

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024*

## **Remarks at the Tribal Nations Summit**

*December 9, 2024*

*Secretary of the Interior Debra A. Haaland.* So, if you'll bear with us for a moment, before the President gives his remarks, Assistant Secretary Newland and I wanted to acknowledge the wonderful leadership by President Biden. He has been a champion for Indian Country over these past 4 years, and I felt the best way for us to acknowledge that was with a blanket.

*The President.* Cover me. *[Laughter]*

*Secretary Haaland.* This is an eighth-generation blanket from a tribally-owned—*[applause]*—from a tribally-owned business. And I've had it—I've had it embroidered.

Secretary—Assistant Secretary—it says, "Joe Biden, Champion for Indian Country, 2021 to 2024."

*[At this point, Secretary Haaland and Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland presented the President with a blanket, draping it over his shoulder.]*

*The President.* All right. Thank you.

*Audience member.* Love you, Uncle Joe!

*The President.* Thank you.

*Secretary Haaland.* I think they want us to look over there where all the——

*The President.* Look over there.

*Audience members.* Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe!

*The President.* Thank you.

Do I go up?

*Secretary Haaland.* Yes, but let's take this off.

*The President.* All right.

*[Secretary Haaland removed the blanket, and the President approached the podium.]*

*Secretary Haaland.* Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you very much.

*Audience member.* *[Inaudible]*

*The President.* *[Applause]* I could have used that blanket when I was lighting that Christmas tree. *[Laughter]* Both of us were freezing, the Secretary. *[Laughter]*

Thank you, Secretary Haaland, Assistant Secretary Newland. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

You know, it's the honor of my life to be a partner to the Tribes throughout my Presidency. I'm going to cherish this moment.

You know, I was raised by a guy politically—when I got here as a 29-year-old kid as a Senator, I was raised by a guy named Danny Inouye. And I once used the phrase "Tribe." He said: "No, Joe. 'Nations.' 'Nations.'"

I want to thank Secretary Haaland for the introduction and for your historic leadership of the Department of Interior. And it—this has been historic. It's been historic. I've met with—worked

with a lot of Cabinet Secretaries. I've appointed a bunch over my fifty-nine—500-year-career. [Laughter] But I tell you what, I've never met with a Cabinet Secretary more devoted to their obligation to the job she's taken on. I really mean it.

And thanks to all the Tribal leaders who traveled across the country representing your Tribal Nations.

Folks, I came to office and I relaunched the White House Tribal Nations Summit to bring us all together again to talk about the needs of your communities, to set goals, to listen, and because I recognize that respect is the core of nation-to-nation relationships.

I have a lot to—you have a—we have a lot to be proud of, I think. We've gotten a lot done.

From day one, my administration—we've worked to include Indigenous voices in everything we do—not only the first Native American Cabinet Secretary in history, but more than 80 Native Americans now serve in senior roles across my administration.

And I mean this sincerely: With their help, we've shaped our approach to Indian Country with respect and matched our words with action.

I'm proud to have reestablished the White House Council on Native American Affairs and taken historic steps to improve Tribal consultation. For example, you shared with me that too many Federal programs treat Tribes like they're subsidiaries of the Government, like cities or counties rather than Tribal Nations—Nations, not subsidiaries. That's who you are. You're Nations.

So, at last year's summit, I sound [signed; White House correction] a groundbreaking Executive order that recognized that you should be treated as Tribal Nations with respect to your—with respect to your decisionmaking power. That Executive order requires Federal agencies to streamline grant applications, to comanage Federal programs, to eliminate heavy-handed reporting requirements. I'm trying to do that across the board, by the way. [Laughter]

We're also investing an historic \$45 billion—\$45 billion—directly into Indian Country. More is needed, but it's more than ever happened before. This includes helping Tribes—Tribal communities get through the pandemic with vaccines in arms and checks in pockets. We're helping Tribes build new roads, bridges, deliver affordable high-speed internet and clean water across Tribal communities.

As a nation, we're making the biggest investment ever—ever, ever—in fighting climate change—ever anywhere in the history of the world—which helps Tribal communities to lead in transition to clean energy and ease the impact of droughts and wildfires and rising sea levels that threaten Native lives and precious homelands.

I secured the first-ever advanced funding for the Indian Health Service—[applause]—where I come from, we call that a big deal—[laughter]—the Indian Health Service so Tribal hospitals can plan ahead, order supplies, hire doctors, knowing the money will be there—not having to wonder.

All told, in 4 years, we've created 200,000 jobs for Native Americans, a record-low unemployment for Native communities. There's been a historic \$8 billion increase in Federal contracts awarded to Native businesses. And I'm proud—I'm proud—[applause]—that's important, I think. I'm proud to have helped cut child poverty in Tribal communities by more than one-third and more to do.

And, folks, at the same time, we're also doing what we should have done a long time ago: preserving ancestral Tribal homelands. It really is important. It really is important. One example is restoring salmon fishing, which historically has been very important to Native communities.

You know, I think it's very important that we memorialize Native culture and history by restoring and designating multiple national monuments that honor Tribal Nations and protect your homelands, from Bears Ears to Spirit Mountain, which comprise nearly 2 million acres combined and will be preserved for—in perpetuity forever, ever, ever.

I remember a young woman came up to me—a young girl came up to me and said—and I—I bent down. She said, "Can I talk to you?" And I said, "Sure." She said, "Can you take care of Bears Ears?" [Laughter] I said, "I beg your pardon?" "Can you take care of Bears Ears?" I thought she wanted me to capture a bear, you know. [Laughter] And when we signed the bill, I gave her the pen.

*Audience members.* Aww.

*The President.* Look, it's sacred. It's magnificent. And this year, my administration designated the first Native [National; White House correction] Marine Sanctuary proposed by Indigenous communities, which is off the coast of California, which occupies 4,500 square miles. That's off limits.

You know, these efforts are totally consistent with my commitment when I came to office to preserve 30 percent of all America's lands and waters permanently by the year 2030. And we're well on our way because of the help you've given me.

And we're doing all this with respect for the stewardship practices that Tribes developed over the centuries known as Indigenous Knowledge. I believe Tribes should have a say in how these sacred lands are managed. To this day, they should have a say.

And last year alone, we doubled the number of co-stewardship agreements, totaling 400 with Tribal Nations. All of this is a stark cry from the failed policies of the past.

In October, I saw many of you in Arizona. It's a day I'll never forget. On behalf of the American people, I felt it was really important for a President of the United States to stand up and right a wrong that had been abandoned—ignored for a long time and apologize—apologize—for the—[applause]. We're not about erasing history; we're about recognizing history: the good, bad, and the ugly.

I apologized for the Federal Indian Boarding School era, a dark chapter that spanned 150 years from the 1860—from nineteen—until 1960, in which entire generations of Native children were literally stolen from their families and Tribes and sent away to boarding school. The official policy in the Federal Government designed to serve—sever ties between children and their Tribal families, their language, and their culture.

Today we act to continue that healing process. And I'm proud to announce we're establishing the historic Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania as a new national monument. So I want everyone to know. I don't want people forgetting 10, 20, 30, 50 years from now, pretend it didn't happen.

The Carlisle Indian School was the first off-reservation Federal Indian Boarding School in—for Native children that were taken to—the first one. About 7,800 children from more than 140 Tribes were sent to Carlisle, stolen from their families, their Tribes, and their homelands. It was wrong.

In making the Carlisle Indian School a national monument, we make clear that—what great nations do: We don't erase history; we acknowledge it, we learn from it, and we remember so we never repeat it again. We remember so we can heal. That's the purpose of memory.

Now, part of the tragedy of the Indian boarding schools is that they deliberately tried to erase the culture of Tribes by ensuring that children lost their language and their traditions. That's why the next chapter of healing requires revitalizing Native languages.

My wife Jill, to her—this is something our First Lady cares deeply about. She's an educator. On her first trip with Secretary Haaland, she visited the language immersion program of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. Jill saw Native children light up—light up—as they recited words their ancestors once spoke.

Over three-quarters of the remaining Native languages are in danger of being lost, being lost forever. That's why, today, my administration is moving ahead on a 10-year plan to revive Native languages in a serious effort. It's a vision that works with Tribes and support teachers, schools, communities, organizations in order to save Native language from disappearing.

This matters. It's part of our heritage. It's part of who we are as a nation. It's how we got to be who we are.

We also heard loud and clear that public safety is a top concern of Native communities. That's why when I was a Vice President, when we reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act, which as my daughter says I wrote with my own paw—[laughter]—I wrote it 30 years ago, the proud—one of the proudest things I ever did—we also reaffirmed Tribal sovereignty and expanded Tribal jurisdiction to cover cases where outside predators harm members of Indian Nations in Indian Country and decide it there.

I also signed an Executive order to improve public safety and criminal justice to address the crisis of missing or murdered Indigenous people. These efforts and all of our efforts are a matter of restoring dignity that was taken away from Tribal Nations—dignity.

My dad used to say, "Joey"—and I mean this sincerely—"everyone—everyone, everyone—is entitled to be treated with dignity." A word most often used in my family by my dad: dignity. That's the foundation of our nation-to-nation partnership.

Let me close with this. This is my final White House Tribal Nations Summit as your President. It's been an overwhelming honor—and I mean this sincerely—an honor of a lifetime to usher in a new era of Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, a new era grounded in dignity and respect that I have seen and experienced in many ways.

In October, I had the honor to bestow one of our Nation's highest medals, the National Medal of Humanities, on Joy Harjo, as the first Native American to serve this Nation as poet laureate. She once wrote, and I quote: "You are a story fed by generations. You carry songs of grief, triumph, and loss. Feel their power as they ascend with you. As you walk, run swiftly, even fly, into infinite possibilities," end of quote.

To all the Tribal Nations, I say thank you. And I mean it sincerely. Thank you for your partnership. Thank you for your trust in me. But most of all, thank you for your friendship and always believing, as I do, that the possibilities of our Nation are limitless.

I was once asked when—I have spent more time with Xi Jinping of China than any other world leader has, over 108 hours alone with him. And I was in the Tibetan Plateau with him in China, and he looked at me and he said, "Can you define America for me?" And I—this is on the record—and I said, "Yes, one word." He looked at me. Through a translator, I said, "Possibilities."

In America, we believe anything is possible if we do it together. And that's what we've done, dammit. We're going to continue doing it.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 3:55 p.m. at the Department of the Interior. In his remarks, he referred to President Xi Jinping of China. He also referred to Proclamation 10870; and his daughter Ashley. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 10.

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