

ONE POTAWATOMI EDITOR'S OPINIONS

BY LEVI RICKERT

INTRODUCTION BY SEN. BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL

# PRAISE FOR JOURNALIST LEVI RICKERT

“For more than a decade, Levi Rickert has been a powerful voice in and for Indian Country. His opinions about social injustice as well as his insightful observations about tribal triumphs have enlightened *Native News Online* readers and reinforced public perceptions of Native people and communities as multidimensional and dynamic.”

**Patty Loew (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe)**, Professor, Medill School of Journalism & Director, Center for Native American & Indigenous Research

“Through the lens of Levi Rickert, our voices for justice, advocacy, and restoration have been heard around the world. He has touched many lives with his work and leadership and captured the real emotions and trauma of Indian Country into words. Through his vision, we can come together as resilient people and build stronger tribal nations for future generations.”

**Jonathan Nez**, President, Navajo Nation

“Levi Rickert has built a successful media career covering a wide range of issues important to Indian Country. Levi’s detailed analysis in his op-eds reflects his depth of knowledge, and over the years he has proven to be one of the leading voices in Native journalism. I encourage anybody who wants to learn more about our country’s tribal nations to pick up a copy of *Visions for a Better Indian Country*.

**Chuck Hoskin Jr.**, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation

“Since he began *Native News Online*, Levi Rickert has proven he has been there for us covering the important issues that impact Native American lives through his advocacy in his writings. I strongly encourage you to get a copy of his book.”

**Ernie Stevens, Jr. (Oneida)**, Chairman, National Indian Gaming Association

“The title of Levi Rickert’s new book, *Visions for a Better Indian Country: One Potawatomi Editor’s Opinions*, is just as understated and humble as the author himself. I have known Levi for about three decades. His passion for carrying the voices of Native people and his dedication to telling stories about Indian Country is unmatched.

For decades he has delicately walked a line for his people — and succeeded — between objective journalism and activism, positioning him as a respected professional and valued opinion leader to all. He is more than just ‘one Potawatomi.’ He is a leader in Indian Country and his industry. He is a powerful voice for our people. He is a respected mentor for any young person entering the field of journalism today.”

**Nedra Darling (Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation)**, *Executive Producer of Bright Path, a feature film on the life of Olympian Jim Thorpe; former Public Affairs Director for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior*

“Levi Rickert gives voice to major Indian Country issues as well as individuals who often are not covered by mainstream media. His extensive on-the-ground connections throughout Indian Country are a testament to the high esteem in which Indian Country leadership and tribal citizens hold him. I have known Levi through his many years of outstanding service as a community leader, as a journalist, and as a friend. This collection of his writings will be an important addition to the Indian Country history of the past several decades.”

**Frank Ettawageshik (Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians)**, *President, Association on American Indian Affairs; Executive Director, United Tribes of Michigan*

“Levi Rickert is one of Indian Country’s most well-respected and informed Indigenous journalists and commentators. For the past 11 years as Publisher and Editor of *Native News Online*, he has diligently and astutely reported on the critical issues facing Indigenous peoples — always with a careful, faithful eye to fact and detail. It’s easy to see why he was given the 2021 “Best Column” award by the Native American Journalists Association. Levi’s book, *Visions of a Better Indian Country*, which includes nearly 50 of his most compelling and important columns, is a must-have for our libraries.”

**Liz Hill (Red Lake Ojibwe)**, *publicist, author and owner of Liz Hill Public Relations, LLC*

“Levi Rickert is a respected Native American leader, writer, philosopher, and social critic. This book is a magnificent compilation of penetrating insights, erudite analyses, informed opinions and Indigenous intelligence on a broad range of issues of interest and importance to Native Americans. It reveals and reflects the best of Native American wisdom about what has happened and is happening to Native America and what is sacred to Native Americans everywhere. A pervasive revival of interest in Native American thought (e.g. history, philosophy, art and spirituality) makes this book a must read for anyone (especially non-Native) who wants to learn and embrace the values, culture and perspectives of a strong, proud, peaceful and courageous people.”

**Dr. Irving Berkowitz**, *Emeritus Dean of Academic Affairs, Palm Beach State College - Florida*

“Levi Rickert has worked tirelessly on ensuring the Native voice is present and understood! He is always careful to bring balance and respect with his narrative, and provide facts that illuminate truth and positive change for Native nations. Through his journalism, he remains a warrior focused on sharing news ‘in a good way.’”

**Eric S. Trevan (Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish of Pottawatomi Indians)**, *Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Community and Economic Development, California State University San Marcos College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences*

“For one seeking to decolonize their thinking and deconstruct non-Indigenous religious training, I am grateful for my brother Levi Rickert’s essays in this work *Visions for a Better Indian Country*. It is in these stories where open hearts can replace their ignorance and follow on the red road, while standing against past and present wrongs to help ‘the arc of the moral universe bend toward the long-awaited justice.’ Thanks for your fidelity to the voice of the Creator calling you to tell the hard truths folks like me need to hear.”

**Steve Spreitzer**, *President & CEO, Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion*





ONE POTAWATOMI EDITOR'S OPINIONS

LEVI RICKERT

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To my grandparents, Levi and Ellen Whitepigeon,  
who taught our family love.



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# FOREWORD

*Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell*

Levi Rickert is a friend of mine. He is a man I respect and trust. He has interviewed me on a variety of topics, and I have always found his reporting to be even-handed and fair.

When Levi takes his journalistic hat off and writes his own opinions, I agree with him probably 90 percent of the time, the other 10 percent of the time we could probably provide an entertaining ‘point-counterpoint.’

Although Levi and I are both widely considered moderate in our opinions, he approaches issues from a slightly left-of-center stance, and I from a slightly right-of-center perspective. In most cases, they overlap in agreement, sometimes they do not.

This is a good thing! In this day and age of canceling those who do not see things 100 percent our way, it is a very good thing that in Indian Country we can agree on most things and disagree on others, yet give our brothers and sisters the opportunity to speak their mind, and perhaps change our minds in the process.

In other cases, we must agree to disagree and walk away with love and respect for the passion our friend has for their position despite our disagreement.

It is known that the Founding Fathers of the United States patterned our government much in the style of the Iroquois Confederacy. I truly believe our Nation’s leaders today would be wise to take their cue from Indian Country on matters of respectful political discourse. Our Country would be better for it.

Although I do not endorse every opinion of my dear Potawatomi friend, I do respect that he has thought out his positions and that his opinion comes from “a good place.”

I believe the broader culture needs to hear more Indian voices and broader Native opinions. Levi’s voice is important and his opinions will give you pause for thought, as you find your own path in the world of ideas. With that, I am proud to present my friend’s book “*Visions for a Better Indian Country: One Potawatomi Editor’s Opinions.*”

Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne)  
U.S. Senator - Retired



## PREFACE

### *Visions for a Better Indian Country: One Potawatomi Editor's Opinions*

This book is a compilation of editorial opinion columns I wrote over the past three years for *Native News Online*. They were published with a single intention: to improve the lives of Native Americans. That's been the fundamental mission of *Native News Online* since its inception in 2011.

Threaded through these opinion pieces are my visions for a better Indian Country. I realize no one person is the definitive voice for all of Indian Country, which is vast in size and embodies the cultures of 574 federally recognized tribal nations and hundreds of state recognized tribes. We are not a monolith. Each tribe has its own unique customs, culture and beliefs.

Even so, we share many values — community-mindedness, respecting the wisdom of our elders and the sacrifice of our ancestors, living in harmony with nature, and the importance of our stories, songs, and traditions.

There are also common issues that tribes and their citizens face in contemporary times. Some of these are practical, everyday concerns related to our health care, education, housing, and employment. Others are more complex: the generational trauma caused by Indian boarding schools, the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, the appropriation of our culture, and ongoing efforts to strip us of our right to vote and our sovereignty.

As a tribal citizen of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, I feel fortunate that my role as editor of *Native News Online* lets me lend my voice to the important issues and concerns in Indian Country. Sometimes in my writings I reference my own personal journey as a Potawatomi man, including the realities I have faced in modern America as an Indigenous man.

I write because policy and decision makers need to know what matters to us, and why we feel the way we do on issues that are critical to the overall well-being of this nation's first people. I hope my voice helps them understand more about issues facing Native Americans across Indian Country.

It is a good time to be a Native American journalist. I doubt I would have written those words in February 2011 at the beginning of *Native News Online*. But through the past few years, even as we fought back against the scourge of COVID-19, many positive things have happened for Indian Country.

To name a few: the shedding of Native-themed sports mascots, the ascension of a Native American woman to a presidential cabinet post, high levels of vaccine acceptance by American Indians and Alaska Natives, record levels of Native voting, the confirmation of tribal sovereignty by the Supreme Court of the United States, and heightened awareness of Native American culture and heritage. I have written about all these topics in opinion pieces shared in this book.

Oftentimes, I tell audiences that my approach to writing opinion pieces about Indian Country is to lay out my stance on a given subject in a clearly stated, rational, and logical manner so that even if readers do not agree with me, at least they know where I was coming from.

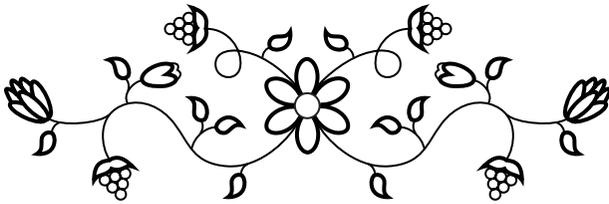
My hope is you find my perspectives on Indian Country topics to be inspiring and informative as we prepare for the next seven generations.

Megwetch.

Levi Rickert

April 2022

# HOW IT BEGAN



# CELEBRATING OUR FIRST TEN YEARS: THE WALK THAT LAUNCHED NATIVE NEWS ONLINE

*Originally published February 15, 2021*

The sounds of night kept me awake on the hard floor in a large community center outside of San Diego at the San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians. It was 10 years ago. Snoring and coughing mixed with the whispers of those who could not sleep merged together like an orchestra that lulled us to sleep. Dozens of us were tucked into sleeping bags scattered throughout.

It was the first night of a walk across America called the “Longest Walk 3 - Reversing Diabetes.” The event was organized by American Indian Movement (AIM) co-founder Dennis Banks, who had been recently diagnosed with diabetes, a disease that claims the lives of Native Americans at a rate of two-and-half times greater than their White counterparts. The walk started on the West Coast and ended in Washington, D.C.

After his diagnosis, Banks — aware that diabetes could be reversed through diet and exercise — called on dozens of Indian reservations and tribal communities to spread the word and join the walk one tribal community at a time.

A few weeks prior, I called Banks at his home on Leech Lake in Minnesota, explaining that I was launching an Indian Country news website. I asked if I could tag along for the walk.

“Of course, you can. You will get to meet a lot of people along the way,” Banks said, sharing details of where to meet in February.

That night was the beginning of *Native News Online*.

I joined the event on the Barona Indian Reservation in modern-day Southern California. Walkers there boarded a coach bus to La Jolla Shores park, where the walk began with a ceremony. Walkers lined up carrying eagle staffs, tribal nation flags, and AIM flags. We took off

under a brilliant Southern California sun with hand drums invoking our ancestors.

By noon, we reached Torrey Pines State Beach on the Pacific Ocean, forming a circle on the beach to hear Banks address walkers about the disease that kills more American Indians than any other. The cause of the disease: food distributed to Indian reservations, filled with preservatives and devoid of nutrients. It was a speech I would hear Banks give many times along the route as we stopped at scores of Indian reservations.

“For the rest of my life, before I enter the spirit world, I will devote my energy to doing away with diabetes. I may take on other causes, but I will never have a bigger one than this,” Banks said.

After his speech, hundreds of walkers and well-wishers gathered for lunch provided by the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay. Walking through the crowd, I observed a tall Native man wearing a black top hat step out of a cab lugging a duffle bag. The image reminded me of the two-culture existence of American Indians. Later I learned he was Larry Bringing Good (Otoe Missouriia/Cheyenne Arapaho), who had flown in from Hawaii to join the Longest Walk. He remained with the walk until it reached Washington in July, serving as a lieutenant to Banks and helping with logistics along the route. Bringing Good taught me that wearing two pairs of socks would help avoid the blisters I got after two days of walking.

In the afternoon, we walked several more miles before vans provided to us by a tribe at the San Pasqual Indian Reservation took us to a community center, where tribal citizens treated us to a roasted-chicken dinner before we settled for the night.

As I lay on a floor at a remote Indian reservation, I was tired but unable to fall asleep due to the hardness of the floor and the excitement of being among the long walkers who had come from several different tribes and states. My internal clock was still three hours ahead, on Michigan time. At some point, sleep overtook me.

I got up about 4 a.m. and sat in a chair in a vestibule. I was not there long before Paul Owns the Sabre, a Lakota man in his early 70s who lived in San Francisco, joined me. He told me he was on the original

Longest Walk back in 1978 and was one of a handful who made it all the way across the country from San Francisco to Washington. He recounted the harsh winter blizzard of the first Longest Walk as the group crossed mountains in Nevada. Owsen Sabre had designed the walk's logo back then, and it was updated for each Longest Walk conducted by Banks.

The Longest Walk 3 – Reversing Diabetes consisted of two routes: a northern one that originated in Portland, Oregon, and the southern route I had joined, originating in San Diego. The two routes would merge near Leesburg, Virginia in early July. I did not participate in the entire walk, but spent time with the southern route long walkers in California and Arizona. I flew home to Michigan and rejoined the northern route a month later as it made its way through South Dakota, and returned in late May as it traversed Chicago.

One amazing aspect of the walk is no one ever knew where they would sleep on any given night.

One Sunday evening, walkers reached San Carlos Apache in Arizona without accommodations. A tribal citizen began making phone calls. If she was unable to find accommodations, she said she would offer her yard as a place to pitch tents.

“That’s what Indians do,” she said. “We open up our homes for each other.”

Minutes later she received a call. The tribe allowed the long walkers to stay at its casino hotel and eat from the buffet.

Two memories from the Longest Walk remain in my memory. They both happened within a 24-hour period in the Navajo Nation. The long walkers set out from sleeping on a floor of a church without Banks. He stayed behind to take care of some business. Just after lunch, along the side of the road, we discovered the nature of his business. He caught up with the long walk in a U-Haul truck he had rented to transport supplies needed for the walk.

The second memory came later that night. I witnessed him put a log into a wood burning stove to keep us warm in a small cabin on the Navajo Nation. Watching him perform these tasks showed how

great this iconic man was. Dennis Banks, who led the takeover of Wounded Knee in 1973, was burning wood to keep us warm.

I rejoined the walk before it reached Washington on the Fourth of July. Days later, Banks gave his stump speech in front of the White House and a Native woman performed a water ceremony.

The Longest Walk taught me I just need a laptop with a charged battery and a wi-fi connection to publish stories to the internet. Given the lack of broadband on most Indian reservations, those simple needs are not always readily available.

Since then, I have covered the White House tribal nations conferences during the Obama administration, Capitol Hill hearings, and national meetings of the National Congress of American Indians, the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, the National Indian Gaming Association, the National Indian Housing Council, the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, and many others.

During the past decade, *Native News Online* has published thousands of articles. Standing Rock's resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline was the biggest Indian Country story since Wounded Knee in 1973, until the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed its deadly wrath. It will take journalists years to unpack the long term implications of COVID-19 for tribal citizens.

I often reminisce about the first week of *Native News Online* 10 years ago. Only 16 readers came to the website the first month. Ten years later, over 3.2 million people read *Native News Online* annually, half a million people follow us on social media, and thousands more get our daily newsletter. And the readership numbers keep growing.

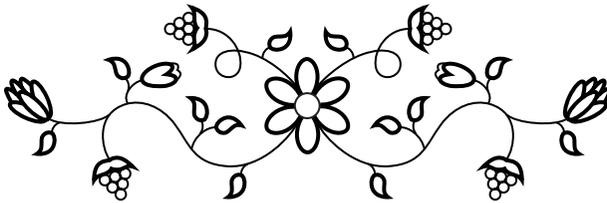
Dennis Banks passed away in October 2017. His memory remains in my heart, and I will forever appreciate the time I spent with him along the Longest Walk because I saw up close a warrior who cared about Native people.

Covering the Longest Walk presented me with the unique opportunities to see Indian Country in a different light than I knew before. Being a journalist has allowed me to learn new things about Indian Country every day.

In the beginning, I felt it was important for Native people to tell our own stories because we have not always been happy with how they have been told in American history, American literature, or how we have been depicted in Hollywood movies and in the mainstream media. *Native News Online* has provided a forum for Native voices.

For this 10th anniversary, I want to say to our *Native News Online* readers that I appreciate your continued support as we endeavor to publish Indian Country news the way you want to read it.

# SOVEREIGNTY



# **“YOU ARE ON POTAWATOMI LAND” – REFLECTIONS OF NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH**

*Originally published November 21, 2021*

This holiday weekend, I have taken time to reflect on Native American Heritage Month. One observation is that there have been a noticeable number of television programs and events highlighting Native Americans this November, in comparison to previous years.

Of course, Native Americans believe they should be celebrated every month. I agree because, this year in particular, I have celebrated being Potawatomi in a special way.

It began this past Father’s Day, when I took an Amtrak train from Michigan to Chicago’s Union Station, to see my three adult children who reside in the Windy City. I was excited to see them, as I had not done so in over a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Lyft moved along Chicago’s Lower Wacker Drive, out of my peripheral vision, I saw the word POTAWATOMI—in reverse—painted on a large canvas. I turned my head to confirm what I thought I saw. Sure enough, it read Potawatomi.

Once I arrived at my son’s place, I told my daughter with excitement in my voice about seeing the word “Potawatomi” from the car. She provided context as she smiled and said, “My friend Andrea Carlson painted a mural on the Chicago waterfront that says, ‘You Are on Potawatomi Land.’”

Carlson’s work contains the phrase “Bodéwadmikik éthē yéyék” in the Potawatomi language and then the English version. The mural consists of five banners 15 feet high and 266 feet long.

It was installed in early June and will be on display for at least the next two years. The project was created in response to last year’s protests against the Columbus statues and aims to rectify monuments throughout the city.

Last July, *Native News Online* reporter Monica Whitepigeon interviewed Carlson, an Ojibwe artist from the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, who moved to Chicago from Minneapolis five years ago.

She explained the meaning of her message: A portion of Chicago is on unceded Potawatomi territory

It is a little-known fact that after Chicago's Great Fire of 1871, when Mrs. O'Leary's cow accidentally knocked over a lantern and started a blaze that burned the city, the debris was pushed into Lake Michigan, creating a landfill from present-day Michigan Avenue to the lake's current boundary. This added land infringed on the water rights of the Potawatomi. So, the land between present-day Michigan Avenue and Chicago's current Lake Michigan waterfront was technically unceded.

In 1914, eight Pokagon Potawatomi filed a lawsuit, *Williams v. City of Chicago*, 242 U.S. 434, in the U.S. District Court in Northern Illinois. Their lawsuit cited the Treaty of Greenville. When the Potawatomi were forced westward during the Trail of Death of 1837, the land was lost, but remained unceded.

The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court. The highest court of the land decided that the Potawatomi "abandoned" the territory and decided against the eight plaintiffs.

Carlson told *Native News Online* in her interview: "Another reason I chose those words for the banner is the current #LandBack movement. This movement of rematriating land means that we as Native people must start thinking of these historic cases. The Pokagon Band came back for the land. They had used their resources to sue and made a case for the lakefront on behalf of all Potawatomi people. I wanted my piece to bow to those Potawatomi ancestors whose hearts were broken with that decision. I want to make sure that Potawatomi people know that they are home when they see this work."

On the first Saturday in October 2021, I returned to Chicago to cover an event organized by the Whose Lakefront Planning Group, at the invitation of organizer JeeYeun Lee. Among the couple hundred people there were Pokagon Potawatomi Band tribal citizens, other Potawatomi, other tribal citizens from various parts of the United

States, and allies. They gathered to make a statement about the 1917 Supreme Court ruling.

And, what a statement they made. They used two line-stripping machines with bright red sand to mark the eastern sidewalk of Michigan Avenue from East Roosevelt Road on the south to the Chicago River on the north to signify that it was unceded Potawatomi land.

The red-sand demarcation gave the term “redlining” a new meaning for me.

To me, a Potawatomi man, it was a reminder of what was lost. Among the bustling crowd of tourists and shoppers on a Saturday afternoon in the nation’s third-largest city, I looked out to Grant Park and knew the Supreme Court got it wrong. The Potawatomi were forced out of their land. They did not abandon it.

The event ended with some speeches and dancing.

Afterward, I stood across the Chicago River and saw Carlson’s mural and the large letters that spelled out “Bodéwadmikik èthë yéyék” in Potawatomi and “You Are on Potawatomi Land” in English.

The pride of being Potawatomi as I stood there remains with me now and will remain a year-round feeling.

As part of celebrating who we are, we must support the #LandBack movement, its artwork and its purpose.

While I am lifted by the increased attention on Native Americans, the issue of stolen land and phony Supreme Court decisions, we must ensure that these celebrations and added attention are not just happening in November, but year-round.

# THE TWO SIDES OF OUR CITIZENSHIP: TRIBAL AND AMERICAN

*Originally published January 24, 2021*

In the late 1990s, I testified before a joint legislative committee of the Michigan Legislature about the benefits of tribal gaming casinos for tribal citizens. Before I began, I introduced myself and noted I was a citizen of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation.

After my testimony, as I was leaving the witness table, I was called back by a state senator who asked me sternly if I considered myself an American citizen. Not wanting to engage in an argument, I answered “yes” and added, “The Internal Revenue Service does.” That answer garnered chuckles from a few American Indians sitting in the audience. The state senator’s face turned red as I took my seat in the audience.

Through the years, I have been asked at speaking engagements about why American Indians serve in the United States military at such higher rates than other demographics, especially after everything that has happened to American Indians throughout history.

It is a valid question. History has not been kind to our ancestors. American Indians were often greeted by settlers on a genocidal path across the continent. They carried the Holy Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. It is believed among American Indians that if settlers could not “save us,” they would kill us. American Indians have been the subject of many such atrocities.

It is true American Indians have served in the U.S. military at higher rates than any other demographic in the country. A high percentage of American Indians volunteered in World War I before they became U.S. citizens in 1924. During the Vietnam War, 90 percent of American Indians who served volunteered for service. They were not drafted.

So when I am asked about Natives who serve in the military, I generally answer by saying that American Indians have always been warriors and since the United States was the land of our ancestors, it is only natural they fight to protect land and freedom. I also take the opportunity to explain the duality of our citizenship as Native Americans.

Those of us who are citizens of federally recognized tribal nations enjoy duality as U.S. citizens. One fine example is Rep. Deb Haaland, a dual citizen of the United States and the Pueblo of Laguna. She has been nominated to be the next Secretary of the Interior. If confirmed by the Senate, she will be the first American Indian member of a president's Cabinet. On Jan. 20, Haaland arrived at President Biden's inauguration dressed in her cultural attire.

American Indians often fall somewhere between being traditionalists who fight colonization and being assimilated with little regard to their tribal identity. The citizenship identity may also shift with time.

Within my own progression as a Potawatomi man, the issue of duality as a tribal citizen and a U.S. citizen has caused me trepidation when examining who I am.

A few years ago, when NFL football quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem to bring attention to police brutality against Black people, I understood. He was asking the nation to pay attention to the disproportionate brutality that Black people endure at the hands of law enforcement. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Indians and Alaska Natives also suffer high rates of death by police.

It was Kaepernick's right. It did not make him less of a patriot because he took a knee to protest injustice. I recalled times I chose not to stand for the national anthem because I was angry about the federal government's treatment of American Indians. I felt standing would make me complicit. Other times, I stood because as a dual citizen I chose to stand. The back-and-forth speaks to conflicting feelings we have as humans, and as we progress along our personal journeys.

The deliberation of where I fit on the duality spectrum became more pronounced during the first three weeks of January as we witnessed an insurrection, an impeachment, and an inauguration.

The U.S. citizen in me was angry at the insurrection. Seeing so-called patriots beat police officers with wooden U.S. flag poles sickened me. I thought this should never happen in the United States.

The inauguration seemed to restore order in United States governance. And 22-year-old Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb" brought a wounded nation hope.

"Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished," she said, adorned in her bright yellow outfit. Her words were refreshing and perhaps more charitable than what I would have come up with. However, she gave us hope that we can work towards a more perfect union.

Later in the week, I read the words of one of my favorite Indigenous leaders, the great Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons. His words summed up my thoughts on my own citizenship duality in its current state: "Even though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same river of life. What befalls me befalls you. And downstream, downstream in this river of life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision."

# **PROTECTING SOVEREIGNTY POST-MCGIRT: FIVE TRIBES SHOULD NOT TRUST OKLAHOMA OFFICIALS**

*Originally published April 25, 2021*

The U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 ruling in *McGirt v. Oklahoma* on July 9, 2020 reaffirmed that Congress never “disestablished” the 1866 boundaries of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, which encompasses three million acres in eastern Oklahoma and includes most of the city of Tulsa.

On the evening news, ABC's David Muir said it was “the most significant ruling for Native Americans in decades.”

Some people erroneously jumped to the conclusion that ownership of the three million acres had been immediately converted to tribal control. The historic court decision was about legal jurisdiction. So no: The Creek Nation will not be collecting property taxes on the land in eastern Oklahoma.

American Indian legal scholar Stacy L. Leeds (Cherokee), who is vice chancellor for economic development, dean emeritus and professor at the University of Arkansas School of Law wrote for *Slate* magazine a day after the decision, “the court noted that Oklahoma repeatedly overstepped and stretched its governmental powers beyond what federal law provides. In short, Oklahoma has no legal authority to prosecute Native Americans for crimes committed within an Indian reservation. Oklahoma spent a century actively creating a law on the ground that was contrary to the law on the books.”

One week later, on July 16, the Oklahoma Attorney General and the Five Civilized Tribes —Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole— announced an agreement in principle to address how criminal and civil legal matters will be handled in the state in the post-*McGirt* era.

To even casual Indian Country observers, striking a deal within one week seemed unimaginable, because they know the wheels of tribal government tend to move slowly. Less than 24 hours after the agreement in principle was announced, Muscogee (Creek) Nation Principal Chief David Hill and Seminole Nation Chief Greg P. Chilcoat said they were not in support of it.

From all appearances, it seems as if the state of Oklahoma sought to retain the legal authority over tribal matters it should have never had. *Native News Online* emailed the Oklahoma Attorney General to ask who signed off for each tribe and has yet to receive a response.

The agreement in principle set off a backlash among Oklahoma tribal citizens and throughout Indian Country, because it appeared the participating tribes were handing the sovereignty reaffirmed by the Supreme Court back to the state of Oklahoma on a silver platter.

One key component of the agreement in principle is the fear that the state of Oklahoma is pressing Congress to pass a law limiting tribal civil jurisdiction over non-Indians to only those situations where the non-Indian has a “consensual relationship, such as contracts” with the nation, according to Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne, Muscogee), a former National Congress of American Indians executive director.

“This mirrors language from the Supreme Court’s 1981 *Montana v. United States*, which has proven harmful for Native nations, given that non-Indian violent perpetrators have repeatedly used the Montana decision to argue that tribal courts do not have jurisdiction to issue civil protective orders against non-Indian perpetrators because they did not ‘consent’ in a contract to tribal civil jurisdiction,” Harjo said.

The thought process was, of course, Oklahoma officials want to retain control over American Indians.

The skepticism was justified.

Seeking to protect the pre-*McGirt* decision status quo, Tulsa county assessor John A. Wright on Friday, July 24, penned an op-ed for *Tulsa World* titled, “Tribes should remove doubt from the marketplace and ask Congress to dissolve reservations.”

The first sentence he wrote was a dead giveaway about where he was going: “The Native American tribes, if acting in the best interest of

their people, should realize the market likes as few unknowns as possible.” As if Oklahoma Native people have not had to worry about the “unknowns” of subjugation for more than a century.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt formed a 10-person commission to recommend to the U.S. Congress the best path forward post-*McGirt*. The commission is composed of eight men, three oil and gas executives, two former members of Congress and a wife of a former congressman.

Governor Stitt is also facing a lawsuit that the Cherokee, Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations filed in federal court on Dec. 31, 2019, over tribal gaming compacts.

Should the Five Tribes trust the Oklahoma officials? Absolutely not.

Intergovernmental agreements are important for tribes, but should be negotiated in good faith and never allow for the watering down of tribal sovereignty, especially in matters relating to non-Indians perpetrating crimes against Native women.

# CONGRESS NEEDS TO PASS THE NATIVE AMERICAN VOTING RIGHTS ACT

*Originally published August 10, 2021*

In late July, one of Indian Country's leading legal scholars, John Echohawk (Pawnee), addressed the Coalition of Large Tribes (COLT) on the topic of Native voting, at its quarterly meeting in Las Vegas.

Echohawk was part of a voting-rights program that also included Jeanine Abrams McLean, the vice president of Fair Count and the sister of voting-rights advocate Stacey Abrams. Echohawk's message was that Native people have to stay involved and persuade those who represent them in Congress to pass voting-rights legislation.

Echohawk, who has served as the executive director of the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) since 1977, recounted the many years of legal fights against voting discrimination towards Native voters.

"From Alaska, Montana and North Dakota, we have fought and won cases against discrimination that tried to suppress the Native vote," Echohawk said.

"Particularly up in North Dakota — it was very obvious. They knew most of our reservation residents did not have street addresses, so they passed a law that said you cannot vote unless you have an ID with a street address, not a post office box number on it. Of course, that disqualified our people. That discrimination was very obvious. It was a violation of our rights under the Constitution," Echohawk said.

He referenced NARF's Native American Voting Rights Coalition, which held nine public hearings with Native voters during 2017 and 2018. The group also produced a 176-page report, "Obstacles at Every Turn: Barriers to Political Participation Faced by Native American Voters," in June of 2020, prior to the presidential election.

"Regardless of whether they live in urban or rural areas, members of the 574 federally recognized tribes face many contemporary barriers

to political participation. Although many other American voters share some of these obstacles, no other racial or ethnic group faces the combined weight of these barriers to the same degree as Native voters in Indian Country,” the report says.

The report cites several factors that discourage political participation in elections. Among those factors are (1) geographical isolation; (2) physical and natural barriers; (3) poorly maintained or nonexistent roads; (4) distance and limited hours of government offices; (5) technological barriers and the digital divide; (6) low levels of educational attainment; (7) depressed socio-economic conditions; (8) homelessness and housing insecurity; (9) non-traditional mailing addresses such as post office boxes; (10) lack of funding for elections; (11) and discrimination against Native Americans.

While Echohawk was pleased with court victories upholding the voting rights of Native Americans, he said he was troubled by the *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court on July 1, 2021. It overturned an appeals-court decision that said two Arizona laws discriminated against the Native, Hispanic, and African American voters in the state.

Echohawk said NARF supported the National Congress of American Indians in court by filing an amicus brief in *Brnovich* to address these issues.

On the day the Supreme Court’s decision was released, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez told *Native News Online* that “the opinion ignores the unique challenges that many tribal nations face during every election and does nothing to protect our voting rights and increase voting access.”

Echohawk says it is important for Congress to pass a comprehensive voting rights law to protect the Native vote. He said Sen. Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.) plans to reintroduce the Native American Voting Rights Act, originally introduced by then Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) in 2019. That legislation would ensure equal access to voting for all Native American voters living on tribal lands and will empower tribal communities in their efforts to improve access to voter registration,

offer education on voting procedure, and ensure equal treatment of tribal identification at the ballot box.

“On top of geographic and linguistic barriers that make it harder for tribal members to vote, restrictive and burdensome voter registration requirements and I.D. laws are suppressing the Native vote across America,” Luján said in support of reintroducing the Native American Voting Rights Act while visiting the Navajo Nation in July.

“We really need the Native American Voting Rights Act,” Echohawk said as he wrapped up his remarks at the COLT meeting. “We all have to get involved in the political process in Washington, D.C. This is our only hope. Congress needs to fix what the Supreme Court did. We need to get Congress to act on this now.”

Indian Country needs to heed the advice of John Echohawk and show our votes and our voices count.

# **DAYS BEFORE THE FOURTH OF JULY, U.S. SUPREME COURT DEALS BLOW TO DEMOCRACY FOR ARIZONA NATIVE VOTERS**

*Originally published July 4, 2021*

Non-Natives often wonder how American Indians celebrate the Fourth of July — Independence Day — the day of the “birth” of the nation 245 years ago in 1776. As with any other group of Americans, Native people are not monolithic; therefore, the answer is that there is no set way.

Some American Indians completely reject the holiday. But quite frankly, as with other holidays that provide a day off work, they are happy for the paid holiday. Others in Indian Country embrace American patriotism.

However, two things may impact the way American Indians embrace Independence Day this year.

One is the recent discovery of the remains of more than 1,000 children attending residential schools in Canada. With Interior Secretary Deb Haaland launching an investigation through the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, many American Indians are bracing for a report on the deaths of Indian children at U.S. boarding schools. The discoveries have caused trauma that have shifted attitudes to how the federal government treated American Indians throughout history.

The second reason Native people have an unfavorable view of the U.S.A. these days is the blow that the U.S. Supreme Court dealt American Indian voters in Arizona on July 1, when it allowed two voting laws that are viewed as suppressing the Native vote to stand.

Arizona has a history of suppressing the Native vote.

During World War II, the U.S. Marine Corps trained 29 Navajo men at Camp Pendleton to communicate in a code undecipherable

to most people because the Navajo language was an unwritten and complex language. By the end of the war, some 400 Navajo men had participated in every major Pacific operation, including the battle of Iwo Jima, speaking in code, a code never broken by enemy forces. It is the only code in modern history that was never broken.

This group, which served its country in a gallant display of support and helped save democracy, are known as the Navajo Code Talkers.

While their heroic contribution was significant in defending democracy, upon return to their homelands, Navajo code talkers who lived in Arizona were not allowed to vote in elections.

The reasons for these denials could add a chapter to the Jim Crow South that denied Blacks their right to vote for decades. In spite of American Indians being granted U.S. citizenship in 1924, Arizona election officials maintained that American Indians living on reservations were disqualified from voting under state law. A second reason was Arizona state officials said American Indians were “under guardianship, non compos mentis, or insane.”

Given the valor of Navajo Code Talkers and other American Indians from other tribes in the state, the disqualifying arguments were deemed no longer valid in 1948, when the Arizona Supreme Court ruled American Indians could vote.

Even with the right to vote, Arizona election officials implemented Jim Crow-like tactics, such as literacy tests for American Indians who wanted to vote. They were required to read the U.S. Constitution in English and write their own names. Since English was not the first language for many American Indians, many failed the test, thereby denying these would-be voters their right to vote.

These literacy tests were outlawed in the 1970s.

Through the years, Native voters in Arizona have faced obstructions to their voting rights. For instance, on the Navajo Nation, which is roughly the size of West Virginia, some Native voters have to travel up to 100 miles on nearly impassable roads when important elections are held.

Voting precincts determined by Arizona election officials are often not within boundaries that are known to Navajo voters.

On Thursday, July 1, the Supreme Court announced a 6-3 decision that was split along ideological lines. Republican-appointed justices voted to uphold the two Arizona voting laws that effectively suppress the votes of American Indians and Hispanics. The court concluded that disparate impacts on minority groups would typically not be enough to render voting rules illegal under the act.

At issue were two laws: one bars the counting of provisional ballots cast in the wrong precinct; the other bars the collection of absentee ballots by anyone other than a family or caregiver.

“Today’s decision acknowledged the inequitable burden created by Arizona’s laws, including specifically upon Native voters, but indicated that it was not inequitable enough to matter,” Native American Rights Fund (NARF) staff attorney Jacqueline De León (Isleta Pueblo) said in a statement. “Since when have our American ideals been that discriminatory policy is okay as long as it is just a little discrimination? It is now up to Congress to clearly defend the ideal that every vote and every voice counts.”

Voting is one of the fundamental rights in a democracy. Laws that add impediments to suppress Native voters provide a blow to democracy. Further, they disregard the vast contributions American Indians have made to the country that celebrates its 245th birthday today.

# MAKING SURE NATIVE VOICES ARE HEARD THROUGH NATIVE VOTES

*Originally published September 7, 2020*

Beyond the politics of choosing the next President of the United States, the American public faces some major differences during the 2020 presidential campaign as citizens work through the mechanics of casting their ballots.

There has never been a pandemic of this size in a modern election. Voters have the added concern of their health and well-being as they vote this year.

Do voters risk catching COVID-19 by standing in long lines where some selfish people will choose not to wear masks or practice the six-foot rule of social distancing? Or will they vote via mail and hope their ballot actually gets counted?

This dilemma impacts the Native vote as well.

Even in a year without a pandemic, voting is hard enough for many American Indians. Transportation is a perpetual challenge for many who live on reservations, due to lack of vehicles or limited resources to fill up their gas tanks and drive to a polling place. On some Indian reservations, voters have to drive 90 miles from where they live to vote.

Long-distance voting can become compromised quickly. For instance, an early snowfall in Montana or North Dakota can dump a few feet of snow in a short span, making roads completely impassable.

These problems do not negate that voting is important to American Indians and Alaska Natives. Beyond concerns all Americans have when voting, American Indians and Alaska Natives have heightened interest in certain areas that directly impact their daily lives relating to water rights, environmental impact, energy, housing, Indian child welfare issues, and federal spending allocated to Indian Country for education and health care.

For this reason, it is important to have Native voices heard. One sure way to make sure Native voices are heard is to ensure that Native votes are cast.

Four Directions, a national American Indian voting-rights organization, reports data from recent elections supports the notion that the Native vote could influence election results in seven major swing states: Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

Apparently, that data has not gone unnoticed by individuals who want to suppress Native votes.

In 2018, a North Dakota law that required voters to have physical addresses on their driver's licenses or personal identifications as a voter requirement made national news. With that law in place, many American Indians living on reservations did not have physical addresses because the U.S. Postal Service only delivered to post office boxes—sometimes miles away from their reservation homes. Therefore, many reservation residents only used post office box numbers, which don't meet the requirements of the North Dakota law.

Many saw the law as an attempt to suppress the votes of those living on North Dakota reservations.

Tomorrow, Sept. 8, the Native American Relief Fund (NARF), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and ACLU of Montana will be in the Montana Thirteenth Judicial District Court in Yellowstone County to argue the *Western Native Voice v. Stapleton* lawsuit. Filed in March 2020, it challenges the Montana Ballot Interference Prevention Act (BIPA), a law that severely restricts Native Americans' access to the ballot.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Western Native Voice and Montana Native Vote, a pair of Native American-led organizations focused on getting out the vote and increasing civic participation in the Native American community, as well as several tribes: the Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes of Fort Peck, Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation, Crow Tribe, and Fort Belknap Indian Community.

One key issue of the case involves the need for ballot collection because many homes on reservations in Montana lack mail delivery. In the past, nonpartisan organizations would assist in collecting ballots and delivering them to county clerks' offices from reservations.

The BIPA law restricts who can collect ballots and even how many ballots can be collected. Get-out-the-vote organizers would previously collect 85 ballots each on average, but are now restricted to just six ballots per collector. Under BIPA, bringing ballots to the post office for relatives or neighbors could result in a fine of \$500 per ballot.

“Indigenous voters have historically been and continue to be disenfranchised, and the Montana law limiting ballot collection is yet another barrier to the polls for rural Indigenous voters. Montana should do everything it can to make voting easy and accessible, especially for those who have been historically disenfranchised. Ballot collection efforts are often the only way many Indigenous people living on rural reservations can access the polls, and we hope those efforts can continue,” Alex Rate, legal director of the ACLU of Montana, said.

In what was viewed as an initial victory for Native voters, a judge from the Yellowstone County District Court blocked BIPA in July. We are hopeful that the three organizations that filed the lawsuit will prevail, to allow Native voices to be heard through Native votes.

# **CENSUS BUREAU SLASHING A MONTH IS A CRITICAL, DAMAGING BLOW TO INDIAN COUNTRY**

*Originally published August 9, 2020*

The COVID-19 pandemic may yield more damage than the tragic deaths of our fellow Americans — which tragically surpassed 160,000 on Thursday, Aug. 5 — and the worst economy since the Great Depression.

This past Monday, the U.S. Census Bureau announced it would slash one month off the counting of the nation’s “hard to count” tracts, which the bureau refers to as being in remote or difficult areas. With the reduction, enumerating would need to be done within the next six weeks instead of before the original deadline of Oct. 31.

Three leading national American Indian organizations — the National Congress of American Indians, the Native American Rights Fund, and the National Urban Indian Family Coalition — called the announcement an unwarranted and irresponsible decision because of its negative impact on Indian Country.

Four of ten households in the United States live in areas deemed hard to count (HTC). Many American Indians and Alaska Natives fall into that category. According to data supplied by the Census Bureau, in New Mexico, 78.6 percent of American Indians live in HTC tracts; it’s 68.1 percent in Arizona, 65.6 percent in Alaska, 52.4 percent in South Dakota, and 49.9 percent in Montana.

To prevent undercounts in HTC tracts, the Census Bureau sends census takers to homes. Tribes throughout Indian Country have been working closely with the Census Bureau to overcome the barriers to prevent undercounts of their tribal citizens.

The number of people counted in the census helps predicate how federal dollars are allocated and provide the basis for drawing congressional district lines in the United States.

Since funds directed to tribes are predicated on data generated by the Census Bureau, getting an accurate and complete count is essential to meet the bare minimum needs of tribal citizens.

In the 2010 census, the Census Bureau estimated that American Indians and Alaska Natives on reservations, in Native Alaskan villages, and in urban settings were undercounted by about five percent, which represents double the rate of the next closest population rate. Back in 1990, the net undercount was estimated to be 12.2 percent.

The slashing of the month of October by the Trump administration is troubling to Indian Country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added a dual threat of undercount among American Indians and Alaska Natives in this census count. Exacerbating the fear of undercounts on American Indian reservations is the fact that Indian Country has been hit disproportionately hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One such hot spot is the Navajo Nation, where, as of Saturday, Aug. 7, there had been a total of 9,293 COVID-19 cases and a death toll of 470. Because of the disease's huge impact, the Navajo Indian Reservation has taken measures to contain the further spread of the deadly virus, such as lockdowns and curfews. These measures have presented a huge challenge to Navajo citizens' participation in this year's census. Needless to say, when someone is faced with a life-or-death situation, filling out a census form does not take high priority.

As of Friday, Aug. 6, only 15 percent of reservation residents had responded to the census form. The national response rate, meanwhile, was 63.1 percent.

A random scan of other American Indian reservations and tribal nations' response rates is cause for alarm. As of Friday, the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota had a response rate of 5.7 percent; Crow Nation in Montana was at 9.1 percent; Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota was at 17.7 percent; Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona at 16.3 percent; and San Carlos Indian Reservation in Arizona sat at 10.9 percent.

Unless there is a significant drive from now until the end of September, Indian Country will be tremendously undercounted this

census cycle. The result will have devastating impacts on the housing, education, health, and employment services tribes can provide to their citizens.

“Our tribal nations and tribal communities have been ravaged by COVID-19, and an extension of the Census enumeration period was a humane lifeline during an unprecedented global health catastrophe that provided critically needed additional time to tribal nations to ensure that all of everyone in their communities are counted,” the National Congress of American Indians, the Native American Rights Fund, and the National Urban Indian Family Coalition wrote in a joint statement released last week.

Not only do the three organizations object to the shortening of the enumerating period by a month, they feel that because of the pandemic, the period should be extended in the next COVID-19 Congressional stimulus package.

*Native News Online* supports this position, in order to prevent more damage to Indian Country as a result of the pandemic.

# INDIAN COUNTRY'S POPULATION GROWTH PROVES ERASURE WILL NOT WORK

*Originally published August 16, 2021*

Photographer Edward Curtis spent 30 years photographing American Indians. In 1904, Curtis published “The Vanishing Race,” considered his signature piece. It became the underlying reason for him to continue capturing photographs of American Indians before, in his mind, they became a people relegated to history.

Even President Theodore Roosevelt, a supporter of the photographer’s efforts, thought American Indians were “perishing” and sent Curtis a letter that said “the Indian, as an Indian, is on the point of perishing, and when he has become a United States citizen, though it will be a much better thing for him and for the rest of the country, he will lose completely his value as a living historical document.”

While American Indians were not made United States citizens until 1924 through an act of Congress, the Census Bureau in 1900 enumerated the American Indian population at 237,200.

Consider that estimates of the Indigenous population here were as high as 60 million in 1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Other experts say the number was closer to eight million. Regardless, the 1900 Census figure of less than a quarter-million convinced those at the turn of the century that the American Indian population would disappear.

This week, the 2020 Census reported that the population of American Indians and Alaska Natives is on the rise, which reminds me of the Mark Twain quote about “the report of my death was an exaggeration.”

This good news is backed up by data released Thursday, Aug. 12, showing the American Indian and Alaska Native population, when counted alone and not combined with any other race, was 3.7 million,

which is 1.1 percent of the total population of the United States. In 2010, there were 2.9 million American Indians and Alaska Natives. The growth rate over the past decade was 27.1 percent.

More surprising, the American Indian and Alaska Native population, when combined with other races and ethnicities, rose an astounding 160 percent from 2010 to 2020. The “combination population,” as the Census calls it, was 9.7 million people — or 2.9 percent of the total population — up from 5.2 million in 2010.

Despite the growth in Native population, it appears some people in our country want to pretend Curtis was correct, and the American Indian vanished. How else can you explain what’s going on in South Dakota?

News broke this week that the state’s education department eliminated 18 Indigenous-centered learning objectives from social studies standards in the curriculum for students in kindergarten through 12th grade that had been recommended by a workgroup of 46 educators selected by the department from around the state. More specifically, the department scratched all mentions of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate, otherwise known as the People of Seven Council Fires, or the Sioux Nation.

“I was disappointed, but not surprised to learn of the changes to the state standards,” South Dakota state Sen. Red Dawn Foster (Lakota/Diné) told *Native News Online*. “It is a blatant attempt to minimize and devalue the important contributions of the Oceti Sakowin (Seven Council Fires) to the history of South Dakota and the region more generally.

“This is also a failure to recognize the significant electoral power of Natives in South Dakota. We must make our voices heard, loud and clear in every election, or continue to be at the mercy of mean-spirited partisan politics.”

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Chairman Harold Frazier condemned the Department of Education’s actions.

“Unfortunately, the bureaucrats and politicians who commissioned the workgroup gutted the portion of the curriculum regarding our Indigenous people,” Frazier said. “There is so much that must be taught to the children in order for them to understand the world

they will inherit, and it begins with an understanding of one another. Removing the important lessons of who we are, where we came from, and why things are the way they are, robs every young mind of the necessary understandings to overcome the hurdles of conflict, genocide, and historical trauma.”

Chairman Frazier hit harder in a statement shared with the media: “Our children were stolen from us in a past generation, forcefully assimilated or secretly buried in boarding schools under the ‘kill the Indian and save the man’ ideologies, and it would seem that the task to erase them has not ended.”

Erasure of American Indians from history is nothing new. But it’s always been wrong.

With our growing population, our voices must be amplified with concerted outrage to stop the politics of erasing Native people and our culture.

# **THE FEDERAL BOARDING SCHOOL INITIATIVE IS A PROMISING STEP TOWARDS TRUTH AND HEALING**

*Originally published June 27, 2021*

This past Tuesday, June 22, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) addressed the National Congress of American Indians' mid-year conference.

She quickly mentioned the discovery in late May of 215 children buried in unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, Canada.

“Like many of you, I was deeply impacted by the news of the 215 children found in a mass grave at a boarding school in Canada. I couldn't help but think of their families. Each of those children was a missing family member, a person who was not able to live out their purpose, because forced-assimilation policies ended their lives too soon,” Haaland said, adding, “I wept with the Indigenous team here at Interior.”

Haaland's remarks stuck with me all week, because as this nation's first Indigenous Cabinet secretary, she understands our pain.

“Our communities are still mourning,” Haaland continued.

She then announced the establishment of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in the United States. The work of the initiative will be enormous in scope. It is tasked with identifying past boarding schools throughout the country and investigating possible burial sites, then identifying those buried and returning the remains to their rightful tribes. Haaland asked the initiative to submit a written report to her office by April 1, 2022.

Two days later, on June 24, Chief Cadmus Delorme of the Cowessess First Nation announced the discovery of as many as 751 unmarked graves on what was formerly the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan.

Though the latest discovery was yet again in Canada, investigations of Indian boarding schools in the United States are long overdue.

Native Americans have known there to be graves on the grounds of Indian boarding schools for decades. We also have known about physical and sexual abuses perpetrated by those who operated the schools.

We also know about the historical trauma inflicted on our communities that has yielded countless social ills among us.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) has identified 367 historically assimilative Indian boarding schools that operated nationwide between 1870 and 1970. According to NABS, the organization has only been able to locate records from 38 percent of those boarding schools.

Because the records have never been fully examined, it is still unknown how many Native American children actually attended, died, or went missing from the schools.

NABS supports Haaland's initiative, because the organization believes that it is time for truth and healing.

"We have a right to know what happened to the children who never returned home from Indian boarding schools," NABS said in a statement on June 25.

There is no doubt that the work of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative will be painful. It will be like pulling back a scab only to find out how bad the injury really is.

But with only nine months to do the job, the initiative may not unearth all the information that has been buried for decades.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) will soon reintroduce the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, which she introduced last year with then-Rep. Haaland.

The commission would "formally investigate and document, for the first time in history, cultural genocide, assimilation practices, and human-rights violations of Indian Boarding Schools in the United States, to study the impact and ongoing effects of historical and intergenerational trauma in Tribal communities, and to provide a forum for Indigenous victims and families to discuss the personal impacts of physical, psychological, and spiritual violence."

On June 24, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) approved a resolution calling for a federal commission to build on the Interior Department's initiative.

Since being sworn in as the 54th Secretary of the Interior, Haaland has proven she is the right person at the right time.

Having an Interior Secretary who weeps with her fellow Indigenous peoples and nations offers hope during these dark, painful times. Establishing an initiative to investigate the boarding-school era may prove to be the right step towards truth, reconciliation, and healing.

# **FEDERAL INDIAN BOARDING INITIATIVE MUST GO BEYOND THE “MERIAM REPORT”**

*Originally published July 10, 2021*

Throughout American history, the relationship between American Indians and the U.S. government has been fraught with mistreatment, oppression, and disregard for the welfare of Native people. The federal government has shown little regard for American Indians and callously labeled this country’s colonized inhabitants as the “Indian problem.”

For centuries, the government has dealt with American Indian from a paternalistic and colonial stance. After the failures to remove American Indians through disease and war, the government sought to assimilate Native people. Children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools. An ethos adopted by Capt. Richard Henry Pratt to “kill the Indian; save the man” was used to strip Indian children of their culture and “Americanize” them.

As part of a comprehensive study, Indian boarding schools were investigated during the 1920s through a study commissioned by Interior Secretary Hubert Work in 1926. Secretary Work selected Lewis Meriam of the Institute for Government Research (now the Brookings Institution) to supervise a survey of conditions on Indian reservations in 26 states. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the study looked into conditions of agriculture, sociology, law, health and education. After two years of field work, in 1928 the findings were compiled and released in a 847-page tome called “The Problem of Indian Administration,” also known as the Meriam Report.

In the education section, the report revealed Indian boarding schools were part of a broken system in all areas. It reported poor living conditions, poor health care, inadequate food supplies, and lack of family development for American Indian children. The report also lacked accurate census data regarding the number of children who

were part of the system. Teachers were underpaid and oftentimes unqualified to teach.

A portion of the report reads: “The survey staff finds itself obliged to say frankly and unequivocally that the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate. The outstanding deficiency is in the diet furnished the Indian children, many of whom are below normal health. The diet is deficient in quantity, quality, and variety. The effort has been made to feed the children on a per capita of eleven cents a day, plus what can be produced on the school farm, including the dairy. At few, very few, schools, the farm and the dairy are sufficiently productive to be a highly important factor in raising the standard of the diet, but even at the best schools, these sources do not fully meet the requirements for the health and development of the children.”

The report described substandard old buildings that were often used long after they should have been closed and torn down. In many cases, buildings were fire risks, with poor boiler systems. The dormitories were overcrowded with below-standard sanitation.

The Meriam Report was released 93 years ago, just prior to the Great Depression. One can only imagine conditions grew worse at the schools as the entire nation suffered from dire economic conditions. Even after the release of the report, the forced removal of Native American children continued for decades.

The damage of the broken Indian boarding-school system lingers today in tribal communities through alcoholism, generational trauma, and dysfunctional families.

Weeks after the discovery of 215 remains of school children at the Kamloops Industrial Residential School in Canada, a renewed interest in the Indian boarding schools surfaced. The discovery led Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to establish a Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. The initiative will include an investigation to identify past boarding schools, the location of known and possible burial sites, and the identities and tribal affiliations of the children who were taken there.

Soon after Secretary Haaland established the initiative, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said what many of us know to be true through our life experiences about the impact of the American colonization of Indian land and the assault on its people:

“As Navajo people, we all have parents, grandparents, and other elders who were subjected to boarding schools, and that has contributed to many of the modern-day monsters in our society, such as suicide, substance abuse and addiction, violence in our homes and communities, the physical and mental health of our people, and much more. Our people were forcefully removed from their homes and families, placed into the boarding school system, and stripped of their identity as Navajo people to assimilate them. Some were abused physically, mentally, and sexually, and sadly, many had their lives taken. This troubling history deserves more attention.”

The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative will result in a written report on the investigation to Secretary Haaland by April 1, 2022.

This new initiative, under the Department of the Interior, should go far beyond what the Meriam Report accomplished. It should aim to expose the truth about the mistreatment, oppression, abuse, and deaths of Indian children.

It is a first step on a long journey towards healing centuries-old wounds from the assault that has wrought chaos to Native people, the righteous and first inhabitants of this land.

# CONGRESS, IT'S TIME TO PASS THE INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS LEGISLATION

*Originally published October 3, 2021*

As the first Native American to ever serve as Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) has a deep understanding of the realities and ongoing ramifications of our Indigenous history within the context of American history.

As a former member of Congress, Haaland also understands the importance of timing and public opinion when it comes to addressing important issues, making policy, and making meaningful change.

This was evident in June, just three weeks after the discovery of 215 graves of Native children at a residential boarding school in British Columbia. Speaking at the National Congress of American Indians' mid-year conference, Haaland announced the establishment of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to investigate and shed light on this dark era of cultural genocide.

It is hard to imagine a non-Native Interior Secretary acting so decisively in rapid fashion. But Haaland had an unfortunate truth and deep understanding on her side.

"I am a product of these horrific assimilation policies. My maternal grandparents were stolen from their families when they were only 8 years old and were forced to live away from their parents, culture, and communities until they were 13. Many children like them never made it back home," Haaland wrote in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post*.

Six months before being sworn in as Interior Secretary, Haaland, then a House member (D-N.M.), had introduced legislation along with Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) to establish the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy in the United States and set forth its powers, duties, and membership.

“Native people are resilient and strong, but the painful and traumatic history of genocide and forced assimilation by the federal government lives on in our communities, and our people have never been able to fully heal. I know not many people are aware of the history of Indian boarding schools, and I know it’s not taught in schools -- but our country must do better to acknowledge our real history and push for truth and reconciliation,” Haaland said when the legislation was introduced.

On the same day it was introduced, the legislation was referred to a Congressional committee, where it was effectively dead on arrival.

Then last Thursday, Sept. 30, on a day when Indigenous peoples across North America commemorated multiple generations of stolen children, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act was reintroduced by Sen. Warren, with a House version introduced by the co-chairs of the Congressional Native American Caucus, Rep. Sharice Davids (D-Kan.) and Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.).

This bill would establish a formal commission to investigate, document, and acknowledge past injustices of the federal government’s Indian boarding-school policies. Those include attempts to terminate Native cultures, religions, and languages; assimilation practices; and human-rights violations. The commission would also develop recommendations for Congress to aid in healing the historical and intergenerational trauma passed down in Native families and communities. It would also provide a forum for victims to speak about personal experiences tied to these human-rights violations.

Reaction from national American Indian organizations was positive and in full support of the legislation.

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) issued a statement on Friday, Oct. 1, giving its support: “The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act would provide an important avenue for an investigation about the losses that occurred through the Indian Boarding School Policies and the lasting consequences of the violence of this attempted genocide,”

said Juana Majel Dixon, NCAI board secretary and traditional councilwoman of the Pauma Band of Mission Indians.

“Only through a formal investigation which includes meaningful consultation with Tribal Nations and significant input from survivors and their descendants, can the U.S. begin to reconcile with the past and can tribal communities begin to move toward healing from the egregious abuses which occurred,” she concluded.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS), based in Minneapolis, offered its endorsement of the legislation in a statement.

“We are in a moment in history where the wound of unresolved grief from Indian boarding schools is being ripped wide open. The truth is being unearthed and yet so much more is still unknown,” NABS CEO Christine Diindiisi McCleave (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) said.

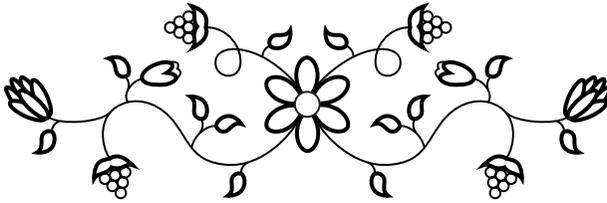
Of course, these two national organizations — and many others — had fully endorsed last year’s Indian boarding school bill when Haaland first introduced it, only to see it die in committee a short time later.

But this time, things feel different.

Since the Kamloops discovery, there has been heightened awareness of Indian Boarding Schools and the role they played in the assimilation and cultural genocide of Native people in North America for 150 years. That awareness has sparked extensive media coverage, political dialogue, new levels of tribal engagement, and Haaland’s establishment of the boarding-school initiative. Many believe it is the beginning of a long-overdue reckoning and a first step toward healing for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

As Secretary Haaland did in establishing the boarding-school initiative, Congress should act quickly and decisively to pass the newly reintroduced Boarding School legislation as part of the federal government’s trust responsibility to our tribal nations. This must happen now.

# MASCOTS, MEDIA & MAKE BELIEVE



# MEMO TO TEACHERS: IT'S NOT OKAY TO PLAY INDIAN

*Originally published October 24, 2021*

On Thursday morning, Oct. 21, I woke up to messages from friends who sent me the Instagram video of the teacher “dressed” as a Native American who was going viral on social media. The video was of a math teacher in Riverside, California who was filmed by a Native American student as she pranced around her classroom in an odd attempt to dance, sing, and pray as a Native American.

Before even watching the video, I thought to myself, “here we go again with someone who wants to play Indian.”

After viewing the video of the teacher conducting herself in such ridiculous fashion, I remarked to friends “I hope she didn’t rehearse her routine” — because it was an awful portrayal of real Native Americans.

Since then, the video has exploded in the national press. Some in the media said the teacher was mocking Native Americans. I am not sure, because she looks as if she was pretty proud of her depiction, complete with a fake headdress made from construction paper, doing her routine.

Some news outlets reported that the teacher, who *Native News Online* chooses not to name, has done this for years. A photograph of the same teacher dressed up to play Indian emerged in a school yearbook from 2010. Since it appeared in a high-school yearbook, one can only ascertain the Riverside Unified School District was aware of her actions and even condoned the inappropriate behavior.

Last month, as reported by *Native News Online*, a different teacher in Wisconsin dressed up as a Native American for a lesson in her history class. She was also filmed by another Native American student. The incident brought outrage from local Wisconsin Native Americans, who addressed the issue before the Wausau School District’s Board of Education.

Many across the country, not just Native Americans, were infuriated by both teachers’ actions. Many of those who were angry see the

similarities of the misappropriation of Native American imagery in sports and in other settings. Non-Native teachers should not be allowed to define Native American culture by dressing up in inappropriate attire.

“These costumes and stereotypes dehumanize us,” former Wausau Board of Education president Tricia Zunker, who also serves on the Ho-Chunk Nation’s Supreme Court, said to *Native News Online*. “There is a correlation between the dehumanization and the growing epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous persons and that needs to be taught to address this ongoing issue that has plagued our communities since the settlers came.”

Her argument coincides with the work of University of Michigan professor Stephanie Fryberg, Ph.D., who argues that Native American students are damaged by American Indian mascots.

“American Indian mascots are harmful not only because they are often negative, but because they remind American Indians of the limited ways in which others see them. This in turn restricts the number of ways American Indians can see themselves,” Fryberg writes.

Often, Native American students are in a very small minority of student enrollment. In the case of the Riverside Unified School District, Native Americans make up only .4 percent of the total school body. The number of Hispanics who can claim Indigenous roots is 4.7 percent. Even combined, the Native American and Hispanic students are vastly outnumbered.

Akalei Brown, who goes by *corn\_maiden\_designs* on Instagram, posted this message along with the video:

*“Yesterday a Native American student filmed this video in his Math class! After several minutes of the teacher ‘war whooping & tomahawk chopping’ the student began filming because he ‘felt that violence was being committed against him and he had the right to record.’ This was taken at John W. North high school in Riverside, CA. At first the student noticed the teacher was pulling out a fake feather headdress and when she put it on he thought, ‘what is she going to do?’”*

The clause “he ‘felt that violence was being committed against him’” caught my attention.

Dr. Fryberg’s findings were manifested: It is no wonder that Native American students have the highest high-school dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.

Every school district in America should send out a memorandum in front of Native American Heritage Month in November to all of their teachers to tell them “It’s not okay to play Indian or try to dress like one,” and direct them to search the Internet to find Native American curriculum that is appropriate to teach in their classrooms.

They can begin by going to IllumiNative website’s “Native Education for All” section for appropriate teaching material. In addition, tribes across Indian Country have education departments that will gladly provide them accurate information about local tribes in the area.

I’ll take it a step further. As Americans head into Thanksgiving season, perhaps a thoughtful conversation can be had about how American history is taught in schools. Perhaps then, when incidents such as those with these two teachers happen, there will be a more profound understanding of why it’s problematic.

# **SOME UNCLE TOMAHAWKS ARE OKAY WITH THE CHOP. IT'S NOT OKAY.**

*Originally published October 31, 2021*

With the Atlanta Braves in this year's baseball World Series, conversations this past week about the team's appropriation of Native American imagery and culture have extended beyond the green field of Truist Park, where the team plays their home games.

On Tuesday, Oct. 26, Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Rob Manfred met with the press and answered questions about the Braves name, chant, and fans doing the offensive "tomahawk chop" at their home games.

Manfred defended the Atlanta baseball club. He said the Atlanta team officials have done a "phenomenal job" working with the local Native American community in a respectful way.

What Native American community?

A quick look at the census demographics for Georgia shows Native Americans make up less than 0.5 percent of the population of the whole state.

History tells us that because of the Removal Act of 1830, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the vast majority of the Native Americans who lived in Georgia were forcibly removed westward during the Trail of Tears.

After the tribal removal from Georgia, the state's population grew due to a vast increase of Whites and Blacks. According to the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Georgia's population was 57.8 percent White, 31.9 percent Black, 4.1 percent Asian, and 0.4 percent American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The idea the Atlanta baseball team even took on the name "Braves" is absurd.

The Atlanta major league team originated in Boston in the 1870s, taking the name “Braves” in 1941. It moved to Milwaukee in 1953 and to Atlanta in 1966. The team kept the Braves nickname and continued the usage of Native American imagery.

The franchise even used the services of an Odawa named Levi Walker from Cross Village, Michigan. Every time the Atlanta team hit a home run, Walker, who played a mascot called Chief Noc-A-Homa, would come out of a teepee that was beyond the outfield wall at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. He was paid \$60 per home game.

After a dispute over pay, Walker and the team parted company in 1986. He was not replaced. Chief Noc-A-Homa was retired by the team.

In 1990, the team introduced a new logo that features the team’s name with an image of a tomahawk. Apparently, bloodthirsty savages who are brave run around with tomahawks looking for their next kill.

The next year gave birth to the tomahawk chop.

By the time the Atlanta team made the National League championship playoffs in 1991, the tomahawk chop had become a craze. Former President Jimmy Carter was highly criticized for sitting in the front row at a game with the team’s owner, Ted Turner, and his wife, the actress Jane Fonda, doing the tomahawk chop.

National Native American leaders voiced their strong opposition.

Not much has changed in the past 30 years for the Atlanta fans who think they own the tomahawk chop.

Through the years, the Atlanta team always seems to find a small group or even a tribal leader who says there is nothing wrong with the tomahawk chop.

In the Black community, Blacks who become subservient to Whites are called Uncle Toms. Among Native Americans, those Native people who become compliant to White people’s wishes are called Uncle Tomahawks.

In the case of the tomahawk chop, there are some Uncle Tomahawks who will say there is nothing wrong with it. These Uncle Tomahawks are wrong.

There is much wrong with one culture appropriating the culture of another.

Seth Thomas Sutton (Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians descendant), author of the just released *The Deconstruction of Chief Blackhawk: A Critical Analysis of Mascots & The Visual Rhetoric of the Indian*, told me Saturday, Oct. 30, “Indigenous-based mascots and the associated ‘chop’ and ‘chant’ represent authentic Indigenous identities with that of falsehoods and stereotypical tropes that the Atlanta Braves fans, and dominant White society, view to be truthful and historically accurate.

“Continuing to use these harmful images and performances, dominant White society engages in acts of neo-colonialism, which in turn, further normalizes oppressive power structures that are in place to both support and be supported by Indigenous subjugation.”

I have decided to boycott watching the World Series this year because of the Atlanta Braves. You should know: I actually like watching the Fall Classic. However, I really don’t want to subject myself to a bunch of non-Natives shouting some unintelligible chant and making the tomahawk chop, which I find both disgusting and disgraceful.

I think it is so hypocritical the Atlanta baseball franchise thinks it appropriate to continue with its name in a state our people were driven from so long ago.

# IT'S TIME FOR THE WASHINGTON NFL TEAM TO DROP ITS RACIST NAME

*Originally published June 22, 2020*

As an American Indian, I have tried for years to understand the psychology behind non-Natives taking on our names and images for local schools or in the world of professional sports.

Three years ago, I attended two school board meetings in Paw Paw, Mich., where a group of American Indians were calling on the school system to drop their mascot name: the Redsk!ns.

Both meetings were emotionally charged with multiple generations of “Redsk!ns” alumni testifying during the public comment portion of the meeting, saying they would never change, and threatening to vote school board members out of office if they voted to drop the name.

Among the most memorable speakers to come forth at the meetings was an elderly man, who appeared to be in his 80s. As he spoke, his face turned red, and he pointed his finger at the group of American Indians in the crowd, telling them he had some tar at home and if he had some feathers, he would have come to “tar and feather” the group.

It was truly one of those “wow” moments we encounter in life.

Listening to the speakers, I realized through the years they had taken ownership of the Redsk!n name and did not care that the American Indians in the room wanted them to drop the name. At that point in time, the school board decided to keep the name.

Then, in March 2020, the Paw Paw school board decided to drop the name.

In recent weeks, with a national dialogue on systemic racism developing across the United States, there has been a renewed call for Dan Snyder, the owner of the Washington National Football League team, to drop the racist Redsk!ns name.

Earlier this month, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser (D) said it's time to change the name.

On “#BlackoutTuesday,” which was called to draw attention of racial injustice in the aftermath of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, Ocasio-Cortez noticed the Washington NFL team had blackened its Twitter logo to support Black Lives Matter.

“Want to really stand for racial justice? Change your name,” the first-term congresswoman wrote in response on Twitter.

Mayor Bowser was asked about Ocasio-Cortez's comments on a local talk radio show.

“I think it's past time for the team to deal with [that the team name, Redsk!ns] offends so many people,” Bowser said on the radio show. “This is a great franchise with a great history, that's beloved in history, and it deserves a name that reflects the affection that we feel for the team.”

On Friday, June 19, the *Washington Post* called for the name change in an editorial, “Change the name of the Washington NFL team. Now.”

“This should be an easy call. Mr. Snyder — or, if Mr. Snyder refuses to back down from his declaration of ‘NEVER,’ the NFL — should take advantage of this singular moment in history to get on the right side of history,” the *Post* editorial says. “Change the name. NOW.”

The renewed call to change the name is welcome by American Indians. American Indian organizations have fought against the name for decades.

In an opinion for the British *Guardian* in January 2013, Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne-Arapaho) wrote:

“Can the Washington team not see that its name celebrates a vile history of bounty hunting and mutilation of Native Americans?”

“All major Native American organizations have called for the Washington pro football franchise to end its team's despicable name. Why? Because it's a racial slur and — no matter how many millions it spends trying to sanitize it and silence Native peoples — the epithet is not, was not, and will not be an honorific.”

The next year, Harjo was presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama for her tireless work for decades to get sports teams to drop names that promote negative American Indian stereotypes. For three decades, Harjo has worked to have the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office revoke the trademark the Washington Redskins filed in September 1992, on the grounds that it was disparaging.

The call by American Indians to do away with the misappropriation of Native-themed images goes way beyond being politically correct. It is about doing the right thing.

According to a Reclaiming Native Truth study released in June 2018, four out of five American Indians say they find Native-themed mascots disrespectful. There is a basis for American Indian opposition that goes beyond the racist nature of mascots.

“Research shows that these mascots are damaging to Native high school and college students, negatively impacting feelings of personal and community worth, and that they reinforce bias among non-Native people,” the Reclaiming Native Truth study notes.

This publication has called for the Washington NFL team to drop its racist name for years. The time to change the name is long overdue. Now is the time.

# LONG OVERDUE: THE CLEVELAND MLB TEAM RENAMES ITSELF THE “GUARDIANS”

*Originally published July 25, 2021*

As I was leaving Las Vegas Friday, July 23, after a week covering the National Center for American Indian Economic Development’s Reservation Economic Summit and the National Indian Gaming Association’s Indian Gaming Tradeshow and Convention, I was greeted with a nice email with positive news that the Cleveland Major League Baseball team was changing its name from the “Indians” to the “Guardians.”

The name change comes one year after the Washington National Football League (NFL) team dropped the offensive “Redsk!ns” name — a name that is considered racist by the vast majority of American Indians. Last year, the NFL team’s retirement of the racist name after 87 years of misappropriation was even more refreshing because the team’s owner, Dan Snyder, was quoted previously as saying, “We will never change the name of the team.”

Well, never came, and the world didn’t end.

The fight to have the “Indians” name dropped was begun more than 50 years ago by the Cleveland American Indian Movement (AIM), in response to the wishes of the local Native community, elders, and leaders in the Nations, according to the organization’s website.

In my personal view, the “Chief Wahoo” logo that the Cleveland team retired, which featured a silly-looking Native, was one of the most offensive and disrespectful caricatures ever used by a professional sports team. Proponents often say it is an honor for a team to use American Indian imagery or a Native name.

Chief Wahoo provided no honor to American Indians. Fortunately, the team dropped the caricature before the beginning of the 2019 season. Here again, the world didn’t end.

Even with Chief Wahoo gone, the team still felt pressure from American Indians to drop the name. Last December, it announced it would retire the “Indians” name.

On July 23, the team announced its new name in a statement, which read in part:

“The name change process started in June 2020 with a statement acknowledging the importance of taking a leadership role in uniting our community. We conducted an extensive multiphase process to learn how the team name ‘Indians’ impacted different constituencies and how it intersected with our organizational values.”

Praise came from the National Congress of American Indians, IllumiNative – a nonprofit created to challenge negative stereotypes of American Indians – and the American Indian College Fund. Cheryl Crazy Bull (Sicangu Lakota), president and CEO of the American Indian College Fund, offered this praise:

“I have seen firsthand the harm that mascot names and imagery cause to the self-esteem and self-confidence of our young people. I know only too well what the research proves about the harm the imagery does to them. By selecting a team name and image that reflects a city’s shared values and celebrates all its citizens, the Cleveland Guardians have set a welcome and higher standard for how change can be managed by listening to all community members, including all voices in a shared vision, and helping a city, an enterprise, and citizens grow as they move forward.”

Not everyone was happy about the progress.

The name change compelled Sheriff Bruce Zuchowski, of Cleveland’s neighboring Portage County, to make a statement on behalf of what he calls “the silent majority,” a term the failed president Richard Nixon used to call on Americans to support the increasingly unpopular Vietnam war.

To give credence to his statement, the sheriff remarked that his wife is a descendent of the “Cherokee and Blackfoot American Indian Tribe.”

His statement says of his wife: “She and her relatives never viewed the Cleveland Indians as a biased or prejudiced team, but rather their

hometown baseball franchise. This is once again another attempt of trying to erase our history due to the outcry of the few that affects the many.”

The sheriff, an elected official, continued: “I have boycotted professional sports for the past three years and if you were to ask me who the starting lineup was for the Indians, I couldn’t tell you. Some may question if I don’t care to watch or follow their progress, why should I care about their name change? The fact is that the general standpoint is not about this particular position taken by the team but rather the principle of the decision-making process.

“These unfortunate decisions are being made while continuously impacting individuals and industries across the nation. Both lawmakers and decision-makers need to begin to think about the majority of their constituents before caving to the impulsive demands being made by a small group of the public.”

American Indians are a “small group of the public” in this country in large part because of the genocide committed against many of our ancestors.

Sheriff Zuchowski’s sentiments go beyond the size of the population of American Indians. His statement reads as if he believes he’s speaking for the majority of non-Natives, who allegedly feel American Indians should have no say in things that matter to us or the overall decision-making process.

We are 2-0 against professional sports teams over the course of the past 12 months in getting rid of misappropriation of Native names and imagery. The fight continues.

# **IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT SPORTS TEAMS CALL THEMSELVES AS LONG AS THEY LEAVE NATIVE THEMES OUT**

*Originally published February 6, 2022*

This past Wednesday, Feb. 2, the Washington National Football League franchise became the Washington Commanders. The name replaces the racist moniker the team used from its time in Boston in 1933 until the team relinquished it in July 2020.

The team had agreed on July 2, 2020 to drop the offensive name. That agreement was a reversal from franchise owner Dan Snyder's position in 2013, when he vowed, "We'll never change the name. It's that simple. NEVER — you can use caps."

Well, NEVER came seven years later.

The shift occurred in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder. Corporate America put pressure on Snyder to drop the racial slur. The pressure mounted when Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) and Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser (D) said it was time to change the name.

On "#BlackoutTuesday," June 2, 2020, which was called to draw attention to racial injustice in the aftermath of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, Ocasio-Cortez noticed the Washington NFL team had posted a black square on Twitter to support Black Lives Matter.

"Want to really stand for racial justice? Change your name," she posted in response.

Mayor Bowser was asked about Ocasio-Cortez's comments on a local radio talk show.

"I think it's past time for the team to deal with [it. The team name, Redsk!ns] offends so many people," Bowser said. "This is a great

franchise with a great history, that's beloved in history, and it deserves a name that reflects the affection that we feel for the team."

Efforts from corporate America and politicians are important, but Native Americans' calls for the team to drop its name should not be forgotten. That includes calls from Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne & Hodulgee Muscogee), the late Clyde Bellecourt (White Earth Ojibwe), and Native activist Amanda Blackhorse (Navajo), among others.

On Feb. 2, Harjo told *Native News Online* reporter Darren Thompson:

"The name could be commander, or salamander, or macaroni. It's not the name that matters, as long as it's not doing harm and injury to living people—that's all we ever asked for."

She is right. It doesn't matter what sports teams call themselves as long as they leave Native people alone.

Thompson's article prompted one reader to make this comment in an email: "We have had it with the PC/Woke culture eliminating the Cleveland Indians, the Fighting Sioux, the Ole Rebels, the Fighting Christians, the Red Men, the Fighting Illini, the Plainsmen, the Hurons, etc."

Then he asked: "Why are people like you and others so offended at these mascots? It almost seems that you are against diversity and history when it comes to this."

What that reader doesn't live with as a non-Native person is the dishonor that goes with teams using Native names and themes. There is no honor when fans' faces are painted and their heads decorated with turkey feathers, or when opposing teams fans chant: "Scalp the Redsk!ns!" There is no honor in either scenario for Native Americans.

Our opposition to Native-themed mascots is simple. They don't honor Native Americans. They dehumanize Native Americans. The basis for this opposition goes beyond the racist nature of mascots, according to the Reclaiming Native Truth report, released in June 2018.

"Research shows that these mascots are damaging to Native high school and college students, negatively impacting feelings of personal

and community worth, and that they reinforce bias among non-Native people,” per the Reclaiming Native Truth Project.

The timing of the name-change announcement on Groundhog Day was noticed by American Indian College President and CEO of the American Indian College Fund Cheryl Crazy Bull (Sicangu Lakota) who stated, “I can’t think of a better metaphor for the need for respectful visibility of Native people in America than the Washington football team’s announcement that it changed its name to the Commanders, on Groundhog Day.”

Like the movie protagonist stuck in a time warp where every day is the same day and events repeat themselves, the same is true in Indian Country, where more work needs to be done to eradicate racist mascots and names, day in and day out.

It will never be acceptable, respectful, or honorable to use Native American names and imagery to name sports teams. And today, as America reckons with its racist history, it’s a small yet significant step towards achieving reconciliation. The remaining disgraceful professional sports teams holding on to their Native-themed names must shed this racist practice and follow suit.

## **NATIVE VOTERS HELPED FLIP STATES FOR BIDEN. THE MEDIA SHOULD RECOGNIZE THAT.**

*Originally published November 15, 2020*

Ten days after Election Day, on Nov. 13, the state of Arizona was called for President-elect Joe Biden by the major television networks. Even though the Associated Press and Fox News had called Arizona for Biden after the polls closed on election night, it was conceivable the state could be won by President Donald Trump. So the networks waited until they were convinced that it was not mathematically possible for the president to surpass Biden's lead.

As of Saturday, Nov. 14, with 99 percent of the Arizona votes tallied, Biden led the one-term president by only 10,000 votes.

Since the election, media political experts have analyzed vote tallies and exit polls to determine where the presidential candidates received their support. As with other news items, American Indians and Alaska Natives were often overlooked and not even brought into consideration.

On election night, CNN did analysis of exit polls in the 2020 presidential election by race. The network's graph listed these categories of race: White, Latino, Black, Asian, and Something Else.

While CNN clearly did not specify Native voters as "Something Else," the category would be the only logical choice.

This while the country supposedly celebrates National Native American Heritage Month during November.

Many Native people turned CNN's disrespectful listing into good old-fashioned Indian humor, the kind used so often by Native people to look at past insults and pain. Several humorous memes circulated on social media, such as "the Lone Ranger and Something Else," and a photo meme with Forrest Gump "and just like that Natives were labeled 'Something Else' and they just ran with it."

All joking aside, the “something else” vote should be more thoroughly examined by the media and politicians.

Arguably, the Native vote flipped Arizona for Biden. The numbers show the strength of the Native vote in Arizona was substantial. Election results in the three counties in northeast Arizona that overlap with the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe showed that tribal citizens in precincts there voted for Joe Biden over Donald Trump.

Down at the southern border of Arizona, the Tohono O’odham Nation turned out to tell the Trump administration what they think about the president’s border wall, where federal agents dynamited sacred Indigenous burial grounds during construction late last year. The rejection—or, perhaps more aptly, the repudiation—of Trump came as some precincts on the Tohono O’odham land reported that Native voters cast 98 percent of their votes for the Biden-Harris ticket.

Up in Wisconsin, a swing state that’s home to 11 federally recognized tribes, Biden flipped the state back to blue.

Voting data from five Wisconsin tribal communities (Menominee, Red Cliff, Bad River, Stockbridge Munsee, and Mole Lake) showed that Biden garnered 82 percent of the votes. In Wisconsin, Biden’s margin over Trump was just over 20,000 votes. Tribal citizens living there of voting age constitute 71,463 potential voters.

“We worked hard to facilitate the Native vote in the Midwest, understanding what was at stake and really turned out the vote. Especially at a time of epic challenges,” Shannon Holsey, president of the Stockbridge Munsee Band of the Mohican Nation in Bowler, Wisc., said. “Tribal Nation citizens participated and fought for truth and reconciliation and supported leadership that understands that power must come with accountability and the ability to bring us together and move us all in a forward direction. Representation truly matters.”

The mathematics of the Native vote in Wisconsin strongly suggest Biden won the state because of strong Indigenous turnout and those who supported the Biden-Harris ticket. The Biden campaign estimated that he carried Native American voters by 22,500 votes.

“While Native Americans represent just over two percent of the total U.S. population, we represent the margin of victory in key

battleground states so we can and did make the difference in this election,” Sault Ste. Marie Tribe Chairperson and National Congress of American Indians first vice president Aaron Payment said.

From preliminary voting trends, it is clear Native voters preferred the Biden-Harris ticket. However, a notable difference took place in Robeson County, North Carolina, home to the Lumbee Tribe, which voted 58 percent for Donald Trump. In all probability, the trip Trump made to Lumberton, N.C. to show support for the tribe gaining federal recognition helped him win the Lumbee vote.

Both President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris gave a shout-out to Native American voters in their victory speeches. At no point did they sing the praises of the “something else” vote. Unlike the mainstream media, they gave us their respect.

# **FOX NEWS ATTACKS NATIVE AMERICANS AFTER VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS CALLS ON AMERICANS TO RECKON WITH ITS SHAMEFUL PAST**

*Originally published October 17, 2021*

On Monday, Oct. 11, tribes across Indian Country commemorated Indigenous Peoples' Day — from Alcatraz Island to New York City, and in hundreds of tribal communities in between. The commemorations and celebrations featured singing, dancing and speeches laced with truths recognizing the struggles Indigenous people face today.

The next day, Vice President Kamala Harris, the first Black, Asian, and woman vice president of the United States, addressed the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

Vice President Harris told the NCAI delegates: “Since 1934, every October, the United States has recognized the voyage of the European explorers who first landed on the shores of the Americas. But that is not the whole story. That has never been the whole story.

“Those explorers ushered in a wave of devastation for Tribal nations — perpetrating violence, stealing land, and spreading disease.

“We must not shy away from this shameful past, and we must shed light on it and do everything we can to address the impact of the past on Native communities today.”

All this talk of devastation and genocidal practices coming from the vice president was too much for Fox News.

On *Fox News Primetime* Oct. 13 show, hosts Rachel Campos-Duffy and Jesse Watters devoted a segment of their program to call out the vice president for saying America should reckon with its shameful past. Campos-Duffy was joined by her husband and fellow Fox News contributor, former Wisconsin Congressman Sean Duffy, to defend

the lost voyager known as Christopher Columbus. Soon, their defense of Columbus turned into an attack on Native Americans.

“Christopher Columbus, by the way, is the first victim of cancel culture,” Campos-Duffy said and then opined that Native Americans “were just as brutal” as Columbus and other European colonizers.

Sean Duffy suggested that liberals should judge Native Americans by their past, too.

“They burned villages, raped women, seized children, took the people they defeated, took their land, scalped people,” the Republican ex-congressman said. “It was a horrible time all across the globe. But they want to apply the ‘woke’ standard that they have today on Christopher Columbus, but nobody else in the world!”

While in Congress, Duffy represented Wisconsin’s 7th congressional district, which includes eight federally recognized tribes. With his worldview about Native Americans, one can be glad Duffy is no longer able to vote on legislation impacting tribal nations, as he certainly is no friend to Native Americans.

His wife wasn’t done with Native Americans.

“The lie isn’t just about our past,” Campos-Duffy said. “The real lie is with conditions for Native Americans right now. The conditions from Native Americans have everything to do with government dependency, cycles of poverty and alcoholism, and family breakdowns... these are things that the Democrats don’t want to talk about.”

She continued to say Democrats are telling Native Americans that “all the things you’re experiencing has to do with white people and racism in the past.”

“It has to do with government policies as well,” she continued.

“Yeah, they’re just going to try to send more slush funds to the reservations, and make them out to be victims, and then have them keep voting for Democrats,” Watters added.

Crystal Echo Hawk (Pawnee), founder and executive director of IllumiNative, an initiative created and led by Natives to challenge the narrative surrounding Native people, called that rhetoric dangerous.

It is “incredibly harmful and dangerous and very clearly rooted in racism and white supremacy,” Echo Hawk wrote in a statement.

“Instead of allowing people to perpetuate revisionist history that erases the true history of this country — we need to start calling it what it was: genocide. For so long, Americans have chosen to omit and forget us from history and the present day. They render us down to grossly inaccurate stereotypes to perpetuate the discrimination and oppression of Native Americans that began with their ‘founding fathers.’ But we know these are lies non-Natives tell themselves to feel better, even proud about the horrifying truth of this country — and of their ancestors.”

It is hard to imagine the three talking heads at Fox – Campos-Duffy, Watters, and Duffy – would get a free pass if they were to do a segment on any other racial group. Imagine what would happen if they sat there and invoked the stereotypes of Blacks or Hispanics. For some reason Native Americans became their fodder, and Indian Country should be outraged.

Fox News’ assessment that Native Americans are alcoholics who are dependent on the government is completely absurd. An honest look across American society would yield an abundance of non-Native alcoholics, as well as greedy corporations that seem to be dependent on government grants and “handouts.”

The *Primetime* exchange on Native Americans reinforced why I never watch Fox News, which has done harm to America through its constant barrage of lies, hate, and far-fetched propaganda.

Vice President Harris should be commended for acknowledging America’s shameful past.

# **CNN SHOULD KICK RICK SANTORUM AND HIS RACIST VIEWS TO THE CURB**

*Originally published April 27, 2021*

CNN has a problem when it comes to Native Americans.

For a news media outlet that is often criticized as being “too liberal,” CNN cannot seem to get it right when it comes to the Indigenous peoples of this continent. In recent months, CNN has had two notable blunders when it comes to how it refers to Native Americans.

When stratifying racial and ethnic groups in demographic comparisons, Native Americans are often referred to as “other.” During its election night coverage earlier this month, CNN left out Native Americans in a voting graphic that distinguished between White, Latino, Black and Asian voters. We were, presumably, relegated to a category they included at the bottom of the screen called “Something Else.”

Then last week on April 20, 2021, a CNN morning host committed another blunder when she referred to Minnesota Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, a tribal citizen of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, as a “white woman.” This happened as Poppy Harlow was interviewing a reporter in Minneapolis as a jury was deliberating the fate of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Two days before, Flanagan had tweeted that her state is “a place where it is not safe to be Black.”

CNN is short for Cable Network News. For Native Americans, the new meaning may become, more appropriately, “CNN – Can’t Name Natives.” Perhaps CNN needs to put its producers and on-air talent through American Indians 101 to bring them up to speed.

This week, CNN’s Native problem got bigger when a video of the network’s political commentator Rick Santorum, a former U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, went viral.

The clip shows Rick Santorum making disparaging remarks regarding Native American culture at the Standing Up for Faith & Freedom Conference for the Young America's Foundation last Friday, Nov. 20.

Santorum told a group of impressionable youth that the United States was built on faith and freedom. He said the country was set up based on Judeo-Christian principles, and that White settlers “birthed a nation from nothing.”

“We came here and created a blank slate. We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes, we have Native Americans, but candidly there isn't much Native American culture in American culture,” he said.

In essence, Santorum was attempting to erase Native Americans from history.

Erasure of Native Americans dismisses the vast contributions we have made to this country, including the Iroquois confederacy's influence on American democracy. Billy Mills (Lakota), the Olympic gold medalist, responded to Santorum's comments on Facebook: “Well, what do you know! How about almost every state in our union is derived from an Indigenous word! And more! Someone should ‘school’ this man!”

Santorum's dismissive attitude of Native American culture erases the atrocities of genocide committed against our ancestors. His dismissive comments brought out the ire of Indian Country yesterday.

The Native American Journalists Association, which *Native News Online* is a member of, called on CNN to immediately dismiss Santorum from his position.

“With a lack of accountability or ethics around multiple racist and insensitive comments from CNN staff, the Native American Journalists Association urges its members to avoid working with the network to avoid harassment and racism. NAJA also calls on advertisers, funders and journalism diversity organizations to withdraw their support from CNN indefinitely,” NAJA said in a statement.

IllumiNative, a nonprofit initiative designed to increase the visibility of – and challenge the negative narrative about – Native Americans, also released a statement on Monday, April 26, 2021.

“American history that does not include Native peoples is a lie, and Rick Santorum is fueling white supremacy by erasing the history of Native peoples. CNN should not give Rick Santorum a national platform where he can spew this type of ignorance and bigotry against communities of color on air. Allowing him to spread racism and white supremacy to the American public is reckless and irresponsible.”

If this nation is ever going to heal from the great divide that exists in this country today, news media, such as CNN, should not give the likes of Santorum a public platform to perpetuate untrue biases against Native people.

Out of a sense of decency and respect to this country’s first peoples, CNN should fire Rick Santorum. He serves CNN’s viewers no added value when compared to many of their other commentators, who seem to better understand the fabric of this nation.

Santorum does not.

# THE MEDIA NEEDS TO GET PAST THE “MISSING WHITE WOMAN SYNDROME”

*Originally published September 26, 2021*

In July, Gabby Petito, 22, began a four-month trip across the country with her fiancé, visiting national parks along the way. By September 1, something had obviously gone amiss when Petito’s fiancé returned to his home in Florida without her. Ten days later, Petito’s mother filed a missing person report.

Since the couple was last seen together by witnesses in Wyoming’s Grand Teton National Park, the missing report prompted an extensive search effort by the FBI Denver Field Office, its Wyoming resident agencies, the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, the Teton County Sheriff’s Office, Teton County Search and Rescue, and the Jackson Police Department.

On Sept. 19, human remains believed to be those of Petito were discovered in a remote area of the Grand Teton National Park. On Sept. 22, an autopsy positively identified them as her remains.

The events described above may already be familiar to you because, for the last several weeks, Petito’s disappearance and death have drawn national media attention.

Her death was tragic. So, too, are the stories of hundreds of Indigenous people who have gone missing and murdered in the state of Wyoming and across Indian Country.

According to the state of Wyoming’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Task Force Report, at least 710 Indigenous people disappeared in Wyoming from 2011 to 2020. Of those who disappeared, 57 percent were females.

There are some other key findings in the Wyoming report.

During a 20-year period, from 2000 to 2020, there were 105 Indigenous (34 females, 71 males) people who were victims of

homicide in Wyoming. Between 2010 and 2019, the homicide rate per 100,000 Indigenous people was 26.8, eight times higher than the homicide rate for White people. The homicide rate for Indigenous females was 15.3 per 100,000, 6.4 times higher than the homicide rate for White females.

The actual number may be higher than what has been reported, according to Emily Grant, a research scientist at the Wyoming Survey and Analysis Center. The data could be off because of misclassification of victims by coroners, Grant said in a statement in January 2021.

The Wyoming report was not charitable to media coverage of Indigenous homicide victims. Only 30 percent of Indigenous homicide victims had newspaper media coverage, as compared to 51 percent of White homicide victims.

The portrayal of Indigenous homicide victims by newspapers was also more likely to contain violent language, portray the victim in a negative light, and provide less information, compared with articles about White homicide victims.

The national media coverage of Gabby Petito's disappearance and death sheds light on how biased the media is when it comes to coverage of missing and murdered women of color.

"Missing White Woman Syndrome" is a term that has re-emerged over the past week. It was coined in 2004 by the late PBS anchor Gwen Ifill, who was Black.

"If there is a missing white woman, we are going to cover that, every day," Ifill said at the time.

Ifill's theory was examined in a 2016 Northwestern Law study called "Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons." It found that Black people were significantly underrepresented in four major online news sources' coverage of missing persons, as compared to their White counterparts.

"The findings of this study remain persuasive. The race and gender disparities are evident across multiple sources and using multiple methods of analysis... The results of the analyses here help confirm that Missing White Woman Syndrome is a real, empirical phenomenon,"

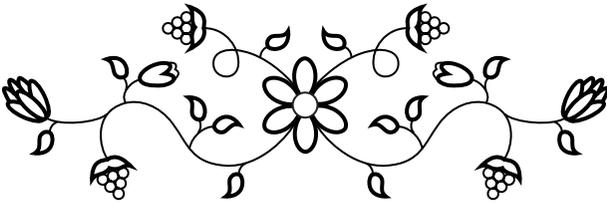
Northwestern University Law and Science Fellow Zach Sommers wrote.

It's worth noting: The Northwestern study did not analyze media coverage of the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous people.

Even so, the recent *Petito* coverage amplifies what we already know as American Indians: While attractive White women who go missing make the front page of newspapers, missing American Indian women don't usually make any page of the paper, much less radio or TV newscasts.

Their disappearances and deaths are those of our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, and friends. They deserve the same amount of attention as their White counterparts.

# POLITICS



# FOR INDIAN COUNTRY, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BE APOLITICAL

*Originally published October 18, 2020*

As justification for not voting in the American election process, apathetic and apolitical citizens often say it doesn't matter who the president of the United States is. Often, they like to add, "all politicians are all alike."

Of course, even the casual observer realizes President Donald Trump has defied that notion since assuming the presidency. He is unlike other presidents in recent years. Those who follow policy set forth by presidential administrations can see Trump has reached new levels when it comes to deregulation and helping the wealthy become even richer.

On this past Tuesday, Oct. 13, one of those moments came when it became apparent it matters who the president is. It came through my phone with a news alert that the U.S. Supreme Court had issued a stay, at the request of the Trump administration's Justice Department, of a lower-court ruling that the 2020 Census could not end its enumeration process.

This matters to Indian Country, because we were already undercounted this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and, now that the count is officially ended, many American Indians and Alaska Natives will remain uncanceled.

In the early months of the pandemic, the Trump administration admitted it could not meet the December 31, 2020 statutory deadline for submitting apportionment data under any circumstances, due to delays caused by the pandemic. Back then, the Census Bureau's field operation said it was "ludicrous" to expect 100 percent of the nation's data collection for the 2020 Census could be done early because of the pandemic.

Then in early August, the Trump administration said it would slash a whole month off of the enumeration period, by ending the count on Sept. 30.

Court cases were filed to keep the count going until Oct. 31. A federal court in northern California ruled that the count should continue until then. The court ruled the Trump administration's action of cutting off the enumeration process early would produce an inaccurate count, particularly among historically undercounted groups, such as American Indians and Alaska Natives. A federal appeals court upheld the lower court's ruling.

Trump's Justice Department took the case to the Supreme Court. The same one with two Trump-appointed justices.

Tuesday's ruling by the Supreme Court offered no explanation for the decision. Only Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued a written dissent.

"The harms caused by rushing this year's census count are irreparable. And respondents will suffer their lasting impact for at least the next 10 years," Justice Sotomayor, an Obama appointee, wrote in her dissent.

The decennial census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution in Article I, Section 2. The number of people counted in the census helps predicate how federal dollars are allocated and provide the basis for drawing congressional district lines in the United States.

Arguably, the census is about money and power.

With an inaccurate count, federal funds allocated to much needed services in Indian Country will be greatly reduced.

The COVID-19 pandemic hugely exacerbated the undercount, which brings up another reason why it matters who the president is. Some 65 percent of Americans feel Trump mishandled the coronavirus crisis, according to an ABC-Ipsos poll released in September.

It is well documented that Indian Country and people of color have been disproportionately impacted by the virus. When the 2020 Census officially kicked off on April 1, the country was just beginning to cope with the impact of the pandemic.

As time progressed, Indian Country was deeply submerged in dealing with the pandemic. Those tribal citizens who live in hard-to-reach

census tracts are dealing with life-and-death issues, particularly on the Navajo Nation, where more than 570 tribal citizens have died from COVID-19.

Arguably, Indian Country was more worried about staying alive than they were about being counted.

“The coronavirus pandemic has set all of us back and created many challenges to get people counted, especially for rural areas such as the Navajo Nation,” Jonathan Nez, president of the Navajo Nation, said after the federal court ruling in September that ordered the enumerating process to continue.

The Trump administration showed it really does not care whether American Indians and Alaska Natives are properly counted. If they did, they would not seek to override the lower federal court decisions.

The 2020 Census results will not be immediately felt in Indian Country, but once the final results are used to predicate federal appropriations, it will be harsh for the next decade.

For those inclined to give Trump a pass, they should realize he really doesn't care about what happens in Indian Country, and that for many of us, it does matter who sits in the Oval Office.

Remember to vote in this year's presidential election.

# CONGRESS SHOULD FOLLOW COLORADO'S LEAD AND PASS THE REMOVE THE STAIN ACT

*Originally published August 22, 2021*

Most American students are never taught about the Sand Creek Massacre, which happened November 29, 1864, during the Civil War. The massacre was not fought in the North, nor the South, but rather in Colorado, 170 miles southeast of Denver.

Led by U.S. Army Col. John Chivington, a Methodist minister, 700 members of the Colorado Territory militia attacked peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian villages while most of the Native men were away hunting.

In his book *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, author David Treuer (Ojibwe) writes about the Sand Creek Massacre: “One eyewitness said he ‘saw one squaw lying on the bank, whose leg had been broken. A soldier came up to her with a drawn saber. She raised her arm to protect herself; he struck, breaking her arm. She rolled over, and raised her other arm; he struck, breaking that, and then left her without killing her. I saw one squaw cut open, with an unborn child lying on her side.’”

While the exact number of those killed that day will never be known, it is estimated that up to 200 died by brutal attacks. Most were women and children.

Chivington provided his superior officer with a different story and even exaggerated the number of casualties. He reported his men killed between 400 and 500 Indians — “almost an annihilation of the entire tribe.”

Fortunately, another account of what occurred at Sand Creek was recorded by Capt. Silas Soule, who was appalled by the attack on the group of peaceful Indians.

“Hundreds of women and children were coming towards us, and getting on their knees for mercy,” Soule wrote, adding that most were shot or had “their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized.”

The brutal acts performed at Sand Creek were carried out by a militia that had been assembled during the summer of 1864 by Territory Governor John Evans, who also served as superintendent of Indian Affairs. Evans issued two proclamations that summer, calling for the “killing” of Indians. He chose Chivington to lead the militia.

Fast-forward 157 years to this past Tuesday, Aug. 17. In a long overdue gesture, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) signed an executive order rescinding the pair of 130-year old proclamations, which were still effectively granting the right to kill American Indians.

In attendance on the steps of the state capitol in Denver were several tribal nations, including representatives of the Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribe, and the Northern Arapaho Tribe, as well as members of Colorado’s American Indian and Alaska Native communities, Lt. Gov. Dianne Primavera, and other Colorado state officials.

*Native News Online* reached out to the governor’s office to ask why Gov. Polis issued the executive order now.

Lt. Gov. Primavera, who also is the current chair of the Colorado Indian Commission, responded in an email: “While the Executive Order won’t remove this stain from our state’s history, it will enable us to move forward together in making Colorado a place where all people feel welcome, safe, and have the opportunity to thrive.”

Gov. Polis’s gesture to rescind the two proclamations that enabled the atrocity of the Sand Creek Massacre should serve as impetus to the U.S. Congress to pass the Remove the Stain Act (S.1073; H.R. 2226), which would rescind each Medal of Honor awarded for acts that occurred on December 29, 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek, Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota.

When still a member of Congress in June 2019, then-Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) introduced the Remove the Stain Act in the 116th Congress. She said the act was “about more than just rescinding Medals of Honor from soldiers who served in the US 7th Cavalry and

massacred unarmed Lakota women and children [in 1890] — it's also about making people aware of this country's history of genocide of American Indians.”

The legislation was reintroduced in the 117th Congress in both chambers because Haaland's bill did not move out of committees during the previous Congress.

It is absurd that 20 members of the U.S. 7th Cavalry were awarded the Medal of Honor for killing between 150 to 300 innocent women and children. It is more insulting to American Indians and all of humanity that the medals still stand as a sign of honor.

Congress needs to follow Colorado's example and right a wrong that has stood for more than 130 years. Revoke the medals of the men who committed atrocities against Lakota men, women, and children. Pass the Remove the Stain Act.

# TRUMP'S BORDER WALL DESECRATES THE SACRED

*Originally published February 17, 2020*

During the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe community and many other American Indians from around the nation fought vehemently against the proposed pipeline's route under freshwater rivers and lakes, as well as its intended route through Standing Rock's ancestral tribal lands.

Over the course of almost a year, the Standing Rock resistance became the largest protest gathering in modern American Indian history.

Knowing that oil pipelines spring leaks, Standing Rock tribal officials and citizens feared — and still do fear — that a leak will occur into the Missouri River, creating a horrific impact of contaminated drinking water for 18 million people downstream.

The Standing Rock protectors' mantra became “Mní Wičóni,” meaning *Water is Life*.

Beyond the concern of protecting water from potential leaks, tribal officials were angry because certain parts of the pipeline's route would go through ancestral burial sites. Just as any civilized society would not allow for cemeteries to be dug up during construction for development, Standing Rock tribal citizens did not want their ancestors' graves disturbed and destroyed forever.

In August 2016, I interviewed Phyliss Young, a former Standing Rock Tribe tribal council member, who explained that tribal officials knew locations of several ancestral graves near the confluence of the Missouri and Cannonball Rivers — graves that tribal citizens still visited.

Young told me these graves' locations would not show up on any map and were never written down, because of the history of non-Native people digging up and desecrating Indigenous ancestral graves.

Grave-robbing American Indian burial grounds has long been a practice in American history for a hobby or archeological research.

In the case of Standing Rock, the desecration of Indigenous ancestral graves was to satisfy the greed of a Canadian oil company that wanted to take oil down to the Gulf of Mexico to export it to Asia.

Young further explained the federal government never allowed for meaningful tribal consultation that should have been afforded through a government-to-government agreement between the United States and sovereign tribal nations — in this case, the Standing Rock Tribe.

Fast-forward to 2020. The desecration of Indigenous tribal ancestral graves continues on the southern border of the United States. This time, the desecration is happening along the route of the border wall that President Trump promised to build during his 2016 presidential campaign.

This time, the desecration involves another American Indian tribe, the Tohono O’odham Nation.

This time, the desecration is happening (again) without meaningful tribal consultation.

In recent weeks, construction crews contracted by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) have been blasting through the Roosevelt easement, a federally controlled strip of land in southern Arizona that includes the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which is part of the traditional homelands of the Tohono O’odham Nation. Not only is the monument sacred to the Tohono O’odham Nation, but the area has been designated as a biosphere reserve by the United Nations because it is full of rare plants and animals.

Last week in Washington, Tohono O’odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris Jr. rose to his feet during the question-and-answer period after Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney finished her update to the National Congress of American Indians to let her know his displeasure with the federal government’s desecration of sacred sites at the Organ Pipe Cactus monument.

“They desecrated those human remains that were there,” Chairman Norris said. “You have an obligation to protect sacred sites and sacred areas and religious areas for Native American people. You have failed to

make sure... I call on you to exercise your responsibility and stop the destruction of sacred sites of Native American communities.”

The blasting quickly drew the attention of Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.), whose district includes the monument. On January 7, 2020, he sent a letter expressing his concern about the lack of consultation with the Tohono O’odham Nation.

In 2020, the lack of tribal consultation is nothing short of astounding. The current case involves CBP, which operates under the federal Department of Homeland Security.

The department has a tribal consultation policy that reads in part: The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is committed to strengthening the government-to-government relationship between the United States and Indian Tribes. DHS recognizes that agency policies, programs, and services may directly or indirectly impact Indian Tribes and is committed to regularly and meaningfully collaborating, communicating, and cooperating with Indian Tribes with regard to policies that have Tribal Implications.

Similar to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe that was not apt to publicize the exact locations of the sacred sites, the Tohono O’odham Nation did not publicize where their burial sites are located. CBP would have learned this if they had done some meaningful collaboration, communication, and cooperation with the tribe.

One can argue the merits of Trump’s border wall, but that’s largely a partisan argument. One would hope, though, that even in a nation as divided as ours is right now, we should all be able to acknowledge that honoring the graves of the deceased is the right thing to do.

# **BIDEN SHOULD RESTORE PROTECTIONS OF SACRED LAND DECIMATED UNDER PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATION**

*Originally published April 18, 2021*

During her third week in office and her first official trip in her new role as the head of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) conducted a fact-finding tour of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah.

The visit included meetings with tribal leaders, Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah), and Republican Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, and were part of a review under President Joe Biden's Executive Order 13990, called "Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis."

Issued on Biden's first day in office, the order takes steps toward reversing former President Donald Trump's actions that are "harmful to public health, damaging to the environment, unsupported by the best available science, or otherwise not in the national interest."

Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante are named specifically in Biden's order.

Biden's move was a counter to his predecessor. While he was in office, Trump used a presidential proclamation to shrink the size of Bears Ears by 85 percent and Grand Staircase-Escalante by half, opening the area up to exploitation by oil and gas, ranchers and mining industries.

Tribes were vehemently opposed to Trump's drastic cuts to protections for land they deem sacred. Just as most Christians worship in physical church buildings, many Native Americans perform their sacred ceremonies at Bears Ears and Grand Staircase.

Haaland will make recommendations to the president within weeks of her visit.

“Decisions about public lands are incredibly impactful to the people who live nearby, not just to us, or the folks who are here today, but people for generations to come,” Haaland told reporters during a news conference in Utah. “It’s our obligation to make sure we protect lands for future generations so they can have the same experiences that the governor and I experienced today.”

President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act into federal law in 1906, later enabling President Bill Clinton to establish the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 1996 and President Barack Obama to create the 1.35-million-acre Bears Ears monument in 2016.

The reckless Trump, seeing opportunity for oil and gas exploration, flew to Utah in December 2017 to sign a proclamation that significantly slashed the size of both monuments, reversing the protections set forth by Clinton and Obama.

Since Trump lifted the protections and downsized the monuments, more tourists have visited the two sites and put natural and cultural resources at risk, said Phil Francis, chair of the Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks.

“Every day that goes by leaves the irreplaceable resources at Bears Ears and Grand Staircase vulnerable to damage or destruction from looting, vandalism, or other threats as a result of lack of protective management,” Francis said prior to Haaland’s visit.

The risks also include desecration by industries that want to profit from the pristine areas of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez was one of several tribal leaders who met with Haaland on her fact-finding visit. Nez said he was encouraged by Haaland’s willingness to meet with tribal leaders personally.

“This landscape is home to many historical and cultural sites, plants, water, traditional medicines, and teachings for our people. It also provided refuge for our people in times of conflict. One of our most notable leaders, Chief Manuelito, was born there, but it is more than that. Bears Ears is sacred, and it deserves to be protected,” Nez said.

In addition, conservation and environmental groups want Biden to restore the two monuments. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden stated he intended to restore protections to both.

On Friday, April 16, 2021, the last day of her first week back from Utah, Haaland issued two secretarial orders to prioritize action on climate change throughout the Interior Department, and to restore transparency and integrity in the department's decision-making processes.

The emphasis on climate change is welcome after the reckless disregard for Mother Earth during Trump's single term as president.

We hope Haaland, in her recommendation to Biden, will recommend the restoration of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments.

# **WHY THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE TO INITIALLY ADD TRIBES TO \$2 TRILLION STIMULUS DOESN'T SHOCK ME**

*Originally published April 6, 2020*

A *HuffPost* headline earlier this week caught my eye: “The White House Wanted to Give \$0 to Tribes in the \$2 Trillion Stimulus Bill.”

I was not shocked by the harsh headline, but more disgusted by the Trump administration's utter disregard of Indian Country.

As a young boy, I was taught the simple precept that actions speak louder than words. As an American Indian journalist, I have watched closely the actions of the Trump administration towards Indians, and I rarely believe a word the president says—whether regarding Indian Country or our wounded and afflicted nation as we navigate this crisis situation.

The headline did not shock me because each year of his presidency, Donald Trump has sent a budget to Congress that cuts funding for Indian Country programs. Thankfully, Congress, in bipartisan collaboration, has proposed funding for Native programs at a higher rate than the original Trump budget numbers.

Even with Congress stepping in, chronic underfunding continues to be the case for Indian Country programs. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 314-page report, entitled “Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans,” makes clear that the federal government has not lived up to its obligations to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The federal budget shortfalls have negative impacts on housing, employment, health, and education in Indian Country.

Even after the release of the report, the Trump administration sent a budget to Congress that would reduce funding to Indian Country by a double-digit percentage.

So, no, I was not shocked by a *HuffPost* headline. I was disgusted.

I was disgusted—just as I was disgusted in November 2018 when Trump, during a ceremony to honor three World War II Navajo Code Talkers, slipped in a racist joke: *“You were here long before any of us were here. Although we have a representative in Congress who they say was here a long time ago. They call her Pocahontas.”*

Of course, he was referring to Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), who one can assume Trump feared as a formidable opponent at the time.

I was disgusted at the *HuffPost* headline, just as I was when the Trump administration completely left Indian Country out of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. This, after years of efforts by the National Congress of American Indians and other national American Indian organizations’ efforts to promote Indian Country’s tax reform priorities that could effectively boost tribal economies and grow jobs on reservations that suffer high rates of unemployment.

I was also disgusted a week ago Friday night, on March 27, 2020, when I learned that Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Chairman Cedric Cromwell took a call from the Bureau of Indian Affairs informing him that Trump’s Interior Secretary, David Berhard, was ordering the tribe to disestablish its reservation. The call came late on a Friday afternoon, in the midst of a global pandemic. This is what has become of the Tribe that welcomed the Pilgrims.

Trump’s people are heartless when it comes to American Indians.

The *HuffPost* article tells the story of the behind-the-scenes dealings of putting together a stimulus package that was ultimately called the CARES Act. The White House did not include American Indian tribes in its initial proposal. In the bitter end, tribes were written into the package that was signed into law as the CARES Act. Both Democrats and Republicans take credit for securing funding for tribes.

The CARES Act was meant to rescue an economy that has been shuttered by the largest health crisis in the United States since World

War II. As rightful citizens, American Indians deserved to be included in the Act.

Tribal casinos remain closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectively, tribal casino revenues have become the overall largest economic driver in Indian Country, and arguably a major force in the American economy as a whole. According to the National Indian Gaming Association, employment in tribal casinos ranks 14th among industries contributing to the American workforce.

“We need help to make sure your colleagues understand there is the Treaty and Trust responsibility when we traded our 500 million acres of land across the country, we were promised health, education and social welfare for as long as the grass grows, the winds blow, and the rivers flow,” Aaron Payment, tribal chairperson of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, told U.S. Senator Gary Peters (D-MI) during a United Tribes of Michigan meeting.

The Trump administration must remember that treaties and trusts are LAWS of the land, and they must uphold — as sacred — this promise that was made to the American Indian people.

# **DEB HAALAND COULD SHATTER YET ANOTHER GLASS CEILING AS THE FIRST NATIVE AMERICAN CABINET SECRETARY**

*Originally published November 22, 2020*

It took until the 116th Congress for an American Indian woman to be elected to serve as a member of the House of Representatives.

Actually, two women broke through the glass ceiling when they were elected in November 2018. Rep. Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna), who serves New Mexico's 1st congressional district, and Rep. Sharice Davids (Ho-Chunk), who serves Kansas's 3rd district are the two women who shattered it.

Since entering, both women have made Indian Country proud for two reasons: They serve their districts well, but also represent American Indians and Alaska Natives as strong advocates for concerns, issues, and policies that are important to Indian Country.

Then came the election of Joe Biden as the president of the United States. Since then, Haaland's name has been circulated in the national media to be the next secretary of the Department of the Interior.

Having Haaland's name under consideration for a presidential cabinet position is consistent with the 12-page Biden-Harris Plan for Tribal Nations released during the campaign, which pledged "Biden will ensure tribes have a seat at the table at the highest levels of the federal government."

What better way to ensure tribes have a seat than to have a well-informed Native American like Haaland filling a Cabinet seat?

This past week it was disclosed that she is indeed being vetted by the Biden-Harris transition team.

If Haaland is nominated by President-elect Biden and then confirmed by the Senate, she would become the first American Indian ever to serve in a president's Cabinet in a secretarial role.

Another glass ceiling shattered.

The Interior Department would be an excellent choice for someone of Haaland's experience and sheer understanding of Indian Country. Among federal departments, the Interior is the one most engaged with Indian Country because it is home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education, Office of the Special Trustee, and Bureau of Land Management.

The Trump administration has strained relationships between Interior's Indian Affairs and tribal leaders around the country.

Just 19 months into his administration, Trump's Indian Affairs leadership reversed an Obama-era decision to put land into trust for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, effectively disestablishing the tribe's reservation. The whole matter did not sit well with Indian Country leaders, who viewed the reversal as a threat to tribal sovereignty.

After Congress appropriated CARES Act funding for tribal nations, almost 20 tribes ended up suing the federal government, because the distribution of funds was delayed and, quite frankly, botched by Trump's Treasury and Interior departments. The whole fiasco provided one more example of how the federal government does not know how to properly fulfill its trust responsibilities to Indian Country.

The delay further compounded the impact of COVID-19 in Indian Country. Unfortunately, among American Indians and Alaska Natives the COVID-19 infection rate is more than 3.5 times higher than non-Hispanic whites. American Indians and Alaska Natives are over four times more likely to be hospitalized as a result of COVID-19.

The Interior Department also helps set the agenda for climate change, particularly on public lands, which the department oversees. The Trump administration has done a horrible job when it comes to climate change — in some cases, even denying climate change exists.

Haaland has stated she would welcome being named Interior secretary.

“It would be an honor to move the Biden-Harris climate agenda forward, help repair the government-to-government relationship with tribes that the Trump Administration has ruined, and serve as the first Native American Cabinet secretary in our nation’s history,” she said in a statement.

Haaland has the support of some 120 tribal leaders who sent a letter to the Biden-Harris transition team. Some 50 House of Representatives colleagues signed a letter crafted by Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), the chair of the Natural Resources Committee, in support of Biden naming Haaland to head the Interior Department.

So, yes, Haaland would be a great asset to the Interior Department, and to the Biden-Harris administration in general. It is time for a tribal citizen with the type of capabilities that Haaland clearly possesses to sit in a cabinet seat.

If Haaland becomes Interior Secretary, she would indeed shatter yet another glass ceiling.

# INDIAN COUNTRY, VOTE REP. DEB HAALAND'S OPPONENTS OUT OF OFFICE

*Originally published February 2, 2021*

Rep. Deb Haaland's long-awaited confirmation hearing to become the 54th Secretary of the Department of the Interior is Tuesday morning, Feb. 23.

For Indian Country, it has been a 244-year wait.

She will enter the hearing before the Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources as the only American Indian in history nominated by a president to serve as secretary of a Cabinet department.

Haaland, a tribal citizen of the Laguna Pueblo, is serving her second term in Congress, representing New Mexico's 1st Congressional District.

Haaland's story is the stuff of an Academy Award-winning epic. She overcame homelessness as a single mother. She used food stamps and money she earned selling salsa to feed herself and her daughter. She earned her law degree in her thirties and then entered politics. She was elected to Congress in November 2018 along with Rep. Sharice Davids (D-Kan.), a Ho-Chunk — the first two American Indian women elected to Congress.

That's her personal story, but she also bears the weight of generations of Natives, the extermination of a people, the theft and pillaging of a land, and the systemic disempowerment and ostracization of Native people over centuries.

The Interior Department is home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education, Office of the Special Trustee, and Bureau of Land Management. It manages 500 million acres of public land — about 20 percent of the land in the United States.

As vice-chair of the Natural Resources Committee and the chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands,

Haaland shepherded key bipartisan legislation through the House, including the historic Public Lands package in 2019 and the Great American Outdoors Act in 2020. The two pieces of legislation redirect revenues from offshore oil and gas drilling into conservation, helping to create trails, parks, and recreation destinations in all 50 states. They also use revenues from energy development to provide maintenance for critical facilities and infrastructure in national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, recreation areas, and American Indian schools.

Who better than Haaland, a member of Indian Country, to run these bureaus? Who knows more about Indian affairs, Indian education and land management, and the impact that centuries of legislation have had on Native people?

Some among us don't want Haaland running such an office. Last month, a group of Republican members of the House of Representatives asked Biden to withdraw Haaland's name from consideration, even though they have no say — the Senate alone does — in her confirmation.

Not that the Senate has lined up behind her. Earlier this month, Sen. Steve Daines (R-Mont.), who had received \$632,551 in campaign contributions since 2016 from oil and gas industry funds, called Haaland a radical, saying he would block her nomination.

"I'm deeply concerned with the Congresswoman's support on several radical issues that will hurt Montana, our way of life, our jobs and rural America, including her support for the Green New Deal and President Biden's oil and gas moratorium, as well as her opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline," Daines said after meeting with Haaland.

The reason she is opposed so vociferously by members of the Republican Party has nothing to do with her support of the Green New Deal. The Green New Deal is not radical. It is supported by hundreds of lawmakers, world leaders, and organizations.

The president naming a Native American to a Cabinet post such as Interior is not radical — it's progress. Instead of tossing another obstacle Haaland's way, Biden is handing her the remote. And this Republican group, funded in their posts by oil and gas, can't bear the thought of centuries of wrongs to be acknowledged, reversed, or repaired.

Daines's threat to block Haaland drew the ire of Indigenous tribal organizations. They have paid for billboards and newspaper advertisements in Montana to push back.

"With his condescending and cynical remarks, Senator Daines may succeed in ginning up the MAGA base, but he also evokes the 'Great White Father' in his paternalistic attitude toward not only Representative Haaland but his Indigenous constituents. His buzzword of choice to undermine her is 'radical' and so we've given it right back to him," said Rain Bear Stands Last, executive director of the Global Indigenous Council, in reference to pro-Haaland ads that began appearing in Montana this week as well as other states.

"The only radical thing about one of the First People of the Land being nominated to care for it, is that it took over 244 years to happen," reads one advertisement.

The anger by tribal organizations is long overdue. This is just one more example of elected officials ignoring the desires of tribal citizens within their congressional districts and states.

Even though Daines is a senator from the state of Montana, "his statements did not reflect the views of the tribes," Holly Cook Macarro, chairwoman of the American Indian Graduate Center, said in the *Washington Post*. Native people are nearly 10 percent of Montana's population, she added. "We are not invisible."

Incredibly, Daines sits on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. It would stand to reason that a U.S. senator who cannot support the first American Indian who is highly qualified to serve in a presidential cabinet does not deserve to sit on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Daines' seat on the Committee on Indian Affairs is suspect at this point. Why is he there if he cannot support American Indians or their positions on issues? By virtue of its name, the committee's members should be dedicated to promoting American Indian affairs. We do know Daines is highly partisan. When he was a member of the House of Representatives, he voted against the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act that contained a tribal provision. Since being in

the Senate, Daines has a record that is suspect in regards to Indian concerns.

Haaland will likely have enough votes to be confirmed. However, it is unfortunate that those members of Congress who receive oil and gas money have voiced so much opposition to her nomination.

Indian Country needs to keep score. Unfortunately, Daines was re-elected in 2020; so the Montana tribes have to put up with him for six long years. However, midterm elections are 21 months away and others who oppose Haaland's confirmation should be targeted by tribes and voted out of office.

## HAALAND HEARING BROUGHT PRIDE AND DISGUST

*Originally published February 28, 2021*

It was difficult for me to not get emotional as Rep. Deb Haaland testified at her confirmation hearing to become the 54th Secretary of the Interior. The hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee was held over two days, and the three rounds of questioning produced feelings of pride and disgust.

I was proud as I watched and listened to Haaland — a highly qualified woman who happens to be a 35th generation New Mexican from the Pueblo of Laguna, an attorney, and a member of Congress — testify to become the first American Indian in history to serve as a secretary in a presidential cabinet.

Further pride came when I realized Haaland will, if confirmed, lead the Interior Department, which houses the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which had its origins in the War Department in 1824.

It certainly does not take a genius to realize the BIA's genesis within the War Department was not designed to benefit the well-being of our ancestors. It was to further advance the genocide that already underway back then.

More pride came when I remembered something Haaland said in December, on the day she was nominated to be Interior Secretary.

“This moment is profound when we consider the fact that one former Secretary of the Interior once proclaimed his goal, to, quote, ‘to civilize or exterminate us,’” she said, referring to an 1851 remark by Interior Secretary Alexander H.H. Stuart. “I am a living testament of the failure of that horrific ideology.

“I also stand on the shoulders of my ancestors and all the people who sacrificed so that I can be here,” she added.

More pride came when Haaland told the story on Wednesday, Feb. 24, that Navajo Code Talkers first used “Our Mother” or “Mother

Earth” as the first code words for the United States as they prepared their codes to help save democracy during World War II.

“It’s difficult to NOT feel obligated to protect this land, and I feel that every Indigenous person in this country understands that,” she added.

Haaland’s confirmation hearing was truly historic, and Indian Country was proud.

Unfortunately, not everyone is pleased by Haaland’s historic nomination, especially the Republican members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. They showed up in full force, their paternalistic and condescending behavior in full display.

Here is when disgust surfaced for me: Several of the Republican senators treated Haaland with complete disrespect. This ill treatment triggered memories of the gross disrespect Indigenous women have been treated with since the arrival of Columbus and his men. Throughout the course of history, Indigenous women have been subjugated to the control of non-Native men.

Male GOP senators, particularly those from western states, hunted Haaland.

Funded by the oil and gas industry, the Senators did not hold back on their industrial benefactors’ behalf. Without listening, they told her she was wrong. The Republican Senators disregarded the decorum typically afforded to a fellow lawmaker.

“I almost feel like your nomination is this proxy fight about the future of fossil fuels,” said Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), after hearing how her Republican colleagues conducted themselves on Tuesday, Feb. 23.

After watching the three rounds of questioning presented by the committee, Nedra Darling, a retired spokesperson for the Department of the Interior – Indian Affairs was also disgusted.

“I witnessed something that really did not sit well with me. I worked over 30 years for the federal government and have prepared many nominees in their confirmation hearings. I am so disappointed by what I saw and heard, especially from a senator that represents

many wonderful Native American constituents,” Darling posted on her Facebook page, referring to Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.).

Barrasso, a former chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and the top Republican on the committee, attacked Haaland viciously for two days.

On Wednesday, Barrasso pressed Haaland about the Endangered Species Act, which she supported. He was upset she wanted grizzly bears left on the endangered list.

As Haaland began to respond, referencing her track record of working collaboratively with local tribes, communities, and scientists when it comes to the Act, Barrasso interrupted her, pointing his finger on the table and shouted, “I’m talking about the law.”

Haaland responded: “Sir, I will always follow the law.”

After the hearing on Wednesday afternoon, Sen. Steve Daines (R-Mont.), a member of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, vowed to block Haaland’s nomination and encouraged the Senate to reject it.

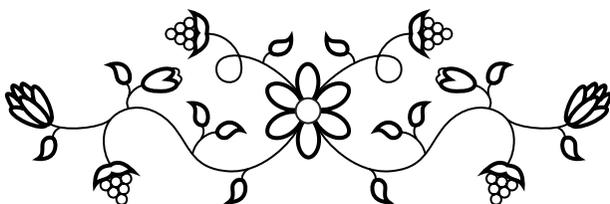
“The Secretary of the Interior should be a consensus-builder, with a pragmatic and well-balanced track record. I’m concerned Rep. Halaand will be unable to separate from her progressive agenda and support what’s best for Montana and the West. Her hostile record towards energy, natural resources and sportsmen issues are very concerning,” Daines said in a statement.

The truth of the matter is the Republicans wanted to paint Haaland as a radical. Even in their disgusting paternalistic behavior over two days, they could not accomplish this.

What these Republican senators accomplished is a show of disrespect towards an Indigenous woman and Indian Country. Considering several of them are members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, they should be removed from their roles.

Even with the disgust brought on by mistreatment of Haaland, I am proud that in the face of tough questioning, she treated the Senators with more respect than they afforded her.

# INDIAN HEALTH & WELL BEING



# **ONE YEAR IN: COVID-19 HAS BEEN DEVASTATING FOR INDIAN COUNTRY**

*Originally published March 7, 2021*

As COVID-19 began to spread across the United States, the first documented case in Indian Country was on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton, Ore. on March 2, 2020. The tribes announced that day a staff member at the Wildhorse Resort & Casino tested positive for the coronavirus. The next day, the tribes announced their casino would temporarily close.

Since then, the deadly virus has spread throughout Indian Country with deadly force.

Tribal gaming casinos voluntarily closed their doors “out of an abundance of caution” to protect their staff, patrons, and tribal communities.

One Michigan tribal leader told me its casino management worked all weekend to come up with a plan to close the casino smoothly. In operation since 1998, the casino had never closed before COVID-19. Some tribal casinos actually had to install locks on their doors, because there had never been a need to lock them before COVID-19.

The voluntary closures of tribal casinos have resulted in more than \$10 billion in lost revenue, leading to reduced tribal services to tribal citizenry. Casino and gaming revenues play an outsized role in helping tribes provide services such as health care, elder programs, education, law enforcement, and housing to tribal citizens.

As the year progressed, COVID-19 cases in Indian Country grew, devastating tribal communities.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities had lost more than 5,300 lives to COVID-19 as of mid-February.

The Color of Coronavirus project, which engaged a team at APM Research Lab, a St. Paul, Minn.-based data-research group affiliated with American Public Media, to compile death statistics across races, estimates that during a four-week period this February, there were 958 deaths in Indian Country. These numbers represented the deadliest stretch of the pandemic for Indian Country so far.

Throughout all 50 states and including the District of Columbia, Indian Country has the highest COVID-19 mortality rate among all races.

The breakdown among races tells the story, according to APM:

- 1 in 390 Indigenous Americans has died (or 256.0 deaths per 100,000 people)
- 1 in 555 Black Americans has died (179.8 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 565 Pacific Islander Americans has died (176.6 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 665 White Americans has died (150.2 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 680 Latino Americans has died (147.3 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 1,040 Asian Americans has died (96.0 deaths per 100,000)

With 524,000 deaths nationwide as of March 6, the pandemic's death toll has increased at such a rate we have become desensitized to daily death reports.

The Color of Coronavirus project's statistics evoke strong emotions associated with the high death rate among Native people. In conversations with people across Indian Country, when measuring the human toll, numbers alone don't tell the whole story.

I cannot remember any Native person in recent months telling me they don't know anyone who has died from COVID-19. All of us in Indian Country know someone we will never see again at a powwow, tribal community event, or national conference.

Across Indian Country the impact of these deaths has been significant. Each death impacts the lives of families, friends, and tribal communities. The Cherokee Nation reports that dozens of fluent speakers of Cherokee languages have died from COVID-19. Scores of Native elders who serve as keepers of tribal history, traditions, and customs have died. With their deaths, a part of Native culture dies with them.

In Indian Country, the epicenter of the coronavirus has been the Navajo Nation. As of March 6, there had been 29,857 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases, resulting in 1,198 deaths.

“Despite all of the adversities, challenges, and uncertainties that we have experienced over the last year, our Navajo people and frontline warriors continue to show their determination, resilience, and faith,” Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez says. “Our health-care workers are working hard to get the vaccines into the arms of our people to help save lives.”

The COVID-19 death rate in Indian Country demonstrates that the most vulnerable suffer the most during a crisis. Living conditions on Indian reservations are comparable to those in the Third World living conditions, with poor housing, lack of running water, poor roads, and lack of efficient broadband. All these factors have contributed to the deaths of Native people.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, the CDC advised frequent hand-washing for 20 seconds. A third of people in Navajo Nation do not have running water. Plainly, they don't have 20 seconds of water—or the half-gallon of water that flows from a bathroom faucet—to wash their hands.

One year in, there is positive news. Vaccinations are happening in Indian Country. Vaccinations save lives. The U.S. Senate on March 6 passed the American Rescue Plan Act that allocates \$31.2 billion to Indian Country, which is good news for Native people. The bill is expected to go back to the House on Tuesday, March 9, and it's likely that it will be approved and then move on to President Biden for his signature.

One year in, we need to continue to show caution and be prayerful as tribal nations prove once again—as they have throughout history—to be resilient in the face of adversity.

# **FINDING BALANCE AS WE TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THESE PANDEMIC DAYS**

*Originally published May 4, 2020*

In traditional American Indian teachings, our elders instruct us to find balance in life so that we may live in harmony. They teach us we should find balance between our natural environment and the fulfillment of our sustainable needs—so that we can leave enough behind for the next seven generations. Our elders teach us that we should seek balance between pragmatism and spirituality.

I have found myself trying to discern between what is true and what is false. In the Internet age, one can find a whole lot of conjecture and speculation about where the deadly virus originated. While finding its origin is extremely important in the long term, sadly, in the short term the situation has led to loss of lives. In Indian Country, the Navajo Nation has sustained the worst loss of lives, with a death toll from the virus at 73 as of May 1.

In this pandemic, it is obvious that finding the right balance is important to the safety of our communities, both physically and emotionally. I am convinced it is not in Native people's DNA to live in isolation. I am not one who enjoys the confinement of isolation. We all want to be able to live our lives again and travel freely again.

Historically, our ancestors lived and even traveled together as communities as they uprooted daily life from one area to move on to another locale. They existed on the premise that what was good for one should be good for all. In other words, they lived and practiced the concept of community rights over individual rights.

Even now, during the pandemic, decisions made by tribal leaders have been made for the good of the total community in mind.

In this pandemic, there is the challenge to balance the huge social issue of public health with the concern for economic impact.

Certainly, tribes that operate casinos have voluntarily closed down their hotels, entertainment centers, and gaming floors out of concern for the well-being of their tribal communities, employees, neighbors, and patrons.

The impact of the closures has been great. As the California Indian Gaming Association told *Native News Online* in late March, the voluntary shutdown of tribal gaming facilities was the responsible decision to make. However, the decision to close them resulted in many tribal governments' revenue streams being reduced to near zero overnight. These losses come with an enormous cost to tribal citizens, as well as to the communities where they are located.

The true severity of the closure of Indian casinos is not yet known in terms of economic loss and impact on tribal programs and services, which are often funded by gaming revenues. Tribes, while being sovereign governments, lack the ability to charge many taxes. Casino revenues fill that gap.

Countless other tribal businesses have been hurt because of the pandemic, including tribally owned and Native-owned businesses.

Finding balance in the midst of the troubling pandemic days is difficult. However, the pandemic has allowed us unique opportunities to grow internally, as we discover those things that really matter and those that don't. It has afforded us the opportunity to discover those people who really matter in the larger scheme of life — and those who don't.

Finding balance in this pandemic is important so that we can ultimately live in harmony.

# **AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVES ARE SURVIVORS AND WILL GET PAST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*Originally published April 13, 2020*

Regardless of socio-economic status, religion, race, or ethnicity, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normalcy of people's lives.

Unfortunately, a disturbing pattern has begun to emerge: While the coronavirus may not discriminate in who it infects, it does appear to cause death at a disproportionate rate among people of color.

Throughout the world, people with underlying medical conditions are most susceptible to suffering the greatest harm, including death, from the coronavirus. These underlying conditions include heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, high blood pressure, and cancer.

In Indian Country, Navajo Nation has become the epicenter of COVID-19 among tribal nations, with the largest number of confirmed cases and deaths. With new cases reported daily, the Navajo Nation, which is located on the country's largest Indian reservation, has more confirmed cases related to COVID-19 than these eight states: Alaska, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, or West Virginia.

It's not just the Navajo Nation that is suffering. The deadly virus has spread quickly through certain cluster areas in New Mexico — including the Pueblo of San Felipe, Zia Pueblo, and Pueblo of Zuni — that have become COVID-19 hotspots in Indian Country.

The fact that COVID-19 is hitting Indian Country hard is not a surprise. For decades, health disparities between Native and non-Native communities have existed. American Indians and Alaska Natives die from heart disease, diabetes, and kidney and liver disease at

considerably higher rates than their non-Native counterparts do, according to the Indian Health Service (IHS).

The life expectancy of American Indians and Alaska Natives, at 73.0 years, is 5.5 years less than the figure for the U.S. population of all races, 78.5 years.

Stacy Bohlen (Sault Sainte Marie Tribe of Chippewa), executive director of the National Indian Health Board, said in a March 27, 2020 interview with the *Navajo Times* she does not believe IHS is prepared for coronavirus, and neither is the United States as a whole.

“We need places where people can go for ICU beds, which we don’t have,” she said. “Our hospitals are 40 years old. The equipment is two times older than in any other place.”

Bohlen said 90 percent of American Indian tribes have not received the personal protective equipment they need.

During times of crisis, cracks in the system become more apparent and obvious. This is particularly true now during the COVID-19 pandemic, relating to the cracks in the system in Indian Country.

Sadly, the results of the cracks in a broken system are unnecessary deaths, which when reported are mere numbers. However, the numbers represent human lives. The numbers are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles.

Beyond the personal illnesses and deaths brought on by COVID-19, Indian Country faces a whole different challenge with the voluntary closure of tribal casinos and other tribal business enterprises. When the casinos closed, so did money flowing into Indian Country.

The California Nations Indian Gaming Association (CNIGA) says voluntarily shutting down its tribal gaming facilities was the responsible decision to make. However, the decision to close them resulted in tribal governments’ revenue streams being reduced to zero overnight, which came with an enormous cost to its tribal citizens and the communities where they are located, CNIGA Chairman James Siva (Morongo Band of Mission Indians) said to *Native News Online* last month.

No one at this point knows when tribal casinos and closed tribal business enterprises will reopen. So, as the closures continue, Indian

Country will work to survive on funds provided through the CARES Act, which have limiting stipulations that at this point do not allow for relief for closed-down casinos.

To Indigenous people of this land, survival has been part of our history since the first boatloads of Europeans arrived on our land centuries ago.

The novel coronavirus is not the first deadly disease from afar that American Indians have faced. Our ancestors had to fight off smallpox and other diseases that were foreign to their immune systems and caused many deaths. Our ancestors have had to survive wars, boarding schools, and massive poverty, which contributes to early deaths.

The good news is American Indians and Alaska Natives are resilient and survivors. We are still here.

# **BREAKING THROUGH THE COVID-19 VACCINE HESITANCY WALL**

*Originally published April 25, 2021*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating in Indian Country.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports Native Americans are four times more likely to be hospitalized and 2.5 times more likely to die from the deadly virus than their White counterparts. In particular, COVID-19 has taken a tremendous toll among American Indian and Alaska Native elders. As a result, tribes have lost many fluent speakers of their tribal languages.

The good news is that rates of COVID-19 vaccinations in Indian Country have surpassed 28 states, including New Mexico, Arizona, and Alaska where many Native Americans received health care from tribal health centers and the Indian Health Service (IHS), according to the Connecticut News Project's CT Mirror.

President Joe Biden said Wednesday, Apr. 21, that the United States had administered 200 million COVID-19 vaccinations in the country. It was quite an achievement, considering that the president promised early in his administration that the goal for his first 100 days in office was to have 100 million Americans vaccinated. That goal was hit on the president's 58th day in office. Once it was met, the president doubled down and set a new goal of having 200 million vaccinated by his 100th day in office. With eight days to spare, that was achieved.

More than 80 percent of Americans over 65 have had at least one vaccine as of Apr. 22, according to President Biden.

Navajo Nation, one epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States last spring along with New York City and Detroit, saw almost half of Navajo citizens living on the reservation vaccinated. Nearly 90 percent of allocated doses have been administered.

It is fair to assume that the high percentage of vaccinations in the Navajo Nation has helped curb the once-devastating rates of coronavirus cases and deaths. This past week, the Navajo Nation reported some days with less than 10 new COVID-19 cases, and it went 10 consecutive days without one COVID-related death.

In South Dakota, on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, tribal officials have taken down the blockades that were set up last year to stop nonresidents from entering the reservation, helping safeguard the tribal community from COVID-19 mass outbreaks.

This is good news for Indian Country and is attributable to the distribution of vaccines among tribes. In recent weeks, the supply of vaccines has exceeded the demand on Indian reservations. Several tribes have opened up vaccine administration to non-Native residents from neighboring towns and cities.

Access to an excess supply of vaccines was offered by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in Oregon to the Portland Trail Blazers basketball team, who took the tribe up on the offer and sent 12 players to become vaccinated.

Even with the success of having over 200 million vaccinations across the United States and the supply exceeding the demand in Indian Country, a new problem is now confronting the nation and Indian Country: We have hit a vaccine-hesitancy wall.

“We knew we were going to hit this point,” CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on NBC News Apr. 22. “Now comes the hard work of working with our community corps, trying to understand why people may be hesitant.”

Vaccine hesitancy is the result of fear, distrust, and ignorance—or a combination of all three. As Native Americans, we have been distrustful of both the government and some modern medicine.

Obviously, everyone has to decide for themselves. However, we as Native people have been taught to think beyond ourselves. We do things for the good of family and community.

“I am well aware of the suspicions we as Native Americans have toward taking the COVID-19 vaccine. However, with a global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization, and if unchecked, the

potential of the virus killing millions and millions of people until global immunity is reached, I decided to place my trust in our scientists who study and research infectious diseases,” Olympic gold medalist Billy Mills (Lakota) told *Native News Online* in January, soon after he received his first vaccine shot.

Mills, the only American ever to win the 10,000 meters in Olympic competition, praised scientists for working hard to get the lifesaving vaccine developed and to the public in record speed.

The vaccine has obviously helped reverse the large number of deaths in the Navajo Nation and other parts of Indian Country. My hope is that we, as Native people, overcome any hesitancy we have about the vaccine, for the good of our tribal communities and the world at large.

# **ALLEGATIONS OF UNWANTED HYSTERECTOMIES AT ICE FACILITY REMINISCENT OF FEDS' MASS STERILIZATION OF NATIVE WOMEN IN 1970s**

*Originally published September 20, 2020*

A whistleblower story surfaced Tuesday, Sept. 15, that accused the Trump administration's Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of sending detained immigrant women to a doctor who performed unnecessary mass hysterectomies at the Irwin County Detention Center, operated by LaSalle Corrections in Ocilla, Ga.

The whistleblower, Dawn Wooten, a licensed practical nurse at the detention center, said, "I had several detained women on numerous occasions that would come to me and say: 'Ms. Wooten, I had a hysterectomy. Um, why?' I had no answers as to why they had those procedures."

The allegations of mass hysterectomies were quite disturbing, because they are reminiscent of the sterilization of Native women during the 1970s by the federal government. Those sterilizations came to light after a keen American Indian woman doctor became suspicious after a patient visited her office.

In November 1972, a 26-year-old Native woman visited the office of Dr. Connie Pinkerton-Uri (Cherokee, Choctaw) and asked for a "womb transplant," because she and her husband wanted to start a family.

Shocked by the request, Dr. Pinkerton-Uri discovered that six years before, the Native woman had been given a full hysterectomy by an Indian Health Service (IHS) doctor because she had a drinking problem. The IHS physician had lied to the woman by telling her the procedure could be reversed when she wanted to have children.

Pinkerton-Uri had to inform the young woman that a complete hysterectomy could not be reversed.

In later accounts of the visit, Pinkerton-Uri reported that the encounter left her in tears. She knew she had to discover more information about why the IHS doctor lied to the woman.

The visit set in motion efforts by Pinkerton-Uri to uncover thousands of similar cases of complete hysterectomies. An independent study she conducted discovered that one in four Native women had been sterilized without consent. Her study said research bore out that IHS had “singled out full-blooded Indian women for sterilization procedures.”

In one case, an American Indian woman was given a full hysterectomy because she complained of headaches. Her headaches persisted after the unnecessary sterilization. They were ultimately found to be the result of a brain tumor.

Pinkerton-Uri and other activists put pressure on Congress to investigate what was concluded to be cruel and inhumane abuse of thousands of Native women. Sen. James Abourezk (D-S.D.) took up the cause to investigate IHS practices.

The investigation uncovered a federal government program that sought to sterilize American Indian women. In 1976, a study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) found that four of the 12 Indian Health Service regions sterilized at least 3,406 American Indian women without their permission during the 1970s.

The 1970s sterilization abuse perpetrated against Native women would suggest a concerted effort by the federal government to stop reproduction among American Indians, in what could be labeled as a modern-day attempt to continue the genocidal practices by non-Natives against this continent’s first peoples.

Fast forward to this past week’s whistleblower accusations, Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.), a tribal citizen of the Laguna Pueblo, tweeted on Wednesday evening, Sept. 16: “Dawn Wooten’s whistleblower account is terrifying and brings to light the generational trauma caused by efforts to exterminate communities of color and people with disabilities. We need an investigation.”

She joined 172 other members of Congress on Sept. 15 in signing a letter to Dept. of Homeland Security Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari to open an investigation into Wooten's allegations against ICE.

The letter, in part, states:

“The reports of mass hysterectomies cause grave concern for the violation of the bodily autonomy and reproductive rights of detained people. Everyone, regardless of their immigration status, their language, or their incarceration deserves to control their own reproductive choices, and make informed choices about their bodies.”

Wooten is represented by Project South and the Government Accountability Project, two advocacy groups. In a 27-page complaint filed Sept. 14, the allegations of mass hysterectomies emerge against the Irwin County Detention Center, a privately owned prison contracted by ICE to house immigrants.

Some of these immigrants come from Indigenous tribes in Mexico and Central America. We can only hope history is not repeating itself. While it is too early to know the complete truth behind the alleged unwanted hysterectomies or the exact number of victims of this abuse, if one happened under ICE's control, then that is one too many.

The sterilization of Native women in the 1970s was horrible and deplorable, and its traumatic legacy will be everlasting. The current allegations against the Irwin County Detention Center are horrible and deplorable now. And much like the violence perpetrated against Native women, we will not soon forget this either.

## **MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN IS AN INDIAN COUNTRY EPIDEMIC**

*Originally published November 21, 2021*

Late last October, on the night before her 18th birthday, Mashpee Wampanoag tribal citizen Jalajhia Finklea went missing. The family remained in turmoil for the next five weeks as they waited and wondered what happened to her.

Then the day before Thanksgiving, Jalajhia's dead body was found abandoned in a field off Interstate 95 in Fellsmere, Fla., about 1,350 miles from her home in New Bedford, Mass., near Boston. An autopsy found she had been shot in the head twice, and her death was officially listed as a homicide.

The article about her death was the most read story on *Native News Online* in 2020, a year saturated with stories about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jalajhia Finklea became a statistic among thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women. But for her family, friends, and tribe, she was no statistic.

"Our very deepest condolences to the family of Jalajhia," the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe said in a statement. "We hold them in our prayers in this most sorrowful time. We must be here for them and one another."

For the past few years, May 5 has been recognized as the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW).

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) has in the past declared the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls an epidemic.

"The epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women has been overlooked for far too long, but we're finally giving a voice to this silent crisis," Haaland wrote in an op-ed published by *Native News*

*Online* in 2019, while she was in Congress. “When your community is at risk – when it could be your daughter, your sister or your mom – the issue demands urgency. The attention this issue has received wouldn’t have been possible without the women in Indian Country saying, ‘enough is enough, we deserve to feel safe too.’ It was a call for Congress to direct real resources to the problem.”

This issue did not just begin last decade or earlier. The disrespect of Indigenous women has continued throughout American history and continues today.

As this issue receives more attention, it is more evident that it is complicated by the dismissive behavior of some law enforcement; lack of coordinated data collection between tribal, federal, state, and local law enforcement; and the complexities involving human trafficking in the United States.

One step in the right direction would be the passage of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act. Given the ongoing epidemic in Indian Country, the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act has the widespread support of tribes and tribal communities and Native American organizations.

Title 9 of the legislation, addressing “Safety for Indian Women,” aims to improve the issue by authorizing funding for training and equipment, allowing tribal governments access to federal criminal investigation data, and creating a pilot project to allow “up to five Indian Tribes in Alaska to implement special Tribal criminal jurisdiction.”

The House of Representatives passed the Act in March. It will linger in the Senate because Republicans don’t like provisions in the Act that would forbid those convicted of assaulting women from owning guns.

During the 2020 presidential campaign, the Biden-Harris Plan for Tribal Nations committed “to break the cycle of victimization and promote accountability, partnering with tribal leaders and tribal women’s advocates to ensure tribal lands are safe and focus on ending violence against Native women and children and ending the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.”

Indian Country remains hopeful more will be done during the Biden administration.

# **THE DEATH OF YOUNG PREGNANT MASHPEE WAMPANOAG WOMAN IS TIP OF THE ICEBERG OF MURDERED AND MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS EPIDEMIC**

*Originally published December 6, 2020*

The news that Jalajhia Finklea's body was found in a field along a Florida highway came during Thanksgiving week. The young, pregnant Mashpee Wampanoag tribal citizen went missing October 20, the night before her 18th birthday. Her remains were discovered over a month later, some 1,350 miles from her home.

The particulars of the tragic death of this young Indigenous woman may never be fully known. The man who was suspected of kidnapping her from her hometown in Massachusetts and taking her to Florida was killed during a shootout with law enforcement in a McDonald's parking lot, three weeks before Finklea's body was discovered.

Sadly, Finklea's abduction and subsequent death represents just one story of hundreds of Indigenous women and children who go missing in the United States annually. During the past several years, there has been a stunning rise in the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the United States and Canada. The problem is so profound that the crisis is now referred to as an epidemic.

Experts argue that the shameful and all-too-common practice of sexual abuse of Indigenous women and girls is not a new phenomenon. The total disrespect of and violence against Indigenous women and children dates back to Columbus, as his vile men raped and killed Native women. Some were taken by Columbus and his men to Europe. Once there, the Indigenous females were sex-trafficked.

The disrespect of Indigenous women has continued throughout American history.

In 1976, a study by the U.S. General Accounting Office found that four of the 12 Indian Health Service regions sterilized at least 3,406 American Indian women without their permission during the 1970s.

In 2017, the National Crimes Information Center reported 10,642 missing Native Americans. Of that total, 5,172 were Indigenous women and girls. The U.S. Department of Justice logged only 116 of the cases in its database.

Not to take the need to protect Indigenous women and children only, but to enlighten the general public to the serious problem faced in Indian Country, Indigenous men have been included in some studies, such as the National Institute of Justice's "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men" 2016 report that said:

"Results show that more than four in five American Indian and Alaska Native women (84.3 percent) have experienced violence in their lifetime. This includes 56.1 percent who have experienced sexual violence, 55.5 percent who have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, 48.8 percent who have experienced stalking, and 66.4 percent who have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner. Overall, more than 1.5 million American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime."

Much work needs to be done to correct these staggering statistics. Across Indian Country, tribes, elected tribal officials, survivors, advocates, and tribal coalitions have for years worked hard to bring the epidemic to the attention of local, state, and federal officials.

Currently, there is a Presidential Task Force on Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives, also known as Operation Lady Justice, working on the issue. In its first full year of operation, it has spent its time holding tribal consultations and establishing cold-case offices in various regions within Indian Country.

In October, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families released a 66-page report, "Missing and Murdered Native Americans: A Public Health Framework for Action," that creates a pathway for some critical HHS

human services programs to work with tribal communities and its partners to strengthen protection for Indigenous people and to counter the impacts of violence.

The MMIWG crisis has the attention of the incoming Biden administration. The Biden-Harris Plan for Tribal Nations released during the presidential campaign commits “to break the cycle of victimization and promote accountability, Biden will partner with tribal leaders and tribal women’s advocates to ensure tribal lands are safe and focus on ending violence against Native women and children, and ending the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.”

All of these efforts are steps to stop the long history of violence against Indigenous women.

Within our tribal communities we need to be prayerful and diligent to keep our Indigenous sisters – family and friends – safe, because they are more than sad statistics.

As in the case of Jalajhia Finklea, her death is a loss for her family and tribal community.

*Native News Online* reported on the discovery of her body on Nov. 27, the evening after Thanksgiving. The story of this young woman’s death has already reverberated throughout Indian Country, but it needs to reverberate beyond Indian Country if we are to ever stop this epidemic.

## **JOURNEY HOME FOR TURTLE MOUNTAIN WOMAN COMES TO A CLOSE, 15 YEARS AFTER SHE WAS REPORTED MISSING**

*Originally published May 16, 2021*

On May 4, *Native News Online* reported news about the positive DNA identification of Melissa “Missy” Ann Poitra, a Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa tribal citizen who had been missing for 15 years. Her remains were discovered in a self-storage unit five years ago in Durham, North Carolina, some 1,600 miles from her tribal homeland.

The body was only discovered by a cleaning company clearing out the storage unit after the person who rented it died.

By coincidence, our article was published one day before National Awareness Day for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons on May 5.

Police in Durham classified Poitra as being a White woman. When her family spoke to the Durham Police Department, they were treated with a dismissive attitude. But the family was persistent in their pursuit to discover if the remains were Poitra’s.

It took another five years for her body to be positively identified by law enforcement through DNA tests. The results came back on April 23, 2021. Melissa’s father was notified by the Durham police four days later.

The family contacted *Native News Online* to tell the story.

On May 12, Durham police held a press conference to discuss the case. They said they were treating the case as a homicide and offered little more detail.

The details of Melissa’s tragic death make her a statistic among thousands of other missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Across Indian Country, Indigenous women are murdered at a rate 10 times higher than White women. More than four of five Indigenous women have experienced violence in their lifetimes. More than half of Indigenous women —56.1 percent—experience sexual violence.

The story of Melissa’s journey home brings attention to three key elements of the missing and murdered Indigenous persons epidemic: misclassification, law-enforcement dismissiveness, and family persistence.

When Melissa’s body was first discovered in the storage unit, she was misclassified as being a White woman. Sadly, racial misclassification is a frequent occurrence, which often prevents accurate tracking of cases of Indigenous victims.

The misclassification of Native persons indicates there is an undercount of missing and murdered Indigenous persons, which means the epidemic is worse than we imagine.

Racial misclassification can occur for different reasons. Law enforcement often classify individuals based on assumptions about their physical appearance. If a Native woman is of mixed race, she may be wrongly identified as White or Black. Through colonial times, American Indians took Hispanic last names, contributing to misclassification. Another reason misclassification occurs is because federal or state governments may not recognize tribes.

In the vast majority of missing and murdered Indigenous persons cases, law enforcement is frequently seen as dismissive to families of the missing and murdered.

Sometimes law enforcement denies there is a problem of missing and murdered Indigenous persons.

“Don’t wait for law enforcement,” Lissa Yellowbird-Chase said at a press conference for Olivia Lone Bear, a mother of five who was murdered in 2017 near the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. “People have this false sense of security that when you file a missing-person report, all of the officers and detectives jump in their cars and run all over the place looking for this person. That’s simply not true.”

In the case of Melissa, the Durham police were dismissive because of the misclassification. They thought the remains were those of a White

woman. Because the family that reported her missing is Indigenous, they thought the remains could not be hers.

Jessica Poitra, Melissa's sister, is a teacher on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. During the time her sister was missing, Jessica thought about finding her. After an online article was published in 2016 about an unidentified woman in Durham being discovered in a plastic tote concealed in a self-storage unit, she had suspicions that the person was her sister.

Durham police at the time named the remains Durham Jane Doe.

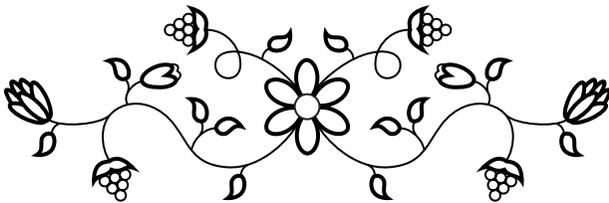
"The woman had the same gap in her teeth as my sister did, and we knew it was my sister," Jessica told *Native News Online*. "But the police wouldn't believe us."

The family persisted. They asked the Durham police repeatedly to perform a DNA analysis, but the police seemed to drag their feet. It took five years of persistence by Melissa's family.

Melissa's long journey home to North Dakota—both in time and distance—will end soon. Her remains are due to return this week to Turtle Mountain.

For her loved ones, Melissa is not a statistic. She is family. Soon, she will be home.

# **CULTURE & SOCIAL JUSTICE**



# HONORING OUR NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS ON VETERANS DAY

*Originally published November 11, 2021*

Today, on Veterans Day, we honor the men and women who have served in the United States Armed Forces. Commemorated annually, Veterans Day originated as “Armistice Day” on November 11, 1919, the first anniversary of the end of World War I. Then President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation in 1954 that changed the name to Veterans Day. It is a national holiday that honors all veterans—alive and dead—who have served the United States in the military.

For over 200 years, Native Americans have fought valiantly in the United States military, even before Native Americans gained citizenship in 1924.

The rich contributions of the Navajo Code Talkers during World War II have been chronicled in recent years. The fact that their codes were never broken is witness to the power of Native language that was available to those who spoke it then. One irony of history is that the Native languages that helped to save democracy during World War II were, at one point, beaten out of many of that generation at Indian boarding schools. Thankfully, for our entire nation, the Navajo language survived.

Known as warriors throughout history, Native Americans have carried deep traditions into modern times. The Pentagon reports American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) participate in the military at a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States.

Watching Native American honor guards carry eagle staffs and flags into the dance circle during grand entries at powwows is a breathtaking and powerful experience. The power of the drum, coupled with the brilliance of the eagle feathers and colorful flags, conjures a tremendous

moment of remembrance to their service. Native people represent well because they served our country well.

The Office of Tribal Governmental Relations at the Veterans Administration on Nov. 10 sent *Native News Online* the latest statistics, from 2017, on AI/AN service to the United States military. Prepared by the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, the report said:

- 88.7 percent of Native veterans are men, and 11.3 percent women.
- Native veterans were more likely to live in the West region of the United States than veterans of other races.
- Native veterans' median age was 59, while the median age for non-native veterans was 41.
- A higher percentage of Native veterans served before 9/11 than did veterans of other races.
- Native veterans had lower personal incomes than veterans of other races.

Native veterans were more likely to have some college compared to veterans of other races.

The percentage of Native veterans who were unemployed was higher than the percentage of veterans of other races who were unemployed.

Native veterans were more likely to lack health insurance as well. The percentage of Native veterans with no health insurance (7.4 percent) was more than twice that of all other veterans (2.9 percent).

With all the praise we offer veterans on Veterans Day, many lack basic services for health care, and too many are homeless. These veterans who sacrificed so much deserve much more.

Today, *Native News Online* honors all warrior veterans and says “megwetch” (thank you) for all you did for this country.

# **NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET PAST THE THANKSGIVING PILGRIM INDIAN**

*Originally published November 7, 2021*

When he proclaimed November Native American Heritage Month, President Joe Biden became the sixth U.S. president to recognize the month as such, beginning with President George Herbert Walker Bush in 1990.

To be accurate, November was proclaimed National American Indian Heritage Month from 1990 to 2008. Beginning with the Obama administration, the month became Native American Heritage Month.

During the last administration, then-President Donald Trump thought it was too much to only recognize Native Americans. He proclaimed November 2019 as National American History and Founders Month in an attempt to divert attention away from Native Americans. He returned to proclaiming Native American Heritage Month in 2020.

It is not quite clear why November was chosen to be the month Native Americans are honored. I can draw from personal observations, though. The period between Indigenous Peoples' Day and Thanksgiving is the most requested time of the year for Native American speakers.

Some Native Americans resist having only one month to celebrate who they are. Among Native Americans, there is a belief that every month is Native American month, and every day is a good day to be Indigenous.

I agree.

As descendants of ancestors who survived genocide and the tragedies of Indian boarding schools, our pasts are intertwined into our collective American history. Unfortunately, most non-Natives know

very little about the lives, culture, and history of the Native people of this country. Their perceptions are filled with misconceptions. Some believe Native people don't pay income taxes (they do) and are all rich from Indian gaming (they are not).

Often, non-Native perceptions are based on New Age philosophies or what they learned in elementary school about Indians who shared a meal with the Pilgrims in 1621. Those lessons about "Thanksgiving Indians" are based on a constructed history depicted in inaccurate paintings about the special time of unity of that first harvest feast.

So elementary-school teachers still bring out construction paper, crayons, and scissors to make headdresses for half the class. The other half of the class gets to make pilgrim hats. Then they play Native Americans and pilgrims in the classroom. This is most Americans' perception of what it was like here in the 1600s.

During Native American Heritage Month, opportunities exist for non-Natives to learn about Native American history and culture.

As a starting point, one great resource is IllumiNative website's "Native Education for All" section for appropriate teaching material. In addition, tribes across Indian Country have education departments that will gladly provide accurate information about local tribes in the area.

In his proclamation, President Biden writes:

"Despite a painful history marked by unjust federal policies of assimilation and termination, American Indian and Alaska Native peoples have persevered. During National Native American Heritage Month, we celebrate the countless contributions of Native peoples past and present, honor the influence they have had on the advancement of our Nation, and recommit ourselves to upholding trust and treaty responsibilities, strengthening Tribal sovereignty, and advancing Tribal self-determination."

Those words sound good, but tribal nations and non-Native Americans need to hold the Biden administration and future presidential administrations accountable for continued change, and policies that empower and don't hurt Native American people. Today, many Native Americans live without power and running water. Disease rates

are the highest in the country, and limited access to basic human needs keeps Native people in a state of oppression and disregard.

It is up to our collective society that the words in this proclamation are not just ceremonial.

“Native American roots are deeply embedded in this land — a homeland loved, nurtured, strengthened, and fought for with honor and conviction. This month and every month, we honor the precious, strong, and enduring cultures and contributions of all Native Americans, and recommit ourselves to fulfilling the full promise of our Nation together,” Biden continued in the proclamation.

Many Native Americans I know celebrate being Indigenous year-round, not just in November or on Thanksgiving.

Perhaps the best way to honor Indigenous people in November — and in all months — is to rethink and question our go-to history books. We can honor Indigenous people by shining a light on truth, acknowledging our painful history and aspiring for a more just society that seeks to lift, not erase, the lives, traditions, and cultures of the people who were here first.

# MOVE OVER COLUMBUS, MAKE WAY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' DAY

*Originally published October 10, 2021*

On Oct. 8, President Joe Biden issued the first-ever White House proclamation designating Monday, October 11 as Indigenous Peoples' Day across the United States.

In his proclamation, the president recognized the obligations the United States government has to live up to fulfill its trust and treaty responsibilities, and admitted centuries of failure.

“Our country was conceived on a promise of equality and opportunity for all people — a promise that, despite the extraordinary progress we have made through the years, we have never fully lived up to,” Biden said. “That is especially true when it comes to upholding the rights and dignity of the Indigenous people who were here long before colonization of the Americas began.”

What a difference a year — and a new presidential administration — makes.

Last year, then-President Donald Trump issued a Columbus Day proclamation and warned of “radical activists” seeking to tarnish the explorer’s false legacy.

Trump wrote in his proclamation: “Sadly, in recent years, radical activists have sought to undermine Christopher Columbus’ legacy. These extremists seek to replace discussion of his vast contributions with talk of failings, his discoveries with atrocities, and his achievements with transgressions. Rather than learn from our history, this radical ideology and its adherents seek to revise it, deprive it of any splendor, and mark it as inherently sinister.”

Of course, Trump’s reference to “radical activists” was actually a reference to Native Americans who spoke the truth about the lost plunderer who never actually set foot on the mainland of North America.

If that's the definition of radical activists, then I guess I am one.

For years, as a member of Grand Valley State University's Native American Advisory Council in Michigan, I have either moderated or participated in panel discussions that attempted to educate mostly non-Native students about why Native Americans don't consider Christopher Columbus a hero.

At the midpoint of this past week, I realized I had spent more time talking about Indigenous Peoples' Day this year than about Columbus Day. The idea Indigenous Peoples' Day has taken over my thoughts and conversation is gratifying to me because it demonstrates movement in the way the country thinks about Native people. Then, when I opened my email from the White House and read President Biden's proclamation, I knew a major shift had taken place.

As I said, what a difference a year and a new presidential administration makes.

It is especially gratifying in a year when Indian Country has dealt with the renewed awareness of the Indian boarding school era, after the remains of 215 children were discovered in a mass grave at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada. The disclosure shook the world, both in Indian Country and beyond, prompting Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), the first Native American presidential cabinet secretary, to establish a Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in the United States.

Even with the hurts and truths already uncovered about the Indian boarding school era, Indian Country remains resilient. Earlier this week, our newsroom's Indigenous writers wrote their reflections on Indigenous Peoples' Day and the importance of their work as Indigenous writers.

"Many Indigenous stories, however, are still being suppressed and misrepresented by non-Native news outlets...At times, it feels like a never-ending cycle of injustice, but hope is hard to kill," wrote Monica Whitepigeon.

The last phrase, "hope is hard to kill," made me pause to reflect on how powerful the word "hope" has been for Indian Country. Even with the attempt by non-Natives to commit genocide through wars

and a “kill the Indian, save the man” philosophy, we have survived as Indigenous people.

Then, in a prelude to Indigenous Peoples’ Day weekend, there was a ceremony in the White House Rose Garden on Oct. 8. Interior Secretary Haaland stood at the podium wearing her tribal regalia, turquoise jewelry, and moccasins, choking up as she introduced the president of the United States, who would sign proclamations that will restore the original boundaries of Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante and Northeast Canyons, and Seamounts National Monuments, undoing Trump’s actions that exposed them to oil and mining exploration.

What a difference a year and a presidential administration makes.

Pride came over me as I watched President Biden, surrounded by Secretary Haaland and several tribal leaders, sign the proclamations.

Going into Monday, I feel ready to celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day with a renewed vigor, realizing we still have much work to do to improve the lives of Indigenous people across Indian Country.

And I am glad I don’t have to talk about — or think about — Columbus very much this year.

# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN STORY: A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON MT. RUSHMORE

*Originally published June 29, 2020*

My mother taught her children the power of reading and learning.

When I was in elementary school, she took me and my siblings to the local library on Saturday mornings. My lifelong love of biographies began when I selected books to check out of the library to read. I read the biographies of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and other American historical figures.

They became heroes to me.

Those perceptions changed dramatically one day during my eighth-grade American history class. The assignment was to read the Declaration of Independence in our red, white, and blue history textbook while sitting in class.

As I read Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence, I had a sudden awakening of how American Indians were viewed in 1776. That's because the same man who wrote the words, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" also included a phrase in the pronouncement about "merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions."

Merciless. Indian. Savages.

That was a defining moment of enlightenment that changed the way I have viewed American history ever since. Jefferson's words that depicted Indians so unfavorably angered and hurt me, because the "Indian savage" he wrote about was not anything like the American Indians I knew in my family or Indian community. They were far from being "savages."

As an American Indian, I now realize that American history is complex and often messy.

The upcoming trip to Mount Rushmore by President Donald Trump reminded me of the dichotomy between the viewpoints held by many American patriots versus the view that many Native Americans have of the tourist attraction in South Dakota's Black Hills that draws 3 million visitors each year.

For Trump, Mount Rushmore represents a great photo opportunity during a presidential election year. Mountains make great backdrops for photographs, of course, but I suppose a mountain with four U.S. presidents' faces provides an even more majestic view in the eyes of many Americans.

The president's visit to the mountain will be met with protests from American Indians. But they will not be there as an extension of the racial-equity protests that have sprung up across the country after George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police last month.

In fact, American Indians have been protesting Mount Rushmore for decades. We know the "other side of the mountain" story that is seldom taught to American students, who only hear the patriotic version of how great the four presidents were in American history — so great that it warranted their likenesses being carved into the side of the mountain.

What American Indians know, particularly those from the great Sioux nations, is that the tribes were originally given the Black Hills in perpetuity in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.

Soon thereafter, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, and greed set in. The U.S. Calvary moved in by the mid-1870s to protect white miners. The U.S. government took the stance that American Indians had the choice to "sell or starve." By 1877, the Sioux Nations' land was confiscated by the federal government and the Sioux were forced onto reservations.

The Sioux Nations have maintained they are the rightful owners of the Black Hills. They took the federal government to court, and in 1980 the U.S. Supreme Court agreed the land was taken from them wrongfully. As a result, a trust account was set up with \$102 million for compensation.

The Sioux said they did not want the money. They wanted the Black Hills back. The fund is reportedly now worth more than \$1 billion.

Last week, Oglala Sioux Tribal President Julian Bear Runner said he wants the faces of the four presidents removed from Mount Rushmore. He said this should not be done by blowing up the side of the mountain, though, because it would bring more desecration to the mountain that the Sioux still consider sacred.

Historian James W. Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, said in an interview with the *Washington Post* in February 2000, “The other part of the Rushmore story that needs to be told is about its sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. He was a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and his association with the Klan shows how mainstream the group was. President Harding was actually sworn into the Klan at a White House ceremony. In fact, Mount Rushmore has been considered a Ku Klux Klan sacred site.”

As I said, American history is messy and much more complicated than most people even know.

On Sunday, June 28, South Dakota state Senate Minority Leader Troy Heinert (Rosebud Sioux), told me he is concerned about the further spread of COVID-19 with all the Trump supporters, who are not prone to social distancing, in a state that in recent days has seen spikes in new COVID-19 cases. He is also concerned about potential for fires breaking out in the land around Mount Rushmore, since it has experienced drought conditions that have prohibited fireworks there since 2009.

He further said he knows the history of ownership of the Black Hills. He hopes the presidential visit will shed light on the “other side of the mountain” story that Americans should learn.

I agree. Trump’s visit should be an opportunity for Americans to finally learn the truth about stolen land and the desecration of a mountain that depicts the faces of four presidents who are not necessarily heroes to American Indians.

I learned the truth when I was in eighth grade – that there is a real difference between the “history” that is taught in school, and what American Indians know to be true.

# **NATIVE PEOPLE WOULD NEVER SACRIFICE THEIR ELDERS FOR THE GOOD OF THE ECONOMY**

*Originally published March 30, 2020*

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered our normal lives in ways that seemed unimaginable until three weeks ago.

*Native News Online* views its coverage of the deadly coronavirus as a top priority at this time in order to get the word out to help stop the spread of the virus across Indian Country and beyond. In order to bring informative reporting to *Native News Online* readers, we go through a rigorous process of separating fact from fiction by monitoring hundreds of COVID-19 related press releases and articles.

One story that we did *not* cover has been gnawing at my mind all week long. So, I want to address it now.

The story dropped last Monday night, March 23, when Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who turns 70 next month, suggested during a Fox News interview that senior citizens should be willing to die in exchange for restarting the American economy.

“No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that is the exchange, I’m all in,” Patrick told Fox News.

He added, “My message is that let’s get back to work, let’s get back to living. Let’s be smart about it and those of us who are 70-plus, we’ll take care of ourselves. But don’t sacrifice the country.”

As the week progressed, other pundits such as Glenn Beck and Fox’s Brit Hume weighed in to say they agreed with Patrick. To them, saving the American economy is more important than life itself. Well, at least it’s more important than the lives of senior citizens, that is.

Their notion is that the benefits of saving the American economy outweigh the risks to the elderly population, who are more vulnerable to dying from COVID-19 than younger people.

Their comments made me wonder if Patrick, Beck, and Hume had watched the 1990s movie *Grumpy Old Men* a few too many times and now they think that old people are not only grumpy, but that they don't really matter in the larger scheme of life.

The story gnawed at my mind because the whole concept that seniors are expendable conflicts with the American Indian and Alaska Native belief that we are to honor, respect, and revere the older generations. We even opt for the word "elders" over senior citizens when referring to the older ones among us, which distinguishes them as high-status citizens in our society.

The very suggestion that the American public should choose to get the economy going again without concern for the health of our elders is preposterous in Indian Country, where our elders serve an important and honored role in our lives.

They are the keepers of knowledge and wisdom, and they serve as our guides. Elders are seen as being the most beautiful part of our culture. Contrary to Hollywood's definition of beauty, the more wrinkles our elders have, the more beautiful they become to us. The lines on their faces are indicators of life lessons and wise journeys.

In Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Ojibwe, "Gichi aya'a" is the word for elder, which when translated to English means "great being." A term for old man in Anishinaabemowin is "akiwensii," which literally means "earth caretaker." The words and language embody the value that elders have in Native culture.

In Native culture, elders have an intrinsic value that is worth more than dollars and cents.

To validate my own belief on the subject, I asked Mike Williams, a friend who is chief of the Yup'it Nation in Akiak, Alaska for his opinion of Lt. Governor Patrick's suggestion. A man known for his honesty, the chief did not disappoint me with his response.

“That is crazy. These guys are nuts!” Williams said. “We take good care of our elders. They are our libraries, full of knowledge and history. We do not want them to pass.”

On Sunday afternoon, March 29, as I watched the livestream from Navajo Nation’s virtual town hall, I was given further validation when I heard Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez admonishing the young Navajo to stay home. He said he is still seeing too many of them ignoring the order to stay home to combat the spread of the virus.

“Young people, especially, I see too many driving around,” he said. “You don’t even know if you have the virus and are passing it around. Don’t be selfish. Think about your grandmas and those people who have health conditions. We have already seen death from this virus.”

After processing all of my feelings about this controversial situation, I realized that it has only strengthened my belief that all life is precious—especially the lives of our elders.

## IT'S TIME TO RELEASE LEONARD PELTIER

*Originally published July 10, 2021*

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote in *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, “On the day Robert Kennedy himself died, a New York Seneca, whose reservation he had visited in 1967, wrote to his widow: ‘We loved him, too. Mrs. Kennedy, loving a public official for an Indian is almost unheard of, as history bears out. We trusted him. Unheard of, too, for an Indian. We had faith in him.’”

The late American Indian scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote that Kennedy was a man “who could move from world to world and never be a stranger anywhere... Spiritually, he was an Indian.”

Kennedy was a hero to American Indians because he was one of the few politicians who paid attention to the mass poverty, lack of housing, and poor health care on Indian reservations.

Kennedy, the younger brother of President John F. Kennedy, served in his older brother's administration as U.S. Attorney General. After the president was assassinated, the younger Kennedy became a U.S. senator representing New York. In 1968, he sought the Democratic Party's nomination for president.

On June 4, 1968, he won the California primary. Minutes after Kennedy gave his acceptance speech at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, he left the podium and was detoured to walk through the kitchen. Sirhan Sirhan was waiting for him with a loaded gun and shot the senator three times at close range. Sirhan was wrestled to the ground and held until law enforcement arrived to arrest him.

Convicted of first-degree murder, Sirhan has been incarcerated for 53 years. On Friday, July 9, a parole board panel in Los Angeles recommended that he be released. The recommendation does not grant Sirhan immediate release. The parole board has 120 days to review the

two-panel recommendation. Then the governor of California will be given the opportunity to overrule the decision.

The recommendation that Sirhan could be released made me think about Leonard Peltier (Turtle Mountain of Chippewa), who has been incarcerated for 46 years after being convicted of the killing of two FBI agents at Oglala on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975.

To many American Indians and others, Peltier, who turns 77 years old on Sept. 12, is a symbol of an oppressive federal system that confines Native people to a dismal place in American society. He is a political prisoner that we may only think about if we happen to see a bumper sticker on the back of a vehicle that reads “FREE Leonard Peltier.”

“If they can recommend the release of Sirhan Sirhan, who killed an iconic figure such as Robert Kennedy, they certainly should free Leonard Peltier,” Lenny Foster (Diné), who has served as Peltier’s spiritual advisor, told me on July 9. “He has suffered with severe health issues for years. His spiritual beliefs have sustained him.”

Kevin Sharp, a former chief judge for the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee, agreed to take the Peltier case pro bono and fight for his freedom.

“Rather than receiving equal protection under the law, Leonard Peltier was convicted based on fabricated evidence, perjured testimony, and a hidden exculpatory ballistics test,” Sharp said in a statement emailed to *Native News Online* on Saturday. “Even the federal government now admits they don’t know who shot the agents. Leonard remains in prison not because of proof beyond a reasonable doubt but because of politics. His last chance at freedom is the collective voice of people who care and dare to stand up for justice and mercy.”

Peltier is not up for parole until July 2024. Sharp doesn’t want to wait to attempt to gain Peltier’s freedom. Instead, he would like to see President Joe Biden grant clemency to Peltier.

Sharp has the support of former United States Attorney James H. Reynolds, who oversaw the federal government’s case against Peltier’s 1976 appeal. In a letter to the president dated July 9, 2021, Reynolds asks Biden to commute Peltier’s sentence.

“Leonard Peltier’s conviction and continued incarceration is a testament to a time and a system of justice that longer has a place in our society,” Reynolds wrote. “I urge you to chart a different path in the history of the government’s relationship with its Native people through a show of mercy rather than continued indifference. I urge you to take a step towards healing a wound that I had a part of making. I urge you to commute Leonard Peltier’s sentence and grant him executive clemency.”

In May 2020, then-Rep. Deb Haaland tweeted: “Congress hasn’t weighed in on this issue in years. I’m urging the Administration to release indigenous-rights activist Leonard Peltier from prison due to COVID-19 concerns. At 75 with chronic health issues, it is urgent that we #FreeLeonardPeltier.”

Now that she is the secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, perhaps Haaland can get the president’s ear and whisper, “It’s time to release Leonard Peltier.”

# DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR: OUR NATION WAS BORN IN GENOCIDE

*Originally published January 17, 2021*

As Americans celebrate Martin Luther King Day on Monday, Jan. 18, across America, many tribal, federal, state, and local governments will be closed to honor the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Monday should be more than a day off work or school. It should be a day of reflection.

It should be a day to *reflect* on justice and equality in the United States. Working for justice and equality for all Americans helped define Dr. King's pilgrimage during America's civil-rights movement. Even though he was faced with a constant barrage of death threats, harassment by the FBI, and numerous arrests, Dr. King still worked hard to bring justice and equality for all Americans.

While Dr. King happened to be an African American, his leadership and dream transcended racial boundaries. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American leader.

The effects of his great work impacted the lives of all Americans.

For instance, the passage of the momentous Civil Rights Act of 1964 benefited American Indians and Latinos, as well as African Americans. We can now go places we could not go prior to 1964. We can now stay in hotels we could not stay in prior to 1964.

Prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, American Indians were not allowed in many establishments simply because we were Indians. Establishments in various parts of this country prominently displayed signs that read "No Indians or Dogs Allowed."

There is a major difference between an Indian and a dog, I may add.

One Ottawa elder recalls, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became a federal law, business proprietors who owned restaurants, hotels,

and shops in northern Michigan held a meeting to discuss “what they were going to do now that they had to serve Indians.”

In his effort to bring justice and equality for all Americans, Dr. King noted the gross mistreatment of American Indians as he reflected on the origins of racism in America in his 1963 book, *Why We Can't Wait*. King wrote:

“Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles of racial supremacy. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or to feel remorse for this shameful episode. Our literature, our films, our drama, our folklore all exalt it.”

Sadly, so much of what Dr. King wrote over 50 years ago still rings true even today for American Indians.

Personally, I am glad Americans celebrate Martin Luther King Day. It makes me reflect on what was and what still needs to be done as we work towards justice and equality in America. We know there is still much work to be done.

# **DAPL, MCGIRT, AND THE WASHINGTON NAME CHANGE: THREE VICTORIES THAT CAME THROUGH PERSISTENCE AND RESISTANCE**

*Originally published on July 20, 2020*

Not long ago, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans' eyes were focused on a presidential visit to Mount Rushmore on July 3. President Trump went to the Black Hills, where Mount Rushmore is located, to celebrate America's 244th birthday.

The presidential pre-Independence Day show was met with hundreds of American Indian protesters, who said the president was not welcome on their territory. At least a dozen individuals were arrested that night.

It seemed like the start of a bad month for Indian Country.

But not longer after, three things happened that turned the tide in favor of American Indians' efforts in their long fight against social injustice. On July 6, a federal judge ruled in favor of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and ordered Energy Transfer to close down its Dakota Access pipeline (DAPL) by August 5. Three days later, on July 9, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Muscogee (Creek) Tribe in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, and finally, on July 13, the National Football League's Washington franchise announced plans to retire the offensive and racist name it has carried for 87 years.

Any one of these three victories on its own is significant to Indian Country. However, it is important to recognize that these three victories did not happen overnight, nor did they happen by accident. The victories came because of hard work in the court system and through protests outside of football stadiums and along the Missouri River at Standing Rock.

Social justice does not just happen by chance or accident. Social justice does not come by being in the right place at the right time. These three victories happened because of strong advocacy and strong action by American Indians at many levels. While protests are criticized in some circles, taking to the streets has an undeniable impact, amplifying the message of injustice and the calls for change.

In the case of the Dakota Access Pipeline victory, the price was paid by protests along the Missouri River at Standing Rock where over the course of almost a year, tens of thousands of American Indians, who became known as Water Protectors, showed their opposition against the injustice of the DAPL — the “black snake” — being placed near Sioux ancestral territory and water. The mantra for the water protectors at Standing Rock became *Mní Wičóni*. Water is Life.

The Standing Rock movement began in April 2016. As it slowly gained national attention, non-Natives began to take notice. As the resistance efforts continued and more people came and went to the various camps at Standing Rock, the Obama administration’s U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced on Dec. 1, 2016 that they would not grant the DAPL an easement permit to cross the Missouri River near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

Six weeks later, newly inaugurated President Donald Trump reversed the Obama-era order and ordered the Corps to expedite a permit as soon as possible. The DAPL was completed and was allowed to carry oil — with a few leaks along the way.

However, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s lawsuit continued in the court system, which finally resulted in the July 6 decision — a major victory in favor of American Indians’ tribal lands and resources.

The Supreme Court’s decision on the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* case on July 9 reaffirmed that Congress had never disestablished the Muscogee (Creek) Nation’s 1866 reservation boundaries, which contain a large swath of eastern Oklahoma.

After the historic decision, *Native News Online* spoke to Robert Anderson (Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe), a professor and director of the Native American Law Center at the University of Washington School of Law. He also teaches at Harvard Law School.

“I think that Justice [Neil] Gorsuch joining the four so-called liberals on the court to support Indian rights in yet another case is really a huge victory, not just for the Creek Nation, but for Indian Country in general. He has demonstrated since he’s been on the court that he understands federal Indian law in a way that recognizes what tribes and their attorneys have argued for many years — that the promises made by the federal government to tribes are to be kept, and that while Congress has the authority to change the terms of Indian rights, it has to do so explicitly. So, it’s a real big deal.”

This Supreme Court victory for Indian Country was the result of hard work by a strong legal team working tirelessly to hold the United States to its treaty obligations.

“In this case, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation had to fight long and hard to protect their homelands, which were promised in their treaty agreements with the United States. In holding the federal government to its treaty obligations, the U.S. Supreme Court put to rest what never should have been at question,” John Echohawk, executive director of the Native American Relief Fund, said in response to the decision.

Last Monday’s announcement by the Washington NFL team that, after 87 years, it will be retiring the name that is considered racist by many was a victory decades in the making. One more time, it proved the resiliency and determination of American Indians.

In 1992, Bill Means (Oglala Lakota), Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne, Hodulgee Muscogee), Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) and other prominent Indigenous leaders filed a lawsuit calling on the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to cancel the six existing trademark registrations of the Washington NFL franchise’s name. *Harjo et al v. Pro Football, Inc.*, was a landmark lawsuit, and in 1999 a three-judge panel of the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board ruled unanimously against the team and in favor of the plaintiffs.

The Washington franchise appealed the ruling, and a federal district judge overturned the trademark experts’ decision. The case dragged on for another 10 years with legal actions and appeals that reached all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the franchise.

However, public pressure by Native people across Indian Country persisted, and fueled by recent attention to racial injustice that has been brought to light by the Black Lives Matter movement, corporate sponsors of the team finally agreed that it was time for change: The name had to go. The persistence of American Indians prevailed.

While we celebrate these three victories, we also know that we, as American Indians, still have many other challenges to overcome and battles to win. We need to remain strong in the fight against injustice and keep the faith.

The remarks of Congressman and civil rights champion John Lewis, who passed away on Friday night, July 17, are even more relevant now: “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

## **“THE RED ROAD TO DC” TOTEM POLE CONTAINS STRONG MESSAGES OF SURVIVAL**

*Originally published on August 1, 2021*

Last Tuesday, July 27, dozens of American Indians from Michigan tribes gathered on the shores of the Straits of Mackinac to see the “Red Road to DC” totem pole. It was the last official stop on its cross-country journey from the Lummi Nation, based in Bellingham, Wash., to Washington, D.C.

The totem pole was delayed that morning as it made its way from Minnesota across Michigan’s Upper Peninsula en route to Mackinaw City, Mich. Seeing the crowd and no totem pole in sight, people arriving wanted to know if they were at the right location, and joined the growing crowd. As time went by, anticipation grew and suddenly, the totem pole appeared, lying on a flatbed trailer behind a truck.

For those gathered, the wait was worth it. The 24-foot, 8-inch hand-carved totem pole with brilliant colors demonstrated the craftsmanship of the Lummi Nation, whose traditions of carving and painting date back centuries.

Inspired by the Biden victory in last year’s presidential election and the nomination of Deb Haaland as the first Native American secretary to serve in a presidential cabinet, Jewell Praying Wolf James, the only surviving member of House of Tears Carvers, decided to carve a totem pole to present to the Biden administration.

He solicited the assistance of other Lummi Nation carvers, whose ages ranged from four to 70.

The crowd soon discovered that just as a book contains chapters telling unique stories, each totem section carved and painted into the 400-year-old red cedar told a story, too.

Because of ill health, James was not able to complete the journey. His brother Douglas James (Sit ki kadem), who helped carve the totem pole,

described the various sections carved and painted to highlight issues important to Indian Country, such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, environmental issues, and endangered Chinook salmon, bears, and wolves. In its entirety, the totem pole addresses the issues that confront Indian Country today.

Its top section displayed a full moon with a red hand painted on it, bringing awareness to the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

“We bring recognition to them. We cannot forget our sisters... our relatives,” Douglas James said. As he continued, he spoke of an Indian man sitting on the moon praying to the Creator to save Mother Earth for all children.

Just below the top of the totem is an eagle bearing a salmon design on its wings.

“The eagle carries our prayers to the heavens and the eagle is a strong symbol of our spirituality. The salmon represents how the salmon need to be able to climb up the dams to get back into the cold water to lay their eggs instead of the warm water at the bottom of the dam,” Douglas James explained.

“If we save the salmon, then we can save the orcas,” he said. He then brought in the symbolism the orca depicts. “The orca was taken from her home, just like the Native kids were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools,” bringing awareness to a topic widely discussed in Indian Country because of the recent discoveries of graves at Canadian residential schools.

Farther down the totem pole is a section containing an image of a child in a cage. The child references the Trump administration’s hand in the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border and their placement in cages. The parallels between the federal government’s handling of these children and those at boarding schools are equally grotesque, according to Douglas James.

Also on the totem pole are seven tears that symbolize seven generations of trauma from colonialist rule over the Indigenous people of this country.

After numerous stops in Indian Country to bring attention to Indigenous sacred sites, thousands of miles traveled, and its departure from Michigan, the totem pole made its last leg of the cross-country journey to the nation's capital.

On Thursday, July 29, Interior Sec. Haaland spoke at the National Mall in the nation's capital as she received the totem pole on behalf of the Biden administration.

"The fact that we are all here is not insignificant," Haaland said. "When our nation's capital was established, its policies were intended to exclude us, to assimilate us. Laws and policies were written without considering Indigenous communities' challenges or their strengths, and we are working hard to undo so many consequences of these actions."

The "Red Road to DC" totem pole's symbolism sends a strong message to Washington to slow down and be witnesses to the storytelling traditions of Native people and their ancestors – stories of abuse, trauma, neglect, genocide, and above all, survival. The totem pole asks Washington to come to terms with this country's true history and, in doing so, lift those whom they oppressed over centuries, or at the very least, as the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg brilliantly said, "take their feet off our necks."

## **REMEMBERING CHIEF CROW DOG'S WORDS: 'WORLD PEACE, WORLD PEACE'**

*Originally published on June 14, 2021*

On the first weekend of December 2016, thousands of veterans arrived at Standing Rock to offer their support to water protectors who camped there for several months to resist the Dakota Access oil pipeline.

In meetings with the veterans, tribal officials repeatedly reminded the veterans the Standing Rock resistance movement was a peaceful and sacred movement; one that was about prayer for the oil company to do the right thing.

A Vietnam veteran whispered to me, “we could have prayed at home.”

That Sunday, Dec. 4, a rumor began circulating through the camps that some of the veterans wanted to reopen the Backwater Bridge on North Dakota Highway 1806, where law enforcement had put up concrete barriers two months earlier. The rumor was the veterans would assemble at the main entrance to the largest Standing Rock camp and march the half mile to physically move the concrete barriers to reopen the bridge.

At the main entrance into the camp, a line of vehicles stretched back as far as the eye could see. Immediately north of the camp entrance the highway was closed. Over a thousand people congregated there for the veterans' march. Lakota youth on horseback weaved in and out of the crowd. Dozens of members of the media were present, including many foreign correspondents, to cover the impending action. No one really knew what was going to happen.

I took many photographs of the crowd, attempting to capture the moment. Across from the main entrance was Black professor Cornel West, surrounded by a small crowd of reporters listening to why he had come and how American Indians and Black Americans often share

common causes. Just then, I began to hear whispers among the reporters that the Obama administration would not grant the approval for the pipeline easement through the Missouri River. I asked one of the reporters if I heard her correctly. She said yes—she just got word from her New York office.

The announcement spread quickly through the camps. People shouted with joy. Some cried. I remember thinking, we Native people seldom get victories from the government.

The tension about whether the veterans would remove the barriers defused suddenly. People marched back to the main camp. The atmosphere turned to a festive carnival-like celebration with impromptu speeches, drumming, singing, and whooping for joy.

The next day, over a thousand veterans gathered at the Prairie Knights Casino & Resort Pavilion, a 34,000-square-foot event center, for a seemingly anticlimactic rally.

Tribal ceremony leaders were on hand to thank the veterans for coming and talk about the deep commitment Native people have to the preservation of Mother Earth. Speakers talked about the importance of stopping pipelines.

On this day, Wes Clark, Jr., the son of retired U.S. Army general and former NATO supreme allied commander Wesley Clark Sr., led a small group of veterans who lined up and then knelt in front of Chief Leonard Crow Dog, a traditional medicine man and Lakota spiritual leader, who sat in a wheelchair with a stoic look on his face.

Clark begged the tribal leaders for forgiveness for the mistreatment by the United States against American Indians throughout American history.

“Many of us, me particularly, are from the units that have hurt you over many years. We came. We fought you. We took your land. We signed treaties that we broke. We stole minerals from your sacred hills... We didn’t respect you; we polluted your Earth, we’ve hurt you in so many ways but we’ve come to say we are sorry. We are at your service and we beg for your forgiveness,” stated a repentant Clark.

As Clark delivered his apology, outbreaks of Lakota whoops and singing occurred.

As Clark remained kneeling, Chief Crow Dog gently laid his left hand on the back of Clark's head. Then Chief Crow Dog offered forgiveness.

"World peace! World peace," he said. "We are a Lakota sovereign nation. We were the nation, and we are still a nation," he continued, as many of the kneeling vets, and many onlookers, wiped tears from their eyes.

"We have a language to speak. We have preserved the caretaker position. We do not own the land. The land owns us."

This forgiveness ceremony came back last week, as we remembered Chief Crow Dog, a fourth-generation medicine man who began his journey to the spirit world eight days ago, on June 6.

To those of us who remain, the great Chief Crow Dog's call for world peace should be our aspiration in our interpersonal relationships, throughout our tribal communities and beyond. It should be our wonderful goal.

# REMEMBERING STANDING ROCK FIVE YEARS LATER: THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS JOURNALISM

*Originally published on December 5, 2021*

Five years ago, on the first weekend of December 2016, I was at Standing Rock covering the resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline for *Native News Online*. Bolstered by some 2,000 veterans who arrived to show support, the crowd swelled to an estimated 10,000 over the weekend.

That Sunday was one of the most memorable days for me as an American Indian journalist.

It was a brilliant sunny day as veterans made their way to Cannon Ball, a small community on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota, about six miles southeast of the Standing Rock main camp, Oceti Sakowin. The veterans held a large rally there standing in a circle, holding signs that read “Veterans Stand for Standing Rock.” One American Indian man held an American flag attached to a yellow pole. Next to him, a non-Native veteran held a flag that read “Veterans for People.” A large drone flew overhead, moving up and down around the circle, as speakers made their way in to address the crowd.

Among the speakers was then Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), a veteran of the U.S. Army Reserve, who was embraced by the crowd as she spoke about the need to stop Big Oil and the harm that would be caused by the Dakota Access pipeline. Throughout the event, Standing Rock tribal leaders called for a peaceful, nonviolent movement.

They wanted things to remain peaceful, knowing that veterans wanted to reopen the Backwater Bridge on state Highway 1806 near the Oceti Sakowin camp, which law enforcement had barricaded a month earlier.

Even though they were told there was to be no violence, rumors spread that some veterans planned to remove this barricade. Dozens of members of the media, from the smallest local paper to national outlets to foreign press, were there to cover the impending march.

At the entrance into the camp, a line of vehicles stretched back as far as the eye could see. Immediately north of the camp entrance, the highway was closed, as hundreds of people congregated there for the veterans' march.

I took many photographs of the crowd, attempting to capture history. There were Lakota on horseback weaving in and out of the crowd. I saw philosopher, political activist, and professor Cornel West surrounded by a small crowd of reporters, talking about American Indians and African Americans sharing a common history and the need to come together to support this cause.

Just then, I began to hear whispers among the reporters that the Obama administration would not grant the approval for the pipeline easement through the Missouri River.

Within minutes, horns were honking from the long line of cars waiting to enter the camp. A Native American man announced that the Standing Rock tribal officials had been notified that the pipeline easement had been halted.

In the distance, thousands of people roared with joy, a roar similar to that of a Friday night high school game after a touchdown.

An instantaneous parade broke out at the top of the hill, led by tribal men beating their drums and singing a victory song. Adults could be seen shedding tears of jubilation.

I remember thinking Indians seldom win, but today we did. One could feel the jubilation of thousands of American Indians. The celebration lasted hours, with fireworks lighting up the dark sky.

History will record that the win was short-lived because six weeks later, Donald Trump was sworn in as president and reversed the Obama administration's decision.

Five years later, I reflect back on the cold wintry weekend at Standing Rock, where I slept in a pickup truck bundled in sleeping bags and blankets. Waking up in the truck and looking out into the stillness of

the night to see smoke rise into the winter's sky from fires among tents, campers, and teepees will remain in my mind as long as I live.

Reflecting on Standing Rock, I also realize the best journalism — the best Standing Rock articles — came from Indigenous writers who told stories through the lens of tens of thousands Native Americans from over 300 tribes who gathered there to fight against Big Oil.

Covering Indian Country as a Potawatomi man is gratifying and challenging. My hope is that somehow my voice as a Native American journalist helps to move the needle for positive change in Indian Country for this and future generations.



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