



NCAI State of Indian Nations 2022 Address

delivered by NCAI President Fawn Sharp

FINAL VERSION (February 14, 2022)

Raising the Bar: Advancing Advocacy for Indian Country

[Opening in Quinault language] Greetings! My name is Fawn Sharp.

It is my distinct honor and privilege to welcome those of you watching to the 20th Annual State of Indian Nations address! I am humbled to stand before you, once again, as President of the National Congress of American Indians. Today I am here to give a voice to all of those NCAI represents - to share the story of Indian Country's tenacious strength, our vibrant cultures, and to advance the government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the United States as equal and abiding partners.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the tribal leaders with us today, as well as the elders, advocates, youth, and ever-expanding network of partners and allies who would normally be seated right here in front of me. I also want to applaud the NCAI Board who are in attendance. It is because of your dedication and commitment to serving Indian Country that we were able to carry out NCAI's first-ever virtual elections during the 78th Annual Convention last fall. Thank you for your confidence, and we are honored to carry on the important work of this difference-making organization on your behalf, just as the NCAI founders intended.

Since the first time I stood here to deliver this address, much has changed in the world around us. Yet one reality remains; The 574 Tribal Nations, dozens of state-recognized Tribal Nations, and millions of Native peoples across the United

States are as strong and resilient as ever.

Make no mistake, there is plenty of work to be done. But while we have remained strong through headwinds and resistance, I want to take a brief moment to pause; to acknowledge and reflect upon where we are and the times we are in, and what we are going through during this global pandemic that has taken many lives and impacted us all tremendously. The strain on our communities, our people, and our leadership has kept us physically apart, when our power as Nations comes from gathering together, and precisely at the time when we need that connection the most. I ask that in this moment, you join me in taking a breath and moment of silence in an acknowledgement of those we've lost; the challenges that lie ahead; the cultures, communities, lands and the waters we fight to preserve; and for the gifts Creator has bestowed upon us to meet these challenges with good hearts and good minds.

Thank you.

We are here to protect the health and well-being of our communities. As such, this address is not only intended to provide insight into the State of Indian Nations, but to raise the bar for advocacy for Native peoples. To ensure our federal trustee gets behind the vision we have for our Tribal Nations and communities and to keep rebuilding our economies. To remove the barriers between where we stand now and the bright vision of Tribal Nations exercising our full spectrum of sovereignty. A task that cannot be accomplished by any individual – or one organization alone. It takes all of us –it takes Indian Country – to come together and create solutions, to build bridges, and forge a courageous pathway forward.

I must acknowledge the transformative leaders who came before us, guiding us with their knowledge and experience and laying the firm foundation for which we will carry this work on for generations to come. To my fellow tribal leaders that I now stand shoulder to shoulder with... Now, more than ever, NCAI needs your guidance, your partnership, and your help in order to shape our futures and meet the collective needs of our people.

When we move together as one, we are able to heighten the presence of Tribal Nations and claim our role as a vital part of the original American family of governments. The inclusion of Tribal Nations in political and public discourse over the past year has never been higher, and it's the decades of collective advocacy, education, and outreach that have set the stage for the moment that we are in. Our

voices have been heard loud and clear, and our strength and wisdom have been put on display.

Federal partners have heard our demands for partnership and support and have responded with historic investments and expanded engagement with Indian Country. In one of his first presidential memorandums since taking office, President Biden called for strengthening nation-to-nation relationships through enhanced tribal consultation. Doors that were once closed, are starting to open. Doors that we open have become more welcoming in ways that neither we nor our ancestors have ever witnessed. This is an important start. But it's up to us, fellow tribal leaders, to show up and walk through those doors so we can continue to push for meaningful consultation, for a stronger government-to-government relationship, and, ultimately, for free, prior and informed consent. Our sovereign status demands that the United States government seeks consensus and gets our consent before taking actions that affect our people, our lands, and our sacred sites and we will not rest until that is what we have.

However, in the year since the President's memorandum on tribal consultation, we have seen a concerted effort toward building stronger communication, better understanding of Indian Country's priorities, and enhancing partnerships. We are starting to see tangible progress.

In fact, we find ourselves in a time where strong Native leaders are being appointed to positions throughout the Biden Administration. Six Native Americans have been nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate - the most ever by any administration - and we hope more are to come.

We have witnessed the historic confirmation of Deb Haaland as Secretary of the Department of the Interior. The same Department our forebears once fought to educate on tribal issues now has a fierce Native woman - the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary - at the helm.

And that's just the beginning. We are also seeing the effect of an expanded commitment to Indian Country through policies and funding opportunities. Just this past year alone, more than \$45 billion dollars were marked for Indian Country directly in congressional spending and economic relief legislation.

Indian Health Services received more than \$6 billion to provide life-saving services, medical treatment, and vaccines to our communities.

When our Nations are provided the funding, the parity, the deference - we hold up and support our communities and citizens. With the funding and support from the economic relief packages, Tribal governments are now getting access to funding and programs that have been historically closed to our Nations.

In November, Congress passed a once-in-a-generation Infrastructure Bill with more than \$13 billion designated for Indian Country. This hard-won investment sprung from decades of tribal leader advocacy— and \$13 billion is only the beginning. Tribal governments are now eligible for funding and programs throughout the new law. We now call on the federal government to uphold a relationship based on respect and full of promise, to ensure these programs are implemented effectively. America is only as strong as the foundation of its tribal communities.

As the true work in implementation continues... It isn't enough to have a foot in the door, Tribal Nations must have a seat at the table where key decisions are being made. Effective and responsible development cannot happen without the input and direction of those on the ground in our communities. Consultation is simply not negotiable. I call on the Biden Administration to ensure that Tribal Nations are consulted— with free, prior, and informed consent— to ensure the infrastructure planning that's occurring across this country has Tribal Nations' feedback embedded within each blueprint.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exposed a long-standing issue that is our nation's digital divide. For Indian Country, this pandemic shed an eminent light on the lack of broadband access in our communities. It is not merely a matter of inconvenience; it is the difference between saving a life, accessing education, and delivering essential services. Tribal Nations need funding, technical assistance, and workforce development support to ensure that once we close the digital divide, it stays closed for good. Our federal partners must also work together, collaboratively, and across agencies with Tribal Nations to make this happen.

The Federal trust and treaty responsibility to Tribal Nations also extends beyond infrastructure development - it includes the co-management of our sacred places and ancestral homelands. We commend the Biden administration's first steps to protecting sacred sites that are vital to traditional ways of life, such as the expansion of full-protection to the Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante, and the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monuments.

The protection of sacred places is vital to maintaining and preserving the distinct identities, traditions, and histories of Native peoples. Co-management practices must be an inclusive and shared responsibility. It is our sovereign right to manage and protect our resources, and it is the federal government's responsibility to ensure that is carried out through cooperative agreements concerning both state and federal lands.

With 80 percent of the Earth's biodiversity being protected by Indigenous peoples, we have demonstrated the value of promoting harmony with the world around us for generations. We have a sacred obligation as the land's original stewards to protect the natural resources that sustain our communities, economies, and ways of life by exercising our Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

For example the Karuk Tribe in California, in collaboration with federal and state agencies, has been carrying out their traditional wildfire management systems to combat the devastating effects of wildfire damage from climate change to protect their lands, resources, foods, and ceremonial practices.

But the work doesn't just stop with our homelands - we stand with our Indigenous brothers and sisters from across the globe in protecting, preserving, and sustaining Mother Earth.

This year has set a precedent for the value of tribal inclusion at all international climate-related conferences and negotiations moving forward. It is impossible to confront the existential crisis of climate change without the world's Indigenous leaders, and that has been exemplified through NCAI's participation at the Conference Of Parties 26. I was honored and humbled to be the first ever tribal leader to join the U.S. delegation. An important step in ensuring our nations' voices are heard alongside other world leaders.

The world knows and understands disproportionate impacts of climate change to Indigenous peoples. As we continue to tackle climate change there is a new opportunity on the horizon for Tribal Nations in a post-pandemic economic recovery world to be part of this global conversation. Our Tribal Nations' sovereign standing demands that we are a part of discussion with the United States when it is working with friends and allies in the public and private sectors. We must seize this moment domestically and internationally.

In places where our lands are protected - we must also make sure that they are respected. The Department of the Interior has started the process to review 650 offensive Native ‘themed’ geographic names on federal lands. The time to reclaim and rename racist and derogatory names which discount our rich histories and thriving, vibrant cultures is now.

We’ve seen the tides of change across the country as we continue to call on the federal government, state and local governments, school boards, and sponsors to help us finally retire offensive and dehumanizing Native “themed” mascots.

And in the past year, much progress has been made:

- Nationally, nearly 70 school mascots have been retired.
- Three states – Colorado, Nevada, and Washington – enacted comprehensive legislative bans of ‘Indian’ mascots at K-12 schools.
- And finally, with the Washington “Commanders” and Cleveland “Guardians” we begin a new era of accountability and change.

We will not rest until the last offensive ‘Indian’ mascot is retired, such that the schools our children attend may foster equitable learning environments and well-being for all students.

History has shown us the importance of the environments in which our Native children learn and grow, and Indian Country has waited generations for the truth and justice owed to our ancestors and elders taken from our communities and placed in boarding schools. While all of our communities were changed forever under the federal boarding school policies, many of our ancestors never made it home. Secretary Haaland establishing Interior’s Indian Boarding School Initiative begins the shining of a light, as we finally have a place for our stories and traumas to be heard. We know this is not where we will find healing, but it is a place where we may find some justice. We will also continue to push for a Congressional Truth and Healing Commission to ensure these atrocities are investigated fully. We know the truth of what happened – and it is time the world does too.

When the world hears our voices, change happens. No where is that more clear than at the ballot box.

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic and with significant pre-existing barriers to exercising our right to vote, more Native people still cast votes in the 2020 Election than ever before. We made an enormous impact that resulted in an increase of Native representation in the U.S. House of Representatives and in state legislatures nationwide.

We vote because we know how important our voices are and what happens when they are ignored.

This is why Tribal Nations have been calling on Congress to pass voting reforms that protect Native peoples' right to vote and why we work tirelessly to inform our people of how they can exercise their right to vote. And so I urge each of you here – as tribal leaders, as concerned citizens, as members of this democracy – make your voices heard. Get out and vote!

Native representation is not only important in elected office, but in judicial systems. Tribal Nations and tribal communities are impacted by federal laws and courts more so than anyone else. When we do not have Native voices, perspectives, or experience on the federal bench, often decisions are made that ignore our history, sovereignty, and our truths. These decisions have long lasting effects. In the past year, we've seen the confirmation of Judge Lauren King - the first Native American federal judge to serve in Washington State, and the nomination of the first-ever Native American federal judge in California - Sunshine Suzanne Sykes.

With constant attacks on our sovereignty, our jurisdiction, and the ability to protect our Native children in courts - we must ensure that we keep fighting for our sovereignty, our laws, and our future.

We must also further protect our communities and citizens by continuing to advocate for the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. Acknowledging and restoring Tribal Nations' jurisdiction over criminals that target our Native women and children is essential to making sure justice gets served for Indian Country. Together, we can dramatically change the environment in Indian Country by strengthening VAWA to empower tribal sovereignty and safety.

We have seen many promises fulfilled over the last year. We have seen strides where once there were baby steps. We have seen doors opened that were once locked. But

we must not forget all of the promises that came before that were not kept - and that some of the most important promises remain broken. We must always refer back to our histories, treaties, and agreements. The 2018 Broken Promises report, which illuminates the vast needs in Indian Country in everything from joblessness, to poverty, to healthcare, to public safety, to education. While the historic investments into Indian Country over the past year are progress, to solve the centuries of mistrust we must keep fighting forward to hold the Federal Government to its trust responsibility to every Tribal Nation.

It is not enough to let Congress off the hook for failing to fulfill their trust responsibility to another generation. To the extent that there is a gap between our economic conditions today and the bright future that we collectively see for all of our Tribal Nations, our trustee has that responsibility to get behind our vision and support tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Tribal Nations have become leading employers in our country.

The means we must keep fighting for full appropriations and especially for advanced appropriations. This means that our trustee must get behind our vision for a healthy tribal economy, including supporting tribal tax policies. This means removing the regulatory barriers for taking our land back and into trust to protect it for the generations to come. This means that the federal government, the parity with state and local governments, must continue to be the norm going forward. This means raising the bar of accountability and the trust responsibility.

...If this year has shown us anything for certain, it is never too late to mend broken promises.

No matter the challenges, Native people have risen to the occasion. Our ancestors have gifted us with their wisdom, with their strength, and their tenacity. Their will to protect our communities is embedded within our DNA.

...We all have a role to play....

It is our duty as Native people to honor these gifts by using every mechanism available to us to practice our cultures, protect that which is sacred to us, and make the will of our people heard.

It is our duty as tribal leaders to champion advocacy efforts, to ensure the needs of our people are met, and to help shape, and to secure the future of the generations yet to come.

And it is the duty of the National Congress of American Indians to ensure that we aren't just a DC-centric organization, but that we are, and always remain, a representative Congress of Tribal Nations. Our strength lies just as much in our diversity as it does in our unity - and we invite more Tribal Nations to stand beside us. Much of the success discussed today is a direct result of NCAI re-committing to supporting the vision of Tribal Nations, and creating the spaces and opportunities to bring tribal leaders together, to amplify our voices, and to march the collective will of hundreds of Tribal Nations through Capitol Hill and to the doorstep of the White House. NCAI exists to fight for the inherent rights of tribal citizens and to protect the sovereignty of every Tribal Nation. We are here to work with every one of our partners to hold on to what we've gained this year and to keep fighting for what is right for our Tribal Nations - and we're only going to become stronger.

In order to do so, self-determination, sovereignty, and resilience must keep guiding our way. We stay grounded in our collaboration with non-tribal entities. From the Administration, to federal lawmakers, and to state governors – it is your duty to respect our right to self-governance, to work with us for the betterment of the people we serve, and to fully honor the trust and treaty obligations this country holds with Tribal Nations.

Despite the hardships we have endured in 2021, there have been many positive steps forward. However, we also acknowledge there is still much work to be done to build upon the successes of the past year. It will take all of us working together to create solutions and build a brighter future for our communities. I ask that you join us in raising the bar for advocacy and reinforcing our commitment to creating positive change in Indian Country. In answering this call to action, there is no doubt Indian Country will continue to advance the bold legacy of leadership that we inherited, to ensure generations yet to be born will live in a cleaner, healthier, and more prosperous and just future. I have never been more excited about the progress we have made or the opportunities in front of us.

The time is now. Let's get to work.