

13th Annual State of Indian Nations Address

Remarks by Brian Cladoosby, President • National Congress of American Indians

Jan. 22, 2015 • Knight Studio, Newseum • Washington, D.C.

My fellow Tribal leaders, members of Congress, members of the administration, friends and partners gathered here and watching from home.

I want to thank the Creator for this beautiful day, for allowing me the privilege of representing Indian Country and for providing the opportunity to honor our history and celebrate the promise of our nation-to-nation relationship.

In this week when we remembered a great civil rights leader, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and when our president delivered his annual State of the Union address, it is fitting that we take this time to consider the transformation and change that is under way in Indian Country.

Today, Indian Country is leading. Indian Country is innovating. Indian Country is growing. And the state of Indian nations grows stronger by the day.

Tribal nations are steadily reclaiming our rightful place among the American family of governments. And we are doing this despite antiquated ways of thinking about Native peoples and Tribal governments and outdated policies that belong to another century.

We are not where we want to be in our relationship with the federal government, but we are also glad that we are not where we used to be.

Today, I bring a simple message from the Tribes of the 21st century: We must tear down barriers to growth, simplify regulations that are limiting opportunities and acknowledge that Tribes have the capability as governments to oversee our own affairs. As we reach out to the federal government as a partner, we must continue to insist that the United States honors its trust responsibility to Native peoples.

Honoring its trust responsibility means recognizing Indian Country's legal authority to control its own destiny.

It means respecting Native peoples for who we are, not who others think we are. And it means modernizing the trust relationship between our nations.

These are things we can and must do, as a united Indian Country. We are determined to create opportunities for success – within our borders and beyond.

This is a remarkable moment for Indian Country

This is a remarkable moment in our shared history.

For the 566 federally recognized Tribal nations and many state recognized Tribes, for the more than 5 million Native people living in cities or on reservations across this land, these are the days that our ancestors prayed for. We must seize the opportunity to sustain our progress.

As the 21st president of the National Congress of American Indians, I have been privileged to witness great progress over the past few years, from our families to our Tribal councils to Capitol Hill.

We worked with Republicans, Democrats and Independents in Congress to make Indian Country safer by reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act.

We made Indian Country healthier by working together to permanently reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

We made Indian Country fairer by passing the Tribal General Welfare Exclusion Act to ensure that Indian people aren't unjustly taxed for benefits they receive from their own Tribal governments.

In the last six years, we have seen Congress and the administration work together to pass an unprecedented number of bipartisan bills that will improve opportunities for our peoples.

Last month, I was proud to join hundreds of Tribal leaders from across the nation as we participated in the sixth annual Tribal Nations Summit with President Obama.

And, of course, 2014 was also the year that we were privileged to have President Obama visit one of our Tribal homelands. The president told me his trip to the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation had a profound impact. He urged his Cabinet to follow his lead and make visiting Indian Country a priority.

Today, I want to make a personal invitation to Speaker Boehner, Leader Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Reid – as well as every member of Congress: Come to Indian Country this year.

Just today, several members of Congress, a Cabinet secretary and representatives of the administration are visiting the Navajo Nation.

Let's make that visit the beginning of a year of unprecedented engagement between Tribal nations and our federal partners.

We lost a personal hero of mine: Billy Frank Jr.

Among all the gains in recent years, we've also suffered some losses. Close to my heart and to many across Indian Country was the loss of my friend and mentor, a Native American hero, an American hero – Billy Frank Jr.

Billy, like me, was from the Pacific Northwest. His people, the Nisqually nation, are fishing people, like my people.

At age 14, he was arrested for exercising his treaty rights by fishing in the Nisqually River.

As Billy put it, he wasn't a policy guy. He was a getting arrested guy. Over the years, he was arrested more than 50 times. That's one of Billy's accomplishments that I have yet to achieve.

And those arrests laid the groundwork for an historic judicial ruling, later affirmed by the Supreme Court, which acknowledged that our treaties reserved our right to fish where we had for generations.

After all, our rights as sovereign nations were not granted by the Constitution. They existed before there was a Constitution.

How we got here: The brief history of our trust relationship

Now, if you don't know who Billy Frank was, you're not alone. The his-

tory that he lived – that our people have lived – is a history that's not often taught in schools.

But it is essential to understanding the connection between our nations, the trust that defines our partnership and the responsibility that is entrusted to all federal officials – especially members of Congress.

That's why, as long as I knew him, Billy had the same message: Tell your story, tell your story, tell your story. Billy knew that no one could tell our story better than we can.

So for those who don't know, let me tell you the story of our trust relationship.

If the story has a theme, it's a story of pride and resilience book-ended by self-determination on either end.

There are many people who believe that when Europeans got to this land and moved west, they simply claimed empty Indian land for themselves. But that's not true.

When my grandfather and Billy's grandfather were young, the U.S. government signed more than 400 treaties.

In fact, it was 160 years ago today that my dad's great-grandfather, Kalkah-tsoot, signed the Point Elliott Treaty between the Swinomish Tribe and the United States. My dad proudly carries on that name. Dad is 81 years old and – like his namesake – he inspires me every day.

Tribal nations like ours accepted a smaller land base. In exchange, the federal government made three basic promises: To guard our right to govern ourselves. To enable Tribal governments to deliver essential services. And to help manage our remaining lands and resources in our best interests.

These treaties are older than many U.S. state constitutions. In fact, the Point Elliott Treaty preceded the existence of the State of Washington by three and a half decades. All of our treaties continue to stand as the "supreme law of the land."

Every member of Congress and federal official is responsible for carrying out that trust, whether a member has a Tribe in their district or not. Part of their job description is to make sure that the United States of America honors its commitments and lives up to its word.

After all, this trust – it's not a handout, it's a contract. It's a commitment. And it's their duty to honor it.

Invite you to see: Tribal nations are leading and innovating

So, why do I mention this history now?

The nation-to-nation relationship between the United States of America and Indian Country has reached a crossroads.

Many Tribes today are on the forefront of innovative, 21st century governance. Don't take my word for it. As I mentioned earlier, I invite you to come and see for yourselves:

Come to the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, where you will see homes as old as 700 years being rehabilitated. The name

of the pueblo says it all: Place of the Strong People.

Come to Shaktoolik, Alaska, where you will meet the first cavity-free elementary classes. It is the direct result of the dental health therapist workforce – the first of its kind in the nation. To date, 40,000 people have been treated at 30 percent of the cost. Now, other states are studying how they can replicate the success in Alaska.

Come to Lummi Nation, where you'll see the first Tribally developed and operated commercial wetland mitigation bank in the United States – more than 2,000 acres that are creating income streams for the Tribal government while preserving fishing streams for salmon and shellfish.

Many Tribes are engines of economic growth, not just for Native people but for non-Native people, too. In fact, there are nearly a quarter million Native-owned businesses across the United States.

The five Tribes in Idaho contribute more than \$850 million to the state's economy and have increased statewide employment by more than 10,000 jobs.

The 11 Tribal nations in Minnesota have collectively contributed more than \$2.7 billion to the local economy while employing 41,000 Native and non-Native Minnesotans.

These are more than Native American success stories. They are American success stories. And we're ready to write many more in the years to come.

Of course, there is much more work to be done. Too many of Indian Country's reservations and communities are a long way from prosperity. Too many Tribal communities are still plagued by high unemployment rates, high dropout rates, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, and an appalling suicide epidemic.

Together, we believe we can overcome these challenges.

Trust is based on respect

Of course, trust itself is based on respect. Part of modernizing our trust relationship means modernizing the way Native people are respected and our civil rights are upheld.

For this reason, I want to address an issue the National Congress of American Indians has worked on for almost 50 years. I want to talk about the stereotypes and degradation that Native peoples continue to be subjected to in our society.

In particular, I want to talk about the name of the Washington, D.C., football team.

Allow me to read from the pages of a Minnesota newspaper published one September day in 1863: "The State reward for dead Indians has been increased to \$200 for every red-skin sent to Purgatory. This sum is more than the dead bodies of all the Indians east of the Red River are worth."

History is clear on what that vile word meant: It was the scalped head of an American Indian man, woman or child

Continued on next page