

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Remarks at a Virtual White House Tribal Nations Summit and an Exchange With Reporters

November 15, 2021

The President. Thank you, Madam Secretary. You're doing a good job. And I say to the press, "Excuse my back."

[At this point, the President turned to face the video screen behind the podium and addressed participants as follows.]

Next time in Washington, okay? I see you all up on the board behind me, and I hope we do this in person. I hope, I hope, I hope. That's my hope. Thank you.

[The President returned to face the podium.]

Good morning. I want to thank you for joining us. This is a big day. I think, as my mother would say, former Senator Dan Inouye is looking down going: "Finally. Finally." I was raised by Dan Inouye in the United States Senate.

And to President Fawn Sharp, and Chairman Hill of the Oneida Nation, and our President Holsey: I thank you all for what you're doing, and I want to recognize you.

And, Chairman Hill, I thought going—being from Upstate New York, in college, and my deceased wife is from Skaneateles Lake, not far from Oneida, New York—I thought that the Oneida Nation was all in Central New York, but obviously, you're up in Wisconsin. Come down and see us in Oneida. *[Laughter]*

Anyway, I want to thank you, Madam Secretary, for your remarks. But I also want to thank you, Deb, for being willing to join when I asked you to come along and to serve. And as I said, I was confident, at the time, you would be incredibly important.

When I got to the Senate, Dan Inouye took me under his wing. He helped me understand the simple truth that I had only been vaguely aware of, and that is that Tribal nations do better when they make their own decisions. That's why some of the votes I took as a young Senator are among my proudest: supporting the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and so much more.

When I ran for President, it was important for me to continue to make progress. And that's what we've done since I took office. When COVID-19 struck in Indian—it hit Indian Country with devastating consequences. Native Americans contracted the virus at over three times the rate of white Americans, nearly twice the rate of lives lost; twice as many died as a percentage.

But Tribal nations stepped up. And today, the Native Americans have gone from being a population most harmed by COVID to one of the populations most vaccinated against COVID. That success has a lot to do with Tribal leadership, but it also has to do with the American Rescue Plan, which included over \$31 billion—\$31 billion—for Tribal nations, the most significant investment in the history of Indian Country. Long overdue.

Now we're taking the next step. Today I'm signing—and I'll shortly sign—a bipartisan infrastructure deal. Everyone knows we're long overdue to make major investments in infrastructure, but nobody knows that better than Indian Country. Tribal lands have been chronically underfunded for generations.

And so I'm very proud to say that when I sign the bill outside on the South Lawn shortly, the single largest investment in Tribal infrastructure ever is going to occur: more than \$13 billion in direct investments to Indian Country and tens of billions more in grants and future funding opportunities: funding for clean drinking water, high-speed internet, roads and bridges, environmental cleanups, and so much more.

But we can't stop there. We need Congress to pass my Build Back Better plan as well. Today, 1 in 10 Native American parents have reported having to quit or change their jobs or turn down an opportunity due to a childcare challenge. This bill would save most families thousands of dollars per year in childcare, helping moms and dads rejoin the workforce.

But also, this bill, when it passes, will allow every 3- and 4-year-old in the Nation to attend high-quality preschool, increasing considerably their chances of getting all the way through the first 12 years of primary school and on to college. It includes the most significant investment to tackle the climate crisis in history.

And I might note parenthetically: No group of Americans has created and cared more about preserving what we inherited than the Tribal nations. And it will be expanded—will—this also will expand health coverage, lower costs for millions of Americans.

You know, we have to continue to stand up for the dignity and sovereignty of Tribal nations. My dad used the word "dignity" I think more than any other word. He said, "Everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity."

I was proud to reestablish the White House Council on Native American Affairs and to issue a memorandum my first week in office instructing my entire administration to engage in a regular, meaningful consultation with Tribal nations. I was kidding my wife Jill, who'll be out here shortly: She's visited the Navajo Nation so many times I'm worried she's not going to come home.

But look, I've been proud—I'm proud to—of the—to name Native American leaders in my administration: not only the first Native American Cabinet Secretary—and it won't be the last in history—but more than 50 Native Americans now serving in significant roles in my administration.

We've also taken action to protect Tribal lands: revoking the permit for the Keystone XL Pipeline; preserving and protecting their sacred homeland, including Bears Ears and the Grand Staircase-Escalante. It's part of who we are as a nation. And I'm grateful to the Tribes who led the effort.

You know, we also can be proud of that progress, but there's still so much more to do. So today I'm announcing five new initiatives. First, a new initiative involving 17 departments and agencies to protect Tribal treaty rights and the work of the Federal Government. Second, a new initiative to increase Tribal participation in the management and stewardship of Federal lands.

Third, my administration will be the first to work with the Tribes to comprehensively incorporate Tribal ecological knowledge into the Federal Government's scientific approach, helping us fight climate change.

And fourth, taking action to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape in Northwest New Mexico from future oil and gas drilling and leasing. And fifth, I'm about to sign an Executive order, in a moment, addressing the crisis of violence against Native Americans.

Today I'm directing Federal officials to work with Tribal nations on a strategy to improve public safety and advance justice. This builds on the work we did together in reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act in 2013, when we granted authority to try to exercise jurisdiction over non-Indian offenders who commit violence on Tribal lands. We're going to reauthorize that

again. We're going to expand the jurisdiction to include other offenses like sex trafficking, sexual assault, and child abuse.

These efforts—again, to use the word my dad would use much—are a matter of dignity. That's the foundation of our nation-to-nation partnership. That's what this summit is all about. So I want to thank everyone who's here for participating, and I look forward to continuing to work together.

And now it's my honor to sign an Executive order. And a couple of my friends are going to be coming out here, I'm told, Cabinet members. But you know, here we go.

Where is everybody? *[Laughter]* Jill.

The First Lady. Hi. *[Laughter]*

The President. Jill is here. The Attorney General. We've got—oh, everybody is there. All right, Jill.

I don't know what was going on back there, but I—*[laughter]*. You're all here. Okay. I was worried you weren't going to come out here. *[Laughter]* Good to see you. All right.

The title of this legislation is "Improving Public Safety and Criminal Justice for Native Americans and Addressing the Crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous People."

And I'm proud to sign it. It's long overdue.

[The President signed the Executive order and distributed pens.]

Thank you all so very much.

We're going to make some substantial change in Indian Country, and it's going to continue.

Thank you all.

Infrastructure, Jobs, Education, and Family Assistance Legislation

Q. Mr. President, are you confident that Build Back Better will pass the House?

The President. You ask me that all the time, and I give you the same answer. I've been confident since the day I stepped into office.

Q. Mr. President, what do you hope to accomplish in your meeting with President Xi tonight?

Q. Mr. President, what are you going to talk to President Xi about?

Q. Are you hoping to lower the temperature with China?

Q. What are you going to talk to President Xi about?

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:50 a.m. from the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of the Interior Debra A. Haaland, who introduced the President; Fawn R. Sharp, president, National Congress of American Indians; and President Shannon Holsey of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians. He also referred to H.R. 3684; and Executive Order 14053. Also participating in the signing of the Executive order were Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas; and Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : White House Tribal Nations Summit, virtual remarks; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Garland, Merrick B.; Haaland, Debra A.; Hill, Tehassi; Hosley, Shannon; Sharp, Fawn R.

Subjects: American Indians and Alaska Natives : Domestic violence; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Health care system, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Infrastructure, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Law enforcement, Federal support; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal nations, relations with Federal Government; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Energy : Oil and gas industry :: Federal regulations and oversight; Energy : Oil and gas industry :: Keystone XL Pipeline project; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Conservation :: Promotion efforts; Environment : Lead service lines, replacement efforts; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Interior, Department of the : Secretary; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Law enforcement and crime : Sexual assault; Law enforcement and crime : Trafficking in persons, efforts to combat; Legislation, proposed : Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act; Native American Affairs, White House Council on; White House Tribal Nations Summit, virtual.

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