

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at the White House Tribal Nations Conference

September 26, 2016

The President. Hello, everybody. Thank you. Thank you. Well, welcome to the Eighth White House Tribal Nations Conference. And what a amazing honor, and what a kind gesture for the honor song and the blanket and the hat. I have to say that I'm very glad that you also have a blanket for Michelle so she doesn't steal mine. [*Laughter*] She would too. I'm just saying. [*Laughter*] But that was very moving and is a reminder of the great friendships that we've developed over the last 8 years.

I have a couple of people here who I want to acknowledge for their longstanding commitment to Indian Country: Sally Jewell, our Secretary of the Interior; Brian Cladoosby, president of the National Congress of American Indians. We're honored to have here Thomas Begay, one of the last surviving Navajo Code Talkers. And we have some just amazing young people here that I had a chance to meet earlier, including those who are participating in Generation Indigenous, so please give our young people a big round of applause. We're so proud of them.

So today the most important thing I want to say is thank you. After almost 8 years as your President, I have been so privileged to learn from you and spend time with many of you while visiting more tribal communities than any other President. Standing Rock Sioux Tribe here? Choctaw Nation? Alaska Natives? My trips to your nations and communities are days that I will never forget. We—Michelle and I—still talk about hosting those remarkable young people from Standing Rock Sioux Nation in the White House and taking them out for pizza. [*Laughter*] My staff still talks about all the wonderful people in Kotzebue, Alaska, who tried to—they tried to teach them Iñupiaq and tried to stuff them full of meat at Cariboufest. [*Laughter*] And my brothers at Crow Nation, brothers and sisters here, I may be an adopted son of the Crow Nation, but I try not to play favorites. [*Laughter*] Because I pledged to all of you when I first ran for President that I'd be a partner with all of you in the spirit of a true nation-to-nation relationship, to give all our children the future they deserve.

So we began by elevating Native American Affairs within the White House and across the Federal Government. The American people are served by so many dedicated, talented Native Americans like Larry Roberts, our Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. Morgan Rodman, our Executive Director of the White House Council on Native American Affairs. Karen Diver and Tracy Goodluck, our Native American Affairs team at the White House. That's just a few. And by creating the White House Council of Native American Affairs, we created a permanent institution with a long-term, Cabinet-level focus on Indian Country, one that involves you through the decisionmaking process.

So I've been proud of what we've been able to do together. We haven't solved every issue. We haven't righted every wrong. But together, we've made significant progress in almost every area.

Together, we've permanently protected sacred lands for future generations. We've restored more than 428,000 acres of tribal homelands to their original owners. By signing the historic *Cobell* settlement into law, we established the Land Buy-Back Program, a \$1.9 billion fund to consolidate individual Indian lands and restore them to Indian—tribal trusts.

Together, we've strengthened your sovereignty, reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act so that tribes can prosecute those who commit domestic violence against women in Indian Country, whether they're Native American or not. We've worked to ensure your right to equal justice under the law and given more power to tribal courts and police. I know that many of you who have come together across tribes and across the country to support the community at Standing Rock. And together, you're making your voices heard.

And in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, we've made a lot of progress for Indian Country over the past 8 years. And this moment highlights why it's so important that we redouble our efforts to make sure that every Federal agency truly consults and listens and works with you, sovereign-to-sovereign.

Together, we've worked to create jobs and expand opportunity by investing in clean energy projects and infrastructure and high-speed Internet that connects your communities to the broader economy. We've worked to secure quality, affordable health care for more people in Indian Country through the Affordable Care Act, including the permanent reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

We've invested in job training and tribal colleges and universities, and together, we've worked to return control of Indian education to tribal nations so that as we prepare our young people for the demands of a global economy, we're also teaching them in their own language and their own culture. Because we believe that all our native youth deserve a future as bright as any American child, without having to leave the land of their fathers and mothers. That's what's driven our work.

And through Generation Indigenous, we've worked to connect more of our young people to each other, in one big network of opportunity across the country. So that's just some of the progress we've made together. And we've got to keep fighting to the finish line. Even after my time in this office comes to an end, I'm going to be standing alongside you because I believe that, yes, our progress depends in part on who sits in the Oval Office, and whether they're setting the right priorities, but lasting progress depends on all of us, not just who the President is. It depends on making the decisions that are good and right and just and our willingness to organize and mobilize and keep pushing for opportunity.

And I'm optimistic that you will continue on the path forward that we've set. I'm optimistic that our progress will continue. The young people who I've met on this journey, more than anything else, who make me feel optimistic: the students who sang us the Lakota national anthem and told us about all the obstacles they've overcome and shared with us their dreams for the future; the students at the middle school in Dillingham, Alaska, who taught me a traditional Yup'ik dance.

Audience member. Show us! [*Laughter*]

The President. Well, I can only do it when they're around—[*laughter*]—because I'm basically just watching them. It—they were very patient with me. [*Laughter*]

And it's a young woman named Lindsay Early of the Comanche Nation in Oklahoma, who earlier this year wrote me a letter to tell me she was actually at a campaign speech I gave in Texas way back in 2008, where I pledged that I'd do my best to represent Native Americans. And Lindsay said in her letter that when she heard my pledge to her people, in the middle of my speech, she screamed as loud as she could from the balcony. And look, if you're President and somebody screams, that can mean many things, usually. [*Laughter*] Sometimes, it's good;

sometimes, it's not so good. But according to Lindsay, it was good. And I answered back, I hear you girls, and when I'm elected, I won't forget you.

Well, 8 years later, Lindsay's gone on to accomplish some pretty remarkable things. She was raised by a single mom, like me, and didn't have a lot of money or obvious advantages in life, but she earned a scholarship and graduated from college; moved back home to help her mom care for her 92-year-old grandmother. She took a job developing a new assisted-living facility, owned and operated by the Comanche Nation. And after that opened, she joined Teach For America. And now she teaches kindergarteners in her community by day, and Native America history to students at a tribal college at night.

So this is a young woman who knows the meaning of giving back. And her whole life, people told her how smart she was and that someday she'd go off into the world and make big changes. But in school, she came to a realization, and here's what she said: "It was not 'going off' that would make Indian Country better, but returning with education and with the insight education brings. . . . My students have a sense of pride in them about who they are as indigenous individuals. . . . More than anything, they realize they are in control of their own destinies, and that's such a powerful thing to experience."

So you listen to somebody like Lindsay, who understands she's in charge of her own destiny and is now able to transmit that to the next generation, and how can you not be optimistic about this country's future? How can you not be optimistic about the future of all of the nations represented here?

And, Lindsay, I want you to know that I heard you. I didn't forget you. And I want everybody in this auditorium and all the folks back home in your respective communities to know that this whole time, I've heard you. I have seen you. And I hope I've done right by you. And I hope I've set a direction that others will follow.

I hope I've set a direction that others then follow, and I hope I've given more of our young people, like Lindsay and her students, that sense of hope and that sense of what an incredible gift they are to this country and that they're in control of their own destinies and that they're going to help shape the future of the United States of America.

Thank you all for your partnership. Thank you for this journey.

I'll see you on the other side. May God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:52 p.m. in the Great Hall at the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium. In his remarks, he referred to Special Assistant to the President for Native American Affairs Karen R. Diver; Senior Associate Director of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs Tracy L. Canard Goodluck; and Melissa P. Gordon, mother of Lindsay M. Early, adjunct professor, Comanche Nation College.

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

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Begay, Thomas H.; Cladoosby, Brian; Diver, Karen R.; Early, Lindsay M.; Goodluck, Tracy L. Canard; Gordon, Melissa P.; Jewell, Sarah M.R. "Sally"; Obama, Michelle; Roberts, Lawrence S.; Rodman, Anthony "Morgan".

Subjects: American Indians and Alaska Natives : "Generation Indigenous" initiative; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Cobell class-action lawsuit on Indian trust management,

settlement; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Education system, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Health care system, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Job creation and growth; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Land trust and property rights, strengthening efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Law enforcement, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal nations, relations with Federal Government; American Indians and Alaska Natives : White House Tribal Nations Conference; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Education : Teachers; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Interior, Department of the : Secretary; Law enforcement and crime : Domestic violence; Native American Affairs, White House Council on; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Native American Affairs, Special Assistant; White House Office : Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs, Senior Associate Director.

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