding for tribal colleges that are often economic lifelines for a community."

"... And none of our efforts will take root if we can't even guarantee that our communities are safe – safe places to learn, safe places to grow, safe places to thrive ... so tribes need support in strengthening their law enforcement capability. They need better resources and

more training ... And my administration fully appreciates the complexity and challenges you face when it comes to the criminal justice system on tribal lands. But we need to have serious conversations with regard to all aspects of your public safety and that's a conversation my administration is committed to having."

"So this is a challenge we take very seriously ... The Department of Justice, the Department of Interior, the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services are all working on ways to empower tribal governments to ensure greater safety in their own communities."

"... I also strongly support the Tribal Law and Order Act and I thank Chairman Dorgan and Representative Herseth Sandlin for their leadership on this issue. And I look forward to Congress passing it so I can sign it."

"... So there's a lot of work to be done today ... Over the last few years, I've had a chance to speak with Native American leaders across the country about challenges you face and those conversations have been deeply important to me ... Even though our experiences are different, I understand what it means to be on the outside looking in. I know what it means to feel ignored and forgotten and what it means to struggle. So you will not be forgotten as long as I'm in this White House."

"Together, working together, we're going to make sure that the First Americans, along with all Americans, get the opportunities they deserve. So, with that, if I'm not mistaken, I am in a position to start signing the memorandum ..."

The president concluded his speech by signing the presidential memorandum directing every Cabinet agency to present a detailed plan within 90 days of how it proposes to better collaborate with Tribal governments.

The day before the presidential address, Tribal officials were invited to spend a full day with all members of the president's Cabinet (except for the Secretaries of Defense and State) and with several members of the U.S. Congress.

At the end of the day, the president returned to close our meeting which, understandably, was cut short because of the Ft. Hood disaster.

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