

Tribal Council members attend summit

Kennedy, Tom join fellow Native leaders in meeting with President Obama and his administration

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and Tribal Council Secretary Kathleen Tom attended the second annual Tribal Nations Summit in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, Dec. 16, and heard President Barack Obama and his administration's representatives continue their pledge to make American Indian and Alaska Native governments "full and equal partners in our federal family."

The Tribal Nations Summit was attended by hundreds of Tribal leaders from the 565 federally recognized Tribes in the United States and featured a keynote speech from President Obama and attendance by nine members of his Cabinet.

In addition, several members of Congress and senior administration officials attended.

"His commitment remains strong," Kennedy said during the Dec. 22 Tribal Council meeting about Obama's dealings with Indian Country. "There has been a flurry of activity (on Indian issues) compared to previous efforts."

After Interior Secretary Ken Salazar offered opening remarks, the colors were presented by the Navajo Code Talkers Color Guard. Hunter Street, a 7-year-old member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation and Spirit Lake Dakota, sang the Lakota flag song and Gov. James Lujan (Taos Pueblo) gave the invocation.

President Fawn Sharp of the Quinault Indian Nation in Washington state introduced President Obama.

Obama told Native representatives about the accomplishments of his administration and said that the United States would support

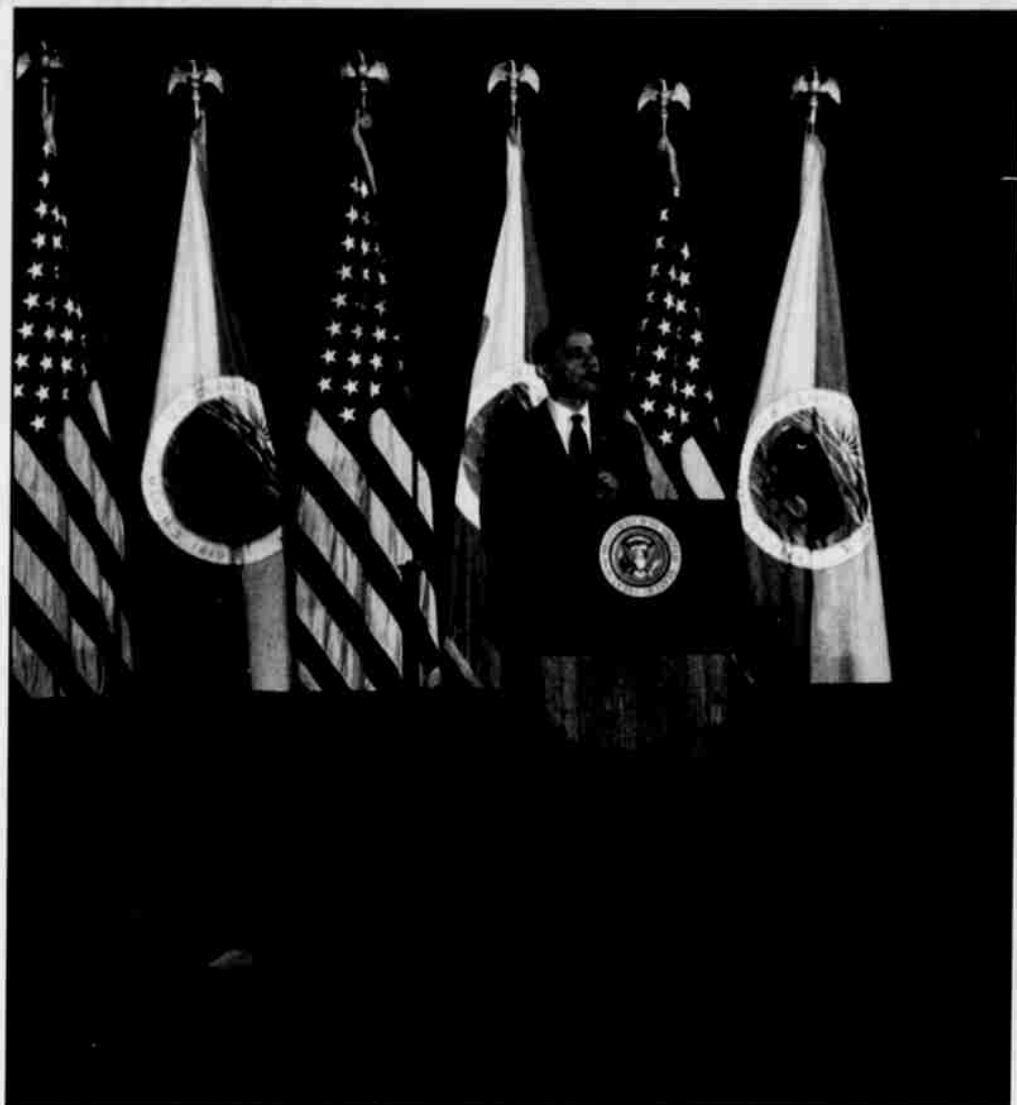


Photo courtesy of the National Congress of American Indians

President Barack Obama addresses the White House Tribal Nations Summit in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, Dec. 16.

the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. He said the United States would continue to fulfill "the aspirations it affirms - including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples."

The day before the Tribal Nations Summit, Obama met with 12 Tribal leaders to continue "conversations that began long before I was president," he said, emphasizing that he wants to hear more about "how we can strengthen the relationship between our governments."

Obama and Salazar cited several

administrative successes, from permanently authorizing the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to settling discrimination claims brought by Native American farmers and ranchers against the U.S. Department of Agriculture to helping to rebuild Native American economies by investing in roads, school renovations and job training.

"We're making progress," Obama said. "We're moving forward. And what I hope is that we are seeing a turning point in the relationship between our nations. The truth is, for a long time, Native Americans were implicitly told that they had a choice to make. By virtue of the longstanding failure to tackle wrenching problems in Indian Country, it seemed as though you had to either abandon your heritage or accept a lesser lot in life; that there was no way to be a successful part of America and a proud Native American."

"But we know this is a false choice. To accept it is to believe that we can't and won't do better. And I don't accept that. I know there is not a single person in this room who accepts that either. We know that, ultimately, this is not just a matter of legislation, not just a matter of policy. It's a matter of whether we're going to live up to our basic values. It's a matter of upholding an ideal that has always defined who we are as Americans. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one."

After Obama's speech, Tribal leaders attended one of five simultaneous breakout sessions that included "Nation-to-Nation Relationship" with Deputy Secretary

of the Interior David Hayes; "Education, Health Care and Community Services" with Indian Health Service Director Dr. Yvette Roubideaux; "Economic Development, Housing and Infrastructure" with Department of Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Del Laverdure; "Tribal Land, Cultural Protection and Natural Resources" with Department of Justice Assistant Attorney General Ignacia Moreno; and "Public Safety and Homeland Security" with Department of Interior Assistant Secretary Larry Echo Hawk.

Tom attended the work session with Moreno where she heard testimony from Alaskan Native Elders.

"There wasn't a lot of time for all Tribes to discuss their issues," Tom said. "That was one of the most moving testimonies I have ever heard. After listening to them, I felt like I didn't have anything to complain about. ... Their stories were just so moving about their infrastructure up on Alaska. Some of them said they get \$1,200 a year to live on and there's nothing there but their villages."

In his closing remarks, Salazar said that the large number of Cabinet secretaries and other senior administration officials attending the second Summit is "not something that President Obama does because he thinks he has to do it," but something he does because he wants to start a "whole new chapter" of working with Tribal leaders.

Salazar added that the Summit "is just a step in a long, continuing work."

"You don't undo 400 years of history in 19 months," Salazar said.

Also while in Washington, D.C., Kennedy attended the first meeting of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Tribal Advisory Committee on Dec. 13-14.

"Those were two jam-filled days," Kennedy said, adding that the experience was "invigorating."

Kennedy, who has 30 years of Indian health care expertise, was appointed to the committee on Dec. 6 by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and is one of 17 primary Tribal representatives picked to provide advice on Health and Human Services programs, including the Indian Health Service.

Kennedy informed Tribal Council on Dec. 21 that her primary role will be to notify the 43 Northwestern Tribes of actions taken by the Tribal Advisory Committee.

Also while in Washington, D.C., Kennedy and Tom visited Oregon's congressional delegation on Wednesday, Dec. 15, meeting with U.S. Reps. David Wu and Kurt Schrader and staff members from the offices of Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

"It was a great meeting in regards to getting to see some of our political people there," Tom said. ■

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