



[Opening in Quinault language] Good morning, my name is Fawn Sharp! I consider it my life's greatest honor to have this opportunity to share with you today.

I thank the Creator for gathering us together for this historic dialogue between Indian Country and the United States. On behalf of the 574 federally recognized tribal nations, dozens of state-recognized tribal nations, and millions of Native people across this country, I welcome the distinguished guests assembled here today, and those watching *around the globe*, to the 18th Annual State of Indian Nations address!

I stand before you today as a humble servant of all tribal nations, fulfilling my duty...

...to share Indian Country's story of perseverance and resurgence with the world...

...to convey with *absolute clarity* Indian Country's expectations of the United States government...

...and to cast a light on the immense power and proven wisdom of tribal nations governing their own lands and affairs, solving difficult challenges, and forging brighter futures *on their own terms*.

I embrace the enormity of this task, for I have been groomed for decades to carry it out by transformative leaders in whose footsteps I follow.

Leaders like Beatrice Black, Elizabeth Cole, Tiny Capoeman, Hazel Rosander, and Ramona Bennett, to name just a few. These matriarchs kindled a *great fire* in me to give my life in leadership to my Quinault people and all of Indian Country. Just as important, they showed me *the way*, and for that, I am forever grateful.

I also draw great strength – as they did – from...

Our almighty Creator...

the advice of my fellow tribal leaders...

the spiritual nourishment and life lessons of the Canoe Journeys...

the inspiration, passion, and ingenuity of our brilliant Native youth...

and the ancestral teachings of our elders.

Their wisdom, encouragement, and guidance have prepared me to meet this moment.

So *why do* we gather here today? The purpose of this annual address is to memorialize and affirm the enduring government-to-government relationship between tribal nations and the U.S. government. It provides *our* assessment of the current health of that relationship, and how it *must* be strengthened.

This hallowed discourse not only speaks to elected officials, political and judicial appointees, and staff of the federal government.

Nor is it limited to tribal leaders, employees, and citizens.

It is meant for *all* Americans – especially those who have been disenfranchised and rendered hopeless by racial injustice, economic inequality, and the rapid decay of our American political system.

They seek answers during these troubling times, and they need to look *no further* than tribal nations to find them.

In that spirit, I stand before you today – supported by more than 600 tribal nations and governments across this land – to share with you this undeniable truth: the *State* of Indian Nations is STRONG.

Across this land, tribal nations are writing remarkable stories of cultural, social, political, and economic renewal. In the face of great obstacles, we relentlessly plow forward in our eternal quest to create futures of hope, opportunity, and cultural vibrancy for our youth and those generations yet to come.

We do so by invoking and practicing the greatest Indigenous core value of all – *self-governance*.

The Creator gifted tribal nations with certain, *inalienable* rights – among them the right to...

steward – and draw nourishment from – our traditional homelands...

cultivate the *extraordinary* potential of our youth...

develop thriving economies that provide opportunity for all of our people...

and manage *our own* affairs and control *our own* destinies.

As my mentor, former Quinault leader and NCAI President Joe DeLaCruz, so perfectly captured it...

“No right is more sacred to a nation, to a people, than the right to freely determine its social, economic, political, and cultural future without external interferences. The fullest expression of this right is when a nation freely governs itself.”

We Native peoples not only have the *inherent right*, but the *sacred responsibility* to live the way our Creator intended:

speaking our Indigenous languages...

living our traditional core values and imparting them to the next generations...

practicing our lifeways...

conducting our ceremonies...

and *freely* governing our lands and communities.

Tribal nations are *not* non-profit organizations – we are full-fledged, battle-tested governments guided by time-honored cultural principles, and recognized as such in the Northwest Ordinance, the U.S. Constitution, and hundreds upon hundreds of treaties and Supreme Court precedents.

However, many Americans – *including many policymakers* – still don’t understand the unique status of tribal nations—our unique political status.

They don’t recognize the *indisputable* fact that we are *genuine* governments with the right – and, more importantly, the *ability* – to govern our own lands and communities—and to govern them in accordance with the values that make us *who we are as Native peoples*.

But through mechanisms like this annual address, more and more Americans – and others *around the world* – are learning this *truth* ... and in so doing, are turning to Indian Country for inspiration, direction, and, most importantly, *solutions* to our common challenges in this great age of uncertainty.

Acting with the next seven generations in mind, our ancestors endured great hardships to forge our path to this day, so that we would be able to be the answer to their prayers for thriving cultures, healthy children, and robust communities.

We must – and we *will* – be worthy of the great sacrifices they made to give us this chance to sustain not just our ways of life – but our world – for future generations.

We will rise to this challenge for the next seven generations by relying on the same Indigenous governance principles, notably...

strategic vision...

separations of powers...

and checks and balances on the abuse of power...

that our ancestors have practiced for *millennia* to overcome the grave threats to tribal sovereignty, our freedom to be *who we are*, and our very existence as human inhabitants of this planet.

However, tribal nations' ability to rise to this challenge is under growing duress.

The threats to tribal sovereignty and self-determination *take many forms*, and they come from *every branch* and *every corner* of the federal and state governments.

They stem from an ignorance— or *hostility toward* — the unique political status of tribal nations as a vital part of the original American family of governments, and the federal government's everlasting trust and treaty obligations to tribal nations.

Yes, there have been some encouraging developments worth noting. For example, we recently saw the passage of the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Program Reauthorization Act and the FUTURE Act, which permanently extends mandatory funding for tribal colleges, universities, and related academic institutions.

Meanwhile, the proposed regulations updating the Community Reinvestment Act promise to expand access to much needed capital and credit for tribal governments, communities, and citizens.

However, these are the *exceptions* to an increasingly *alarming* rule.

Take the Violence Against Women Act. VAWA 2013 affirmed the jurisdiction of tribal governments to prosecute non-Native offenders for domestic violence crimes on tribal lands. Many tribal nations now exercise this authority, providing *justice* for Native victims where none existed before.

Their work has exposed critical gaps in the 2013 law that the new VAWA legislation can and *should* fix. Yet, Congress is *refusing* to expand tribal authority to administer justice for victims of sexual violence, child abuse, stalking, and human trafficking, as well as law enforcement officers assaulted in the line of duty.

Take the current Administration's *wanton* interference with tribal nations' right to restore our traditional homelands, which has created an arbitrary system of "haves" and "have-nots" among tribal nations seeking to place land into trust.

Take the mounting assaults on the Indian Child Welfare Act by special interest groups *intent* on *stealing* Native children from their families, communities, and cultures. ICWA has been hailed as the "gold standard" by child welfare experts, and its legal validity has been affirmed *countless* times over the past four decades. *Yet ...* a recent federal court ruling *ignored* those facts, placing this VITAL law in *real* jeopardy.

In addition to these existential threats, we have threats caused by federal inaction ... and *indifference*.

Take the severe, *chronic* underfunding of the federal government's trust and treaty obligations to tribal nations, *powerfully* illustrated in the recent "Broken Promises" report.

This report is a *troubling* glimpse into the pervasive impacts that federal budget shortfalls have on the health and vibrancy of tribal communities. It comes *15 years* after another Congressional report came to the *exact same conclusion* – that the United States is *failing* to hold its end of the grand covenant it struck with tribal nations in exchange for *hundreds of millions of acres* of tribal lands *and* the *valuable* resources they contain.

Needless interruptions and delays in federal funding *also* pose a significant threat. The 2019 government shutdown – the *longest in history* – is the latest example of an *incompetent* federal budget process jeopardizing tribal nations' ability to provide vital services to our citizens, from law enforcement to healthcare to emergency response. And just *once* in the last *22 years* has Congress passed a fiscal budget on time, an *inexcusable* sign of a broken system.

In addition, tribal nations must compete *with one another* for federal grant programs, a *gross* violation of the federal government's trust and treaty responsibilities to us.

Meanwhile, Congress left Indian Country completely out of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, *despite years* of Hill advocacy by NCAI and our partners in promoting Indian Country's tax reform priorities – priorities that will clearly boost tribal efforts to build sustainable economies and grow local job opportunities.

Congress has also neglected its responsibilities by failing to pass legislation that...

reaffirms the *inherent* right of tribal governments to regulate labor,

permanently reauthorize the *remarkably* effective Special Diabetes Program for Indians,

reauthorizes the Native American Housing and Self Determination Act to curb Indian Country's severe housing shortages,

and takes *long-overdue* steps to curtail the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women epidemic that is *ravaging* so many of our communities and families.

But federal inaction and indifference is perhaps no more destructive than with the current failure of the Administration and some in Congress to address the rapidly accelerating impacts of climate change – *or even acknowledge that it exists*.

As Chief Seattle once said, “What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves.” The damage human beings have done – and *continue to do* – to this planet disrupts *every facet* of tribal life – from our subsistence lifeways to our ceremonies to our continued stewardship of the natural world.

My nation of Quinault is already feeling the brunt, as ocean sea level rise is forcing us to permanently relocate our main village to higher ground. When it comes to climate change and sustaining humanity on this planet, we have no time left to lose, and yet our government is *nowhere to be found*.

Finally, tribal nations face threats from an Administration that appears committed to obstructing the *expressed* will of Congress.

Take the Indian Trust Asset Reform Act. While ratified nearly *four years ago*, the Administration has refused to implement key provisions, notably...

the creation of an Under Secretary for Indian Affairs to protect and advance tribal interests within the Department of the Interior...

and the establishment, through a meaningful dialogue with Indian Country, of Trust Asset Management Plans.

Equally *disgraceful* is the inter-agency M-O-A the Administration developed to implement the new “477” tribal workforce development law. That law was *specifically* passed to expand this successful program and place *self-determination* squarely at the heart of Indian Country workforce development.

Yet the M-O-A was purposefully written to *ignore* the law by allowing federal agencies to “*veto*” individual programs that tribal nations have every right to include in their 477 plans – a dynamic the law was *explicitly* designed to *stop*.

Despite these darkening storm clouds, tribal nations continue to shine brightly. We do so much with so little because our people count on us to find a way, *no matter what*. We devise innovative solutions to the greatest challenges facing our communities because *that’s what governments do...*

From the Pueblo of Isleta, whose innovative partnership with the State of New Mexico is reducing arrest and incarceration rates among Pueblo youth by providing them culturally appropriate diversionary services designed to set them on the right path...

To the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, whose “Miami Awakening” program is bringing back the tribe’s language from the brink of extinction, and the strengthening of its people’s cultural identity and kinship ties with one another in the process...

To the Coeur d’Alene Tribe in Idaho, whose “Education Pipeline” approach identifies and fills gaps in the systems of academic support for its students, which has *dramatically* decreased the Tribe’s high school dropout rate and increased the percentage of tribal members pursuing college degrees.

Tribal nations are doing amazing things, and we could do so much more if the federal government would finally, *once and for all*, abide by the timeless pact it made with us so long ago to create the country that we share today. We have held up our end of this arrangement. *It is long past time* the United States upheld its end of the agreement.

To that end, Indian Country issues a *new standard of accountability* to the federal government to uphold tribal sovereignty and treaty rights in *all* of the ways for which it has been – and always will be – *legally* and *morally* responsible.

This accountability begins with a *genuine* commitment to truth and reconciliation with tribal nations, a process through which the United States can *fully* acknowledge its past transgressions against us so it can avoid repeating them in the future.

This accountability also means affirming tribal governmental parity not just when it suits one’s political agenda, but in *every single policy decision*.

It requires every elected official and political appointee in Congress and the Administration to learn and *faithfully* execute their leadership responsibilities to fulfill the federal government’s trust and treaty obligations to tribal nations.

For federal agency staff, it means dutifully implementing – and *not actively impairing* – legislation that empowers tribal self-determination and self-governance.

For all of our federal counterparts, *we will hold you to this highest standard* ... It is not enough that you fully uphold tribal self-determination in the specific ways your position requires. You must hold your colleagues accountable to do the same.

Whenever you have a policy decision before you, you must ask, “How will my decision impact Indian Country? Will it empower tribal sovereignty, or will it *diminish* tribal sovereignty?”

If you are charged with carrying out a policy decision, you must ask, “Am I seeking out and heeding Indian Country’s voice in how this policy should be implemented? Are my actions advancing tribal priorities, or are they obstructing them?”

So what does this look like—living up to our new standard look like *in practice*, given the current legal and political landscape?

It starts with advance appropriations for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service, to protect tribal governments and communities from harmful delays and disruptions in the Congressional budget process. The federal trust responsibility demands that tribal nations receive federal funding on time, *every time*. It also means *strong, flexible* funding for Indian Country, and to end competitive grant programs that privilege some tribal nations at the *expense of others*. That is just wrong!

Living up to our standard also requires *government parity* for tribal nations, and a new approach to federal land policy predicated on the *free, prior, and informed* consent of tribal governments for infrastructure projects that will impact our lands, our communities, resources, and ceremonies. It also requires *permanently* protecting our sacred cultural places from exploitation and desecration.

Our standard *demand*s that Congress expand tribal authority under VAWA so we can continue to keep our communities safe, and protect Native women from becoming yet another crime statistic.

It also *demand*s that the federal government partner with NCAI and tribal nations to put an end to the assaults on the Indian Child Welfare Act *once and for all*. Our children are our most precious resource, and we can’t prepare them to sustain our tribal nations if they have been taken from their families and the communities to which they belong.

Our standard also means fixing the land-into-trust debacle by finally passing a clean *Carciari* fix! Indian Country has been demanding this *for more than a decade*. A baseless legal decision *does not justify legislative inaction*. *It is long past time* that Congress provide *all* federally recognized tribal nations equal opportunity to claim and reclaim tribal lands to preserve their cultures and grow their economies.

Living up to our standard requires that the United States regain its position as a global climate action leader by recommitting to the Paris Accord, and restoring science to its proper place at the heart of its environmental policy. The United States also needs to empower the role of tribal nations in domestic and global climate action. From the Nuiqsut in Alaska to the Menominee in Wisconsin to the Karuk in California, Indian Country is crafting *ingenious* approaches rooted in time-honored ecological knowledge that can guide climate action *around the world*.



Last but not least, Indian Country's standard of accountability for the United States government requires a full count of Native people in this year's Census – no matter *where they live* and *how* they choose to participate. The United States must also protect the right of Native people to participate in the American political process against voter suppression—suppression tactics that are meant to marginalize their voice, and it must include tribal governments as equal players in the administration of elections across this country.

This is what we *demand* – and this is what we *deserve*. We will settle for nothing less, and we will exercise our rapidly growing political power and voice in Washington and at the ballot box against *any* and *all* who fail to meet this standard.

At every *step* and every *turn*, the National Congress of American Indians will be there to hold the U.S. government to this standard. NCAI's leadership and staff have worked hard to strategically grow the organization's presence and strength to carry out this task – not just for this year and next, but for decades to come. So that we can realize our Creator's vision and our ancestors' hopes for a vibrant, self-determined, *Indigenous* future.

In closing, I wish to share this message with my fellow tribal leaders and all Native people across this land:

We are *empowered* when we make great effort and take great care to tell our stories of strife, resilience, agency, ingenuity, and prosperity to all those who will listen.

We are *strongest* when we think and act as *one* regarding the things that matter most to all of us. When we join together, we are an *unstoppable* force capable of overcoming our greatest challenges and achieving our greatest and unimaginable futures and aspirations.

May the Creator bless all of you, and may the Creator bless Indian Country. [Departing blessing in Quinault language]. Thank you."