

**Remarks at the Tribal Nations Conference**

*November 13, 2013*

Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please, have a seat. Thank you, Karen, for the kind introduction.

A couple of people I want to introduce, or at least acknowledge. First of all, give it up for our outstanding new Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell. We're joined by several other members of my Cabinet, which reflects how much my administration values your partnership, the partnership with your communities. I want to thank the Members of Congress who are here.

I want to give, also, a special shout-out to one of my closest advisers, one of my oldest friends. But he's also a great friend to all of you, and he doesn't get a lot of credit, because he hates credit. He just likes to work behind the scenes. But he worked with many of you when he worked in the Senate. He has been a key adviser on Native American affairs for me throughout this process, and I could not be prouder of him: Mr. Pete Rouse. So give Mr. Pete Rouse a big round of applause.

Now, most of all, I want to thank all of you, especially the tribal leaders who are here today. And I understand, actually, we've got more tribal leaders here than we ever have at any of these conferences. So it just keeps on growing each year, which is wonderful news. You represent more than 300 tribal nations, each of you with your own extraordinary heritage, each a vital part of a shared American family. And as a proud adopted member of the Crow Nation, let me say *kaheé*—welcome—to all of you.

Now, after I became President, I said that, given the painful chapters and broken promises in our shared history, I'd make sure this country kept its promises to you. I promised that tribal nations would have a stronger voice in Washington, that as long as I was in the White House, it would be your house too. And for the past 5 years, my administration has worked hard to keep that promise, to build a new relationship with you based on trust and respect.

And this new relationship wasn't just about learning from the past. It was also about the here and now, recognizing the contributions that your communities make to enrich the United States every single day. Native Americans are doctors and teachers and business men and women and veterans and servicemembers. And they get up every morning and help make America stronger and more prosperous and more just.

And I want to build on our true government-to-government relationship as well. So I'm proud to have Native Americans serving with dedication in my administration, including Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn of the Chickasaw Nation; my Senior Adviser for Native American Affairs, Jodi Gillette of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; our Governmental [Intergovernmental]<sup>\*</sup> Affairs office, we've got Charlie Galbraith of the Navajo Nation. And I look forward to—so they worked so incredibly hard to make this conference possible, and I look forward to it every year.

I had the privilege of some of you coming to the White House yesterday. As we made clear in the Executive order earlier this year that established the White House Council on

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<sup>\*</sup> White House correction.

Native American Affairs, we have a unique legal and political relationship, one that's been affirmed many times in treaties, in statutes, and in the Constitution.

That's the unique relationship we honor today. That's the relationship we're called upon to sustain for the progress of all of our peoples. And while we should be proud of what we've achieved together in recent years, we also should be focused on all the work that we still have to do.

I know we've got members of the Iroquois Nations here today. And I think we could learn from the Iroquois Confederacy, just as our Founding Fathers did when they laid the groundwork for our democracy. The Iroquois called their network of alliances with other tribes and European nations a "covenant chain." Each link represented a bond of peace and friendship. But that covenant chain didn't sustain itself. It needed constant care so that it would stay strong. And that's what we're called to do, to keep the covenant between us for this generation and for future generations. And there are four areas in particular where I think we need to focus.

First, let's keep our covenant strong by strengthening justice and tribal sovereignty. We've worked with you in good faith to resolve longstanding disputes like establishing the Land Buy-Back Program to consolidate Indian lands and restore them to tribal trust lands. We've reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act so tribes can prosecute those who commit domestic violence in Indian Country, whether they're Native American or not. I signed changes to the Stafford Act, to let tribes directly request disaster assistance, because when disasters like floods or fires strike, you shouldn't have to wait for a middleman to get the help you need.

But there's more we can do to return more control to your communities. And that's why I'm urging Congress to reauthorize the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act, because your communities know your affordable housing needs better than Washington does. It's why we'll keep pushing Congress to pass the Carcieri fix, so that more tribal nations can put their land into Federal trust. And we've heard loud and clear your frustrations when it comes to the problem of being fully reimbursed by the Federal Government for the contracted services you provide, so we're going to keep working with you and Congress to find a solution. That's all going to be part of making sure that we're respecting the nation-to-nation relationship.

Now, second, we've got to keep our covenant strong by expanding opportunity for Native Americans. We've created jobs building new roads and high-speed Internet to connect more of your communities to the broader economy. We've made major investments in job training and tribal colleges and universities. But the fact remains, Native Americans face poverty rates that are higher by far than the national average. And that's more than a statistic, that's a moral call to action. We've got to do better.

So I said to some of you that I met with yesterday, growing our economy, creating new jobs is my top priority. We've got to stop the self-inflicted wounds in Washington. Because for many tribal nations, this year's harmful sequester cuts and last month's Government shutdown made a tough situation worse. Your schools, your police departments, child welfare offices are all feeling the squeeze. That's why I'm fighting for a responsible budget that invests in the things that we need in order to grow, things like education, and job training, and affordable housing and transportation, including for Native American communities. And we're going to work to make sure Native American-owned businesses have greater access to capital and to selling their goods overseas. So we've got to build the economy, create more opportunity.

Number three, we've got to keep our covenant strong by making sure Native Americans have access to quality, affordable health care just like everybody else. That's one of the reasons we fought hard to pass the Affordable Care Act, and we're working overtime to make sure the law works the way it's supposed to. For Native Americans, this means more access to comprehensive, affordable coverage. It permanently reauthorizes the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which provides care to so many in your communities.

And let me just give you one example of how this law is already working for tribal nations. Thanks to the ACA, the Puyallup Tribal Health Authority in Washington State created the country's first tribal family medicine residency program. Patients are cared for in a culturally sensitive way, often by Native American staff. And we're seeing results: a young physician caring for a revered tribal elder; a doctor who has delivered babies in the community for years, and now his son is also doing the same. And that's creating more quality health care, but also sustaining bonds between generations. That's progress that we need to build on.

And then the fourth area that we've got to work on is, let's keep our covenant strong by being good stewards of native homelands, which are sacred to you and your families. I saw the beauty of Crow Agency, Montana, when I was a candidate for this office. Next year, I'll make my first trip to Indian Country as President.

The health of tribal nations depends on the health of tribal lands. So it falls on all of us to protect the extraordinary beauty of those lands for future generations. And already, many of your lands have felt the impacts of a changing climate, including more extreme flooding and droughts. That's why, as part of the climate action plan I announced this year, my administration is partnering with you to identify where your lands are vulnerable to climate change, how we can make them more resilient.

And working together, we want to develop the energy potential of tribal lands in a responsible way and in accordance with tribal wishes. Over the last 4 years, we've more than doubled oil and gas revenues on tribal lands, a big reason why the United States is now more energy independent. So we're working with tribes to get more renewable energy projects, like solar and wind, up and running. Because your lands and your economies can be a source of renewable energy and the good local jobs that come with it.

So standing up for justice and tribal sovereignty, increasing economic opportunity; expanding quality health care, protecting native homelands—this is the foundation we can build on. This is the progress that we can make together.

And we don't have to look far for inspiration. Some of you know, Monday obviously was Veterans Day, a time to honor all who have worn America's uniform. I know everyone here is proud that Native Americans have such a high enlistment rate in our military. And we've seen generations of patriotic Native Americans who have served with honor and courage.

We draw strength from the Navajo code talkers whose skill helped win the Second World War. We draw strength from Woodrow Wilson Keeble, who many years after his death was finally awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism in the Korean War. We draw strength from—and I want to make sure I get this right—Lori Piestewa, who during the Iraq war was the first known Native American woman to give her life in combat for the United States. And we draw strength from all our men and women in uniform today, including two pilots I rely on when I step onto Marine One—Major Paul Bisulca, from the Penobscot Nation, and Major Eli Jones, of the Shoshone Bannock. And those guys are carrying me around, keeping me safe.

So on this Veterans Day week, even though it's technically not Veterans Day, I want to ask all the veterans in the audience—including several legendary Navajo code talkers who are here— if you can, please stand, accept our gratitude.

For generations, these men and women have helped keep our covenant strong. So now we've got to keep strong what they've built, for this and generations to come. It falls to us to keep America the place where no matter where you come from, what you look like, you can always make it as long as you try, as long as you work hard. And I know that that's what—all of you are working hard. That's what you represent as leaders of the communities that are represented here from coast to coast. I want you to know, that's what I'm working for. That's the partnership that I cherish, and I will cherish as long as I have the honor of serving as your President.

So thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:57 p.m. at the Department of the Interior. In his remarks, he referred to Karen R. Diver, chairwoman of the business committee, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa; Jodi Archambault Gillette, Senior Policy Adviser for Native American Affairs, Domestic Policy Council; Charles Galbraith, Associate Director, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement; Alan Shelton, clinical director, Puyallup Tribal Health Authority, and his son, clinic resident Austin Shelton; and Maj. Paul B. Biscula, USMC, and Maj. Eli Jones, USMC, Marine Helicopter Squadron One (HMX-1).

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : White House Tribal Nations Conference.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Bisulca, Paul B.; Diver, Karen R.; Galbraith, Charles; Gillette, Jodi Archambault; Jewell, Sarah M.R. "Sally"; Jones, Eli; Rouse, Peter M.; Shelton, Alan; Shelton, Austin; Washburn, Kevin K.

*Subjects:* American Indians and Alaska Natives : Domestic violence; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Health care system, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Job creation and growth; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Land trust and property rights, strengthening efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal nations, relations with Federal Government; American Indians and Alaska Natives : White House Tribal Nations Conference; Armed Forces, U.S.: Servicemembers :: Native American servicemembers; Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: U.S. production; Energy : Domestic sources; Environment : Climate change; Government organization and employees : Funding lapse and partial furlough; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Interior, Department of the : Indian Affairs, Assistant Secretary for; Interior, Department of the : Secretary; Veterans : Service and dedication; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Counselor; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement, Associate Director; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Native American Affairs, Senior Policy Adviser.

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