

Remarks at the White House Tribal Nations Conference

December 5, 2012

It's good to be back. Thank you, everybody. Thank you so much. Everybody, please, please have a seat.

Thank you, Brian, for that wonderful introduction. Thanks to all the Members of Congress and members of my administration who are here. And I want to give a special shout-out to Senator Danny Akaka, who's been such a tireless advocate for Native Americans throughout his career. You know that Danny is going to be retiring this year, and he's such a great friend. And as a Hawaiian boy, I've got to give him a little special props. *[Laughter]* So I want to thank all the tribal leaders who took the time and the effort to come and take part in this conference.

Every year, I look forward to this event. It's especially wonderful to see so many friends that I've gotten to know from various nations all across the country. You guys inspire me every single day, and whenever I've traveled to your home States, there's been such a warm welcome that I've received. So I'm truly grateful to all of you.

Today I want to begin by remembering somebody we lost last week. To the Crow Nation, he was a revered elder; to many Native Americans, he was a respected healer. And I knew him warmly, for a few years at least, as an adoptive father. Sonny Black Eagle adopted me into the Crow Nation during my 2008 campaign. And yesterday he would have been 79 years old. And while we can't celebrate that milestone with him today, we can celebrate his remarkable life and all that happened along the way, because Sonny's story is not just one man's journey to keep his culture alive, but one country's journey to keep perfecting itself.

So Sonny Black Eagle was born in 1933 just outside of Lodge Grass, Montana. That's where his grandparents raised him after his mother died of tuberculosis, where he tended to cattle as a child, and where as an adult, he raised a family of his own. And Sonny was brought up in the traditional Crow ways, with the same values that many of you share: a rev-

erence for the Earth, to cherish the Earth and to cherish each other, to honor ancestors and preserve traditions.

Staying true to those values wasn't always easy. As a child, if Sonny spoke Crow in school, his teachers would strike his hand with a ruler. As a teenager, when he went to eat at local restaurants, he was sometimes met with a sign on the door that said, "No Indians or dogs allowed." In the 1950s, as Sonny and his wife Mary began a new life together, the Government put in place a new policy of forced assimilation, a move that harkened back to the days when Native religions and languages were banned. The policy was called "termination" for a reason; it was meant to end tribal governments in America once and for all.

So Sonny, like many of you, knew intolerance and knew injustice. He knew what it was like to be persecuted for who you are and what you believe. But as time went by, year by year, decade by decade, as Native Americans rallied together and marched together, as students descended on Alcatraz and activists held their ground at Frank's Landing, as respect and appreciation for your unique heritage grew and a seminal struggle played itself out, Sonny lived to see something else; he saw a new beginning.

He lived to see a Government that turned the page on a troubled past and adopted a new policy towards Native Americans, a policy centered on self-determination and the right for tribal governments to do whatever you think is best to strengthen your communities.

Over the past 40 years, that policy has had a major impact. It's empowered you to build up stronger institutions. It's enabled you to establish more effective law and order. It's laid the foundation for a true and lasting government-to-government relationship with the United States.

And over those decades, as Sonny went from being a father to a great-great-grandfather, and as he taught his family the Crow language and his community the Crow customs, as he became a living symbol of the perseverance of

the entire Crow Nation, Sonny stayed true to those fundamental values: to cherish the Earth and each other, to honor ancestors and preserve traditions.

And these are not just Sonny's values. In fact, they're not just values cherished by Native Americans; these should be and are American values. And they lie at the heart of some of our country's greatest challenges: to rebuild a middle class, to build ladders of opportunity for everybody who's working hard, to protect our planet, to leave our children something better than we inherited, to make sure Americans remain optimistic about the future and that this country of ours remains the place where no matter who you are or what you look like or where you come from or what your last name is, you can make it here, if you try.

Now, these are the challenges that we can only solve together, and that's been our approach to the unique challenges facing Indian Country.

Now, 3 years ago, I was proud to see that this conference was the largest gathering of tribal leaders in our history. And back then, an event like this was rare. Today, it's gotten routine. [Laughter] What I told you then is that I was committed to more than a unique nation-to-nation relationship. I was committed to getting this relationship right so that your nations can be full partners in our economy and your children can have a fair shot at pursuing the American Dream and that no one has to live under the cloud of fear or injustice.

And to make sure that we follow through on those commitments—

[At this point, the President sneezed.]

Excuse me. I've named Native Americans to my White House staff like Jodi Gillette and Charlie Galbraith, who many of you know. I've named Native Americans throughout my administration. And today, because we've made sure that the conversations here have translated into action, we can point to signs of real progress.

We've focused on justice and tribal sovereignty. Longstanding legal disputes like the *Cobell* case have been resolved. I signed into

law the Tribal Law and Order Act, which is helping to fight crime. These are all important steps, but we've got more to do. With domestic violence so prevalent on reservations, we're pushing Congress to restore your power to bring to justice anyone—Indian or non-Indian—who hurts a woman. With some tribal nations unable to put their land into Federal trust, we're pushing Congress to pass the *Carcieri* fix right away.

The other focus that a lot of you have spoken to me about and that we're now really trying to drill down on is expanding economic opportunity for Native Americans. Now, together, we've stepped up support for Tribal Colleges and Universities, so that more young people can graduate with the skills they need to start a career. We've strengthened tribal health care and made it more accessible. And along with the HEARTH Act, we've streamlined leasing regulations, putting more power in your hands to build more homes and more small businesses, more clean energy projects, like the Moapa solar project in Nevada.

But we've got more work to do. We've got to rebuild America's infrastructure—from roads to high-speed Internet—that will help connect Native communities to other parts of the country and other parts of the world. Congress needs to expand support for Native American small businesses, because when they're opening new stores or exporting new goods, then they're creating new jobs.

So that's where we need to go. That's the future we need to build. And I've never been more hopeful about our chances. Part of that hopefulness is because I've gotten to know so many of you and I know the skills and the talent and the dedication and the values and the wisdom that you all represent. And I'm hopeful not just because of the work all of you are doing, not just because of the solemn commitment of tribal leaders all across this country, I'm also hopeful because of the rising generation who I've seen embrace the responsibility of following in your footsteps.

I'm hopeful because of young folks like Nick Tilsen. I just had a chance to talk to Nick, a Lakota Indian who lives on the Pine Ridge Reser-

vation in South Dakota, which is one of the poorest parts of the country. And unemployment there is rampant. High rates of disease and violence are often forcing folks to downsize their dreams. But there's a more promising statistic in Pine Ridge. More than half of Pine Ridge's population is under 30 years old. And many of those young people, like Nick, are giving all they have to help turn things around.

So Nick heads up a nonprofit in Pine Ridge. A few years ago, with the support of some grants and other members of his tribe, Nick built a community center that uses spiritual and cultural teachings to help young people stay off drugs and their parents live healthier lifestyles. And it's making a difference. So today, he's building something bigger: a clean energy community that will provide affordable housing for folks who need it and help more Lakota small businesses get off the ground.

Day by day, family by family, community by community, Nick and his nonprofit have helped inspire a new beginning for Pine Ridge. In fact, just a few months ago, young and old came together to adopt a long-term plan that commits to bringing back jobs and development, bringing back native languages and customs, bringing back the spiritual strength that for so long has defined the Lakota people. And Nick says, "We've decided as a community to take ownership of our own future."

See, that makes me hopeful, talking to young people like that, because throughout Indian Country, you've got a generation ready to build on what generations before them have built. They're out there stirring with hope and restless for change and ready to take ownership of their future.

So let's make sure our work here is worthy of their efforts. Let's do everything we can to get things in the best shape possible for when they're in charge.

And over the next 4 years, as long as I have the privilege of serving as your President, we're going to keep working together to make sure that the promise of America is fully realized for every Native American.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:15 p.m. at the Department of the Interior. In his remarks, he referred to Brian Cladoosby, chairman, Swinomish Indian Tribal Community; Jodi Archambault Gillette, Senior Policy Adviser for Native American Affairs, Domestic Policy Council; Charles Galbraith, Associate Director, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement; and Nick Tilsen, executive director, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation.

Remarks on the National Economy in Falls Church, Virginia *December 6, 2012*

Well, I want to, first of all, just thank Tiffany and Richard, Jimmie and Velma for opening up their beautiful home to us. The reason that we're here is because Tiffany is one of the people who responded to "My2K."

As many of you know, we asked folks all across the country to talk a little bit about what would it mean if their income taxes went up in 2013, and Tiffany, who is a high school teacher, responded. Her husband, Richard, works at a Toyota dealership. They actually live with Tiffany's parents, both of whom are still working. And so what Tiffany pointed out was that an increase of \$2,000 or so for her and her husband

in this household would actually mean \$4,000 that was lost. And a couple of thousand dollars means a couple months' rent for this family.

And the story they tell about working hard, my understanding is they're interested in starting a business as well as the work that they currently do. They've got dreams and ambitions. They've got a beautiful 6-year-old son, Noah, who's back with great-grandma. And they're keeping it together, they're working hard, they're meeting their responsibilities.

For them to be burdened unnecessarily because Democrats and Republicans aren't coming together to solve this problem gives you a