

Uniting Tribes to Advance Our Shared Goals

Jefferson Keel - President's Report – June 18, 2012

2012 NCAI Mid Year Conference – Lincoln, Nebraska

For the first time in the history of the National Congress of American Indians we are formally gathering here in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Great Plains region and the tribes have been gracious hosts and we are so thankful – what an amazing pow wow last night. The local planning committee has just done an amazing job and I'd like to recognize their incredible work leading up this event.

Many Americans think of this region as the heartland of America - we are here to celebrate that we are gathering in the heart of Indian Country. Our ancestors have walked before us here and our meeting and the work we do here this week, must honor their courage, their culture, and the direction they pointed us in – even against the greatest odds.

In the coming year we've got some very important conferences. In October, we'll hold our Annual Convention in Sacramento California, and we'll hold a constitutional convention.

Just a few weeks later the United States will elect the President of the United States.

Next year in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2013, at our Annual Convention, we'll be celebrating our 70th Anniversary since the founders of NCAI met in Denver Colorado to unify the voice of Indian Country. All of these events provide us the opportunity to celebrate what brings us together, protecting tribal sovereignty.

The unified voice of Indian Country – that is who we are as the National Congress of American Indians and that is why this Mid Year is focused on "Impacting Indian Country Through Unity."

Unity isn't just a nice sounding word or idea. It's one of the most difficult things to achieve as people – just look at United States Congress – a nation divided is a nation that struggles to find its bearings.

We know our direction as Indian Country and as long as we stay unified we will continue to become stronger.

The unity of our tribal nations over the last century is the very reason the modern history books don't read – "first they were divided, and then they were conquered."

Instead, today – right here – right now, we are writing the chapter of Indian Country that begins – "First they attempted to divide tribes, and it could not be done, and through their unity, the sovereign tribal nations of North America became stronger."

Let us remember, we are here, we are strong and we are united – and it's because we've stuck together.

Over the last century, when our efforts to protect our sovereignty moved from the battlefield to reservations, from the treaty signings tables to the courts, we've stood together. It's not always been easy, we haven't always seen eye to eye, but we've managed to find common

ground and remain united.

One of the central resources we have in shaping federal policy, are NCAI Resolutions. A lot of people ask me – what good are NCAI Resolutions? Why bother?

NCAI Resolutions do matter. They've mattered since the very first meeting of NCAI, and they matter today. They are the barometer of our unity, and the voice of Indian Country, and most importantly, they are also the instruments of policy.

In 2003, in Phoenix, NCAI passed its first resolution supporting an amendment to the Violence Against Women Act that would restore tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit crimes of domestic violence. That was nearly nine years ago. We tried during the 2005 Reauthorization, but Congress was not ready to even consider it.

As many of you know, just a month ago the United States Senate passed the VAWA bill with the tribal jurisdiction amendment. It was a great unified effort by tribes, and it started with an NCAI resolution.

The Tribal Law & Order Act started with an NCAI resolution. In Anchorage in 2007, we heard from the U.S. Attorneys who complained that they spent “too much time” addressing Indian country issues. We passed an emergency resolution urging Congress to act, and they did. We are implementing the Tribal Law & Order Act right now because of an NCAI resolution.

The HEARTH Act started with an NCAI resolution in 2009. The Act will give tribes greater control over leasing tribal lands. The Act advances tribal sovereignty and promotes economic development. Last month the HEARTH act passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 400 to zero. It is waiting for Senate action and the President's signature.

The Cobell Settlement and the Tribal Trust Settlements were supported by NCAI resolutions at the start of the Obama Transition in 2008.

The Keystone Pipeline is opposed by NCAI Resolution, and I know that folks here in Nebraska are glad that tribal pressure is causing the Administration to take a second look at that project.

Recently an NCAI resolution opposed the closing of post offices on Indian reservations, and all of those closings have been delayed, and the Director of Postal Operations met with NCAI at our last Executive Council.

Very recently, an NCAI resolution demanded consultation on the hydraulic fracturing regulations, and Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes is here this morning to talk with you.

In 1968, an NCAI resolution first started the opposition to Indian sports mascots. Last week, the citizens of North Dakota voted to retire the “Fighting Sioux” nickname at the University of North Dakota.

So, I'd like to make three points about NCAI resolutions.

- 1) First, NCAI resolutions often get results.

- 2) Second, sometimes it takes years or decades to change hearts and minds. Don't become discouraged. NCAI is patient and relentless. We are on the right side of history and time is on our side.
- 3) Third, an NCAI resolution is just the starting point, we have to all work together to turn the idea into a reality.

Now, let's focus on the days ahead. This week, we will take important action on new resolutions. As you know, the IRS is trying to tax trust resources. This is outrageous, and Warm Springs has brought an important resolution opposing the IRS on this issue. We have a resolution on a Native woman's right to receive treatment from the IHS in the event of a sexual assault. We have a new resolution demanding that all women be protected by the Violence Against Women Act, and that Native Women cannot be excluded from its protections. We also have an important resolution on the Workforce Investment Act, which funds job training on Indian reservations. Those are just a few.

We will take action on these resolutions, and when we leave here on Wednesday NCAI will have new directions and common purpose.

But we will still have work from numerous resolutions at prior meetings.

We still have to get VAWA through Congress **this** year. We still have to finish the job on the HEARTH Act this year. We have to get the Carcieri Fix passed this year. And, **every year** we have to protect the tribal budget and make sure the federal government lives up to its trust responsibility.

We still need to push the federal government on land to trust. We still have to fight for health care, and education, and elders, and economic development, and the environment, protecting mother earth.

All of these things must be done, and the only way we will get it done is if we work together in united harmony. We have seen it in Congress this year with the Violence Against Women Act – tribes are a force to be reckoned with when we work together. NCAI is a critical forum for bringing tribes together.

There are two really important subjects that I want to mention, and I hope you'll listen.

Starting in the second half of 2012 and continuing for a number of years, American Indian people and tribes will receive close to \$5.0 billion in settlements from the federal government. The Cobell Settlement, the Keepseagle Settlement and the recent trust claims settlements, will be distributing money to individuals throughout Indian Country.

Now we know that American Indian people will be the victims of fraud – probably at a scale unseen before. According to the 2004 Federal Trade Commission Consumer Fraud Survey, "American Indians and Alaska Natives were the ethnic group most likely to be victims: nearly 34 percent had experienced one or more frauds in the preceding year." This is in comparison to the 11.2 % of the adult population in the U.S. who are a victim of fraud.

Today, NCAI will begin working on an educational campaign to head off this potential theft in Indian Country and we will form an ad hoc small working group to guide this campaign. People, young and old, need to understand how to protect our resources, and not have them once again taken from us by criminals.

Next is the Native Vote. In the next five months we have a great deal of work to do to ensure that our people are ready for the 2012 election.

Over the last century since securing our rightful place at the ballot box, Native people have remained one of the most disenfranchised group of voters in the United States. Today as a result, only two out of every five eligible American Indian and Alaska Native voters are registered to vote. In 2008 over 1 million eligible Native voters were unregistered. I think that Indian Country should consider this a civic emergency. We should all be concerned; American Indians and Alaska Natives, tribal, and state and federal governments. There are a number of concrete actions that we can take now to change this situation.

In the 2012 State of Indian Nations this past January – I called on Indian Country, to turn out the largest Native Vote. And you've responded. But we need more action. Starting this week we all must be unified by one mission -we must mobilize like never before – register tens of thousands of people, and turn out the largest native vote in history.

The Native Vote – is more than a civic duty, it's an expression of our unique role as the first Americans. Anyone who says otherwise, anyone who might doubt our civil rights as first peoples or shrug off voting as not part of Native culture – should consider the fate of our nations if we had been silenced at the ballot box last century. This is our right. We must protect it and use it, so we can protect our sovereignty.

So how do we get out the vote? First, focus on the role of everyday citizens to register voters. We must start at home – register our family members – then your neighbors – then to the community centers and then on to the pow wows. Get your businesses to provide the opportunity for folks to register.

We've recently announced a partnership with the national non-profit Rock the Vote, so that the Native Vote campaign can provide on the ground and online resources for voter registration. Through this same partnership, we're announcing today "Rock the Native Vote Youth Week" September 24-28, 2012, coinciding with National Voter Registration day on September 25. The week of events across the country will engage tribal schools in a range of civics education, including a tribal specific supplement to Rock the Vote's Democracy Day class. Participants, such as local chapters of Boys and Girls Clubs of America, will educate Native young people about the power of civic engagement and the importance of registering their parents, family members, and one day, themselves, to vote.

I'm also proud to announce, the "Tools for All" partnership initiated with State Voices – a national civic engagement network. The partnership offers the chance for tribes to access voter outreach tools that can identify tribal members who need to register and encourage all tribal citizens to make their voice heard.

Finally and most importantly, I'm calling on our federal government partners to provide the same voter registration services it offers in other government facilities.

A report released today by Dēmos, a multi-issue national organization, entitled *Ensuring Access to the Ballot for American Indians & Alaska Natives: New Solutions to Strengthen American Democracy*, outlines the state of Native voter disenfranchisement and proposes IHS facilities become equal participants in the government's voter registration practices. The report proposes that, "Appropriate IHS facilities should be designated as official voter registration agencies along the same lines as state based public assistance agencies are now designated under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA)."

If you can register to vote at the DMV, you should be able to do it at the IHS. Hundreds of thousands of Native people visit IHS facilities each year, what an amazing opportunity to offer them the opportunity to vote.

The Indian Health Service is a key agency in delivering on the federal government's trust responsibility to tribes. As outlined in the report, IHS facilities, conveniently and centrally located in many tribal communities, are ideal voter registration sites.

In a letter to the Director of the Indian Health Service (IHS) and all IHS facilities I'm sending a copy of the report and calling the federal government to add IHS facilities to the list of federal and state government service providers, which serve as voter registration sites. And, I'm asking tribes to assist in this non-partisan effort.

This effort is not about electing Democrats who agree with us or Republicans who agree with us. It's about making sure that people with wildly different positions on an array of issues - from climate change to education; from energy to healthcare - share one common position on tribal sovereignty.

We need representatives who understand the place tribal sovereignty holds in our system of government and know that our country's greatness is on the line whenever legislators attempt to undermine our sovereignty.

In Ohio on Thursday, President Obama and Governor Romney laid out their competing economic visions for America. From Indian Country's perspective, what I care the most about is this question - do you understand the importance of tribal governments in the economic success of America? Will you support greater flexibility for our governments? Will you ensure investments in the future of our communities? Will you stand with us?

I guarantee you when they see us standing together, unified, the message will be loud and clear – we are not divided, we are not conquered. We are unified.

I ask you all to answer that call this week, work together this week – pass meaningful resolutions, raise your voice, turn out the largest native vote in history this fall, and remain united in the years to come as we define the future for our next generations.