

honored to speak to you all, but especially to address representatives of the more than 5 million Native people and the 566 Tribal nations of Indian Country.

The State of Indian Nations is strong. Our nations are strong. Our peoples are strong. Like our sovereignty, the strength of our nations is our inheritance. The State of Indian Nations, as I outline it today, should be defined by what we commit to right now to make the state of Indian Nations even stronger in the years to come.

We all know Tribes have faced a difficult history. We are rising from harsh economic conditions to contribute to a more prosperous tomorrow. Tribes have been doing more with less for generations and I am here today to outline a path to overcome our shared challenges – to lay out specific economic changes and improvements for our Tribal nations. Some of these changes require legislative action but many others can come from direct action by the administration. Ultimately though, it will be the actions of Native people that can change their nations and communities.

Native people are the first Americans. Tribal nations are its first governments – one of three sovereigns recognized in the United States Constitution. And our America is a place where each member of the American family of governments contributes to a prosperous future.

Native Vote in this election year

To achieve that vision, we need leaders who understand that Indian Country matters. Especially in a presidential election year! We're all aware of the impact an election can have on Indian Country. And in recent years, many have come to learn that the door swings both ways – Indian Country can have a significant impact on elections – and it can be game-changing.

As grandmas on the Navajo Nation and young people in Alaska Native villages go to the ballot box this November, they are standing on the shoulders of those who fought hard for that right. As students at Arizona State University and veterans in foreign lands cast their vote, they are reminding America that we matter.

In the 1940s, thousands of Native veterans returned home to a shocking reality: America had accepted them on the battlefield, but had no place for them at the ballot box.

Ira Hayes – a member of the Gila River Indian Community who raised the flag at Iwo Jima – returned to the homeland he had defended and was denied the right to vote. Miguel Trujillo from Isleta Pueblo, who enlisted as a Marine in the days following Pearl Harbor, returned home to New Mexico and was denied the right to vote.

These American heroes inspired the fight – all the way to the federal courts – for the right to participate in the 1948 elections. They expressed the power of the Native vote the first time they cast their ballots and it's been at work ever since.

Stories like these have shown Native people that when it comes to Native Vote, we can and we must think big. Simply put, we will work tirelessly in 2012 to see the highest Native turnout ever.

We know it can be done. For instance, on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana, turnout rates are regularly over 80 percent. A survey of seniors at UCLA showed that Native young people participate at rates higher than any other group of students. This is especially important because almost half a million Native youth will be eligible to vote for the first time in the next four years.

We already know Indian Country impacts elections but we offer even more potential. In 2008, one out of every three Native citizens was not registered to vote – that's more than 1 million people. So it comes down to one simple message – register and vote. We will work tirelessly with Native people from across America to make sure all of Indian Country participates in 2012. The stakes are too high for us to stay home on Election Day.

Native people don't see the world in two- and four-year election cycles. We're focused on building stronger communities for generations to come. When we step in the ballot box, we want to vote for candidates who will stand with Tribal nations to create a strong prosperous future. We are not mobilizing for one party or for one candidate. Indians don't just vote D for Democrat or R for Republican. For us, it's "I" for Indian. We are independent voters and we will continue to vote for the candidate who is strong on our issues and cares about our priorities.

That's why today, I'm calling on all presidential candidates to make sure Indian Country is at the table during the campaign and throughout your administration. These specific actions should form the foundation of your Native policy platform:

First, we call on the president to send a special message to Congress on the importance of the nation-to-nation relationship. In 1970, President Nixon sent a historic message to Congress on Tribal self-determination. That message launched the self-determination era – the very framework that allowed Tribes to prove our capacity as governments. All presidents should do the same.

Second, we call on the president to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We specifically call for a review of all existing federal law to ensure they are in alignment with the declaration.

Third, we call for an Annual Nation-to-Nation Summit and ongoing high-level meetings. This would institutionalize the current Tribal Nations Summit, a meaningful commitment to our nation-to-nation relationship that must be upheld by all future presidents. We also call on the president to convene regular meetings on specific issues between Tribal leaders and cabinet secretaries.

Fourth, elevate Native people in the federal government. It is past time for qualified Native people to be seated on the federal bench. The appointment of a senior advisor on Native American Affairs has advanced policymaking at the White House and we applaud President Obama for his leadership. With the importance of the Indian budget in the coming decade, we urge the creation of an office for

Visit Native Christian Conference

The 2012 Native Christian Conference will feature two days of spiritual discussions and insights about unity in the Body of Christ on March 9-10 at the Seven Feathers Casino Resort in Canyonville, Ore.

The event also will include American Indian dancing, praise and worship, and general fellowship.

The conference begins at 1 p.m. on March 9. Rev. Izabel Weedman will be the first speaker in the afternoon.

After the dinner break, the evening service will feature praise and worship. The first evening speaker will be Pastor Larry Gatlin, with Pastor Ellson Bennett from Arizona closing the service.

On March 10, the program begins at 10 a.m. with praise and worship. We will honor people in the military, pastors and Tribal leaders of the community. The speaker for the morning

session will be Rev. Millie Salt. At noon, we will break for lunch.

The conference will resume at 2 p.m. with two speakers, Pastor Randy Ives and Tribal Chairman Don Gentry of Chiloquin. Prayer and encouragement will take place from 3:30-5:30 p.m. and a healing room will be available.

The closing session will start at 7 p.m. with Pastor Don Causey as the first speaker and Pastor Bennett concluding the services.

Various vendors will have Indian handcrafted items for sale.

For conference reservations or additional information, please call Millie Salt at 928-775-6897; e-mail her at salt_of_the_earth513@hotmail.com; or write to her at 6125 N Michele Lane, Prescott, AZ 86305.

Tickets are \$15 for two days or \$10 for a day and are available at the door.

Native American programs at Office of Management Budget.

And finally, we call upon all candidates to actively engage Indian Country in your campaign. We invite each candidate to visit Indian Country to outline your policy positions. We also urge the campaigns to make sure Tribal nations are part of the discussion at the presidential debates.

Opportunities for congressional action

Between now and the election, we have a lot of work to do! For all of the partisan challenges of the past year, the Congress has found common ground on Indian policy. Under the bipartisan leadership of Senators Akaka and Barrasso, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs has worked tirelessly across party lines to develop legislation that promises to transform Indian Country. And in the House, Republicans like Chairman Don Young and Democrats like Dale Kildee have worked hard to educate their colleagues about the benefits Tribal governments offer our nation.

There are some important things the Congress can do right now that can grow Indian economies and create jobs. Without spending a dime, the Congress can fix the problems created by the Carcieri Supreme Court decision and offer certainty for land-into-trust transactions that are critical to Indian Country's economic future.

The Department of the Interior is already acting to streamline lease approvals for renewable energy development and we urge the Congress to pass the HEARTH Act to expand leasing reform and to pass an Indian energy self-determination law.

Congress can also act on public safety legislation that will attract businesses to our communities. We urge passage of amendments to the Stafford Act that are supported by FEMA and would remove burdens from states and Tribes in times of critical emergencies when lives are on the line.

Native women are the protectors of our culture, our families and our future. We call on the Senate to pass the Violence

Against Women Act Reauthorization and the SAVE Native Women Act – both of which would take critical steps to address the horrific rates of violence being perpetrated against our women.

The Native CLASS Act offers the chance to provide the kind of education our young people need to succeed today and build the economies Indian Country needs for tomorrow. Our young people must not be left behind anymore.

Congress must stand with us now to get these bills passed, but long-term success depends on America keeping her promises. That's why NCAI, along with our partners in Indian Country, are making available to you today our plan for the Indian budget.

This document outlines our vision for investing in the future of our America and stabilizing the Indian budget. It will create reliable, safe domestic energy; it will build a 21st century education system; it will modernize our infrastructure; and it will fund implementation of critical legislation like the Tribal Law & Order Act and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

Just as our plan holds hope for the future, the Budget Control Act poses great risks. The act requires Congress to cap discretionary spending for the next 10 years. Much of the funding that fulfills the federal trust responsibility is categorized – wrongly, in our view – as domestic discretionary spending.

The trust responsibility is not a discretionary choice. It is not a line item. It is a solemn agreement that has been sustained over hundreds of years. Unless Congress acts to hold Tribal programs harmless, then starting in 2013 we are facing 10 to 15 percent cuts across the board for the next decade – cuts that will threaten essential services and affect millions of Native citizens throughout vast regions of rural America.

We are well aware of the budget challenges our nation faces. We live in Indian Country – we know all about doing more with less. We urge Congress to stand up for the relatively small piece of the federal budget that belongs to Tribal nations and our citizens.

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