

Remarks at the White House Tribal Nations Summit

December 6, 2023

Hello, hello, hello.

Thank you, Assistant Secretary Newland, for that introduction. Please have a seat if you—
[laughter]

And thanks for all the Tribal leaders here. I want to say how much I appreciate your efforts for being here. You know, we're grateful that you made the journey to have—we have an important conversation to have about things that matter most to your people. That's why we're here. It's a simple proposition.

When I became President, I promised my administration would prioritize respect for Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, otherwise Danny Inouye would come down from Heaven and beat me up. [Laughter] I was raised by Danny Inouye. You think I'm joking.

I remember once I said, "All those Indian nations"—he said: "No. Nations, Joe. Nations, nations." And that was 50 years ago. You know that we usher in a new era of relationship between our Government and nation-to-nation relationships.

We've made progress, but we know Indigenous communities still live in the shadows of the failed policies of the past. That's why I committed to working with you to write a new and better chapter in American history for Indian Nations. To honor the solemn promise the United States made to Tribal Nations, to fulfill our Federal trust and treaty obligations, and to work together to rebuild Tribal economies and institutions.

To make this new era—[applause]. Well, you should be clapping. This is the first time this has happened. Come on, guys. [Applause] You may not be proud of all this, but I'm really proud of it.

Make this new era of self-determination a reality.

On my watch, the Federal Government has made record investments in Tribal Nations. There's more to do. The American Rescue Plan, the largest direct Federal investment in Tribal Nations ever. We helped vaccinate Tribal communities. We got the economy going again.

And the bipartisan infrastructure—the single biggest investment in Tribal roads, bridges, water, high-speed internet, electricity, integration [irrigation; White House correction], environmental cleanup, and so much more. Because you deserve it, and it's long overdue.

The Inflation Reduction Act, the biggest investment in fighting climate change ever, anywhere—anywhere—in the history of the world. And helping Tribal communities to lead in the transition to clean energy and ease the impact of droughts and wildfires and rising sea levels that threaten Native lives and precious homelands.

You know, at the same time, my administration last year secured the first-ever advanced funding for Indian Health Services—[applause]—\$5.1 billion locked in before budget negotiations so hospitals could plan ahead, order supplies, hire doctors, knowing the money would be there.

And we're going to keep fighting to make sure that funding is mandatory part of the Federal budget so that Tribes can count on it year in and year out.

Folks, these transformational investments are going to help Tribes, but they help all Americans—all Americans. We know the Federal dollars are vital to your communities in order to be able to thrive. We know you know how to—you know best how to invest them. Not us—you know. You know what your communities need. And that's what self-determination means.

But today, there are still too many hoops to jump through, too many strings attached, and too many inefficiencies in the process. For example, a small Tribe may qualify for Federal funding, but they can't afford to hire an extra staff needed to compete [complete; White House correction] the—all the paperwork.

Or a Tribal council may secure a grant, but can't collect it without raising enough cash to meet the Federal matching requirements. Or a remote Alaskan village may receive funds—without roads or internet and has to charter a plane or—every quarter just to be able to—required to be in compliance with the report.

Folks, we can do a hell of a lot better than that—a hell of a lot better than that. And we're going to. That's why today I'm signing an Executive order to reform the Federal funding system for Tribes, cutting that redtape so you can deliver for your communities faster and better.

And here's what that order does. It requires Federal agencies to streamline grant applications, to comanage Federal programs, to eliminate heavy-handed reporting requirements. It gives Tribes more autonomy to make your own decisions. Not to mention, it's more efficient.

We know this approach works because we're doing it in some programs already. And we've been doing it for some programs for nearly 50 years. Take the Indian Health Service. More than half its budget now goes directly to Tribes to run their own clinics and hospitals rather than relying on Federal facilities. That's a source of local pride to deliver quality care tailored directly for each community, because communities are different.

Today's Executive order also creates an online clearinghouse, a one-stop shop where Tribal governments can more easily search for grants and all in one place. And the—but that—that to me, by the way, not only Tribes, but every State is asking for the same thing. [Laughter]

And the order also tasks the officials—the Office of Management and Budget and my Domestic Policy Council with identifying areas where our funding falls short and ways to meet these needs going forward.

Folks, separately, we're also streamlining [strengthening; White House correction] the Buy Indian Act so Federal agencies get more goods and services—goods and services from Native-owned businesses. Native-owned businesses. [Applause] This year, for example, the Indian Affairs Bureau awarded 75 percent of its budget to Native-owned enterprises, up from about half that in 2021.

Together, these steps are going to help grow Tribal economies and reduce the hoops they have to jump through to get the funding they deserve.

It's all a part of my vision for a new era of respect. Respect for you as leaders, respect for Tribal sovereignty, respect for the Nations' fundamental right to build a future and own—on your own terms, not anyone else's terms.

From day one, I've worked to include Indigenous voices at the table in all we do. I've appointed Native Americans to lead across the Federal Government. Not only Secretary Haaland, America's first Indigenous Cabinet Secretary—[applause]—and I can say without exaggeration, she is doing one hell of a job—one hell of a job—but scores of other Native Americans in key roles across the administration.

I've been proud to reestablish the White House Council on Native American Affairs to help coordinate that policy as well. And I'm proud—I'm proud—to relaunch this annual summit after years of neglect by my predecessors.

I was proud to take historic steps to improve consultation process between Federal agencies and Tribal Nations.

Working together, we also reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act, which I wrote as a U.S. Senator, expanding Tribes' sovereign jurisdiction—your sovereign jurisdiction. And I directed Federal agencies to work with you to address the missing and murdered Indigenous people.

At the same time, preserving important and ancestral Tribal lands. I restored protections from my predecessor—gutted by my predecessor at three national monuments: Grand Staircase and Bears Ears.

And by the way, you know how that happened? I was in a plane, and a little girl came up to me. She said, "Mr. Pwresident"—[*laughter*]—"can you take care of Beaws Ears?" [*Laughter*] And I said—I said, "Can I"—I thought she said can I take care of her ears. [*Laughter*] And I said, "What, honey?" And she said: "Beaws Ears. It's really important!" And guess what? She was dead right. And we did take care of it.

And Northeast—[*applause*]. The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts off the coast of New England.

I used to have my—I used my authority under the Antiquities Act to designate new national monuments as well, including Castner Range in Texas, Camp Hale in Colorado, Spirit Mountain in Nevada, Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon—which, by the way, I was really like—I enjoyed doing that at the last—anyway. [*Laughter*] It got some attention from people who didn't agree with me.

But, at any rate—[*laughter*]—meanwhile, my Department of Agriculture and Interior have signed more than 200 agreements to strengthen costewardship of Federal lands, recognizing the value of Tribal knowledge. And today we're publishing the best practices guide to help Federal agencies work with Tribes to protect sacred sites in all those areas.

Folks, at the same time, we're helping to preserve cultural heritage like Tribal languages and sports. Sports like lacrosse. Joining us today are members of the Six Nation Confederacy who—which—by the way, where are you guys? Stand up. [*Applause*] Come on.

Which invented lacrosse nearly a thousand years ago. The game brought Tribes together, a force for peace, friendship, and healing. The Six Nation players are still among the very best in the world.

And as a point of personal privilege, I know about this because I went to Syracuse University, long the home of a powerhouse lacrosse program. And I might add, my daughter was a first-rate lacrosse player in high school, and my niece was an All-American lacrosse player at Harvard [in high school; White House correction], so we have a little knowledge of lacrosse in our family.

I wanted to play lacrosse, but you had to choose between lacrosse and football. You couldn't play both in the same season. And since I was a powerful 6-foot, 158-pound—[*laughter*]—flanker back—I was the runner-up at State scoring championship. Don't laugh, man. [*Laughter*] As they say in football, I've got soft hands. [*Laughter*] You catch a lot.

This fall, it was announced that lacrosse will once again be an official Olympic sport. And the Six Nations team asked to compete under its own Tribal flag. And today I'm announcing my support for that request.

Their ancestors invented the game. They perfected it for a millennia. Their circumstances are unique, and they should be granted an exception to field their own team at the Olympics.

Let me close with this. It's hard work to heal the wrongs of the past and change the course and move forward. But the actions we're taking today are key steps into that new era of Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, a new era grounded in dignity and respect that recognizes your fundamental rights to govern and grow on your own terms.

That's what this summit is all about. Excuse me. That's what this summit is all about.

So I want to thank you all for being here, allowing me to be with you. And I look forward to continuing our work together.

Now it's my honor to sign the Executive order to do all the things I just said. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

[At this point, the President moved to the signing table.]

The tradition is, when you sign an Executive order, you give one of these pens to the person responsible for it. You're all going to get a pen. I only have one. *[Laughter]* But I promise, you're all going to get one.

The Executive order: Reforming Federal Funding and Support for Tribal Nations To Better Embrace Our Trust Responsibilities [and; White House correction] Promote the extra era—the Next Era of Tribal Self-Determination.

[The President signed the Executive order.]

There you go.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:11 p.m. at the Department of the Interior. In his remarks, he referred to Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland; and former President Donald J. Trump. He also referred to his niece Alana Biden.

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