

Remarks of Kimberly Teehee, Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs, White House Domestic Policy Council, at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

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Good afternoon, I am honored to be with you today. I want to begin by thanking the members of the Permanent Forum and representatives of the indigenous peoples, many of whom have travelled great distances to participate in this event. Your commitment to address the many important issues that indigenous peoples face around the world is remarkable.

At the outset of my remarks, I want to acknowledge that the United States has a unique legal and political relationship with 564 federally recognized Indian tribes, established through and confirmed by the Constitution of the United States, treaties, statutes, executive orders, and judicial decisions. President Obama is committed to strengthening and building on the government-to-government relationship between the United States and Indian tribes.

Tribal communities have contributed greatly to America's cultural, social, and political traditions. Throughout our land, we have a diversity of indigenous cultures with rich religious traditions. Native religious practices and their expression through song and dance endure and flourish despite wayward attempts to extinguish them during less enlightened times. Tribal cultural practices add to the fabric of the United States.

From the American Revolution to military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Native people have served valiantly in the Armed Forces of the United States. Many brave Native men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice fighting and shedding blood for this country.

In so many ways, the First Americans have added to the wealth and betterment of the United States and the American people. Despite the contributions they have made, we have not always responded in kind. All too often, federal policies undermined the ability of Indian tribes to build strong, self-sufficient and self-governing tribal communities. When the United States adopted misguided policies, the First Americans suffered greatly.

The history of our First Americans is a history that we must acknowledge to avoid repeating our mistakes. The Native people once owned this continent and they were often dispossessed of their lands by threat of war or unbridled encroachment in the name of westward expansion. When Native people stood in the way, they were often forcefully removed. Many Americans have heard of the brutality of the Cherokee Removal called the Trail of Tears. But the Cherokees were not alone as vast communities throughout the east from New York to Florida were moved at the tip of the bayonet – their homelands forever taken.

When their tribal lands were dramatically diminished, the United States adopted a policy aimed to acculturate American Indians by breaking up their remaining tribal lands into individual allotments. There were other misguided attempts at forced assimilation – outlawing of Native religions as well as dance and song, taking of Indian children and forcing them into boarding schools which banished their language, dress, and ways of their people. The federal policy of termination was designed to end the political existence of tribal governments. In this history, there are important lessons and guidance from destructive policies that sunk tribal communities deeper into the cycle of poverty and despair.

Experience also shows us the type of policies that build the foundation for tribal communities to flourish culturally, socially and economically. Our more recent history demonstrates that tribal self-determination – the ability of tribal governments to determine how to build and sustain their own communities is necessary for successful and prospering communities. The federal policy of tribal self-determination is guided by the deep and abiding belief that tribal governments are in the best position to decide the direction of their future.

More than forty years since the United States adopted this policy of greater tribal autonomy, the record is clear—tribal self-determination has been successful. It has enabled tribal governments to establish, develop and enhance tribal institutions and infrastructure ranging from those addressing the health, education and welfare of their communities to those such as tribal courts, fire protection and law enforcement which have allowed them to better protect their communities. The clear lesson is that empowering tribes to deal with the challenges they face and taking advantage of the available opportunities will result in tribal communities that thrive.

Despite the success of this policy, the devastating consequence of the past still haunts us. Tribal communities still suffer among the most challenging socioeconomic conditions. Some reservations face unemployment rates of up to 80 percent. Nearly a quarter of all Native Americans live in poverty. Approximately 14 percent of homes on reservations don't have electricity; and 12 percent don't have access to a safe water supply.

Poverty often breeds crime. Native communities are faced with an increase of youth gangs engaged in drug trade. Some tribes have experienced rates of violent crime twice, four times, and at times more than 10 times the national average. Most tragically is the fact that one in three Native women will be raped in their lifetimes, which President Obama called this “an assault on our national conscience that we can no longer ignore” when he addressed tribal leaders at the White House Tribal Nations Conference last year.

Perhaps the greatest victims of poverty and violent crime on reservations are the children. Native Americans face some of the lowest matriculation rates and the highest high school and college dropout rates.

In addition, Native Americans face disproportionate health disparities compared to the general population. Native Americans die of illnesses like tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes, pneumonia, and influenza at far higher rates than the rest of the population.

Though our challenges are difficult, our future is far from bleak. President Obama believes that tribal leaders must be part of the solution if we are going to address the needs of Native Americans. We must begin a new era in the United States' relationship with tribal governments, one that is built on mutual respect. By working together, on a government-to-government basis, we can realize a future where Native people live long and healthy lives in safe communities, are able to pursue economic self-sufficiency, and where their children and grandchildren can have an equal opportunity at pursuing the American dream.

To address the myriad challenges facing tribal communities, we have taken a number of steps to strengthen the government-to-government relationship between the United States and Indian tribes.

First, President Obama promised greater engagement with tribal leaders. In November, the President invited representatives from each of the 564 federally recognized Indian tribes to attend a White House Tribal Nations Conference. Nearly 400 tribal leaders attended, making it the most widely attended interactive White House tribal meeting with the President, Cabinet Secretaries,

senior officials, and Members of Congress in history. The White House held listening sessions with tribal leaders and representatives from tribal organizations on health care, energy development, tribal consultation, job creation and education. The level of engagement with tribal leaders is extraordinary and continues outside of Washington, D.C. Our federal agencies are engaged in unprecedented outreach to tribal communities.

Second, President Obama believes Native Americans need representation in the Federal government to properly reflect their needs and views. History has shown that failure to include voices of tribal officials in formulating policy affecting their communities has all too often led to undesirable and, at times, devastating tragic results. To ensure that Native Americans are represented in this Administration, President Obama appointed Larry Echo Hawk of the Pawnee Nation as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, Dr. Yvette Roubideaux of the Rosebud Sioux tribe as the Director of the Indian Health Service, Hilary Tompkins of the Navajo Nation as the Solicitor of the Interior, Lillian Sparks of the Rosebud and Oglala Sioux Tribes as Commissioner for the Administration for Native Americans, Mary McNeil of the Winnebago Tribe as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for the United States Department of Agriculture, and Jodi Gillette of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as Deputy Associate Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. Working with tribal leaders, this team is helping shape federal policies that impact tribal communities.

Third, President Obama is committed to regular and meaningful consultation with tribal leaders. Marking a new era in the United States' relationship with tribal governments, the President signed a Memorandum on November 5, 2009, directing every federal agency to develop a plan to fully implement Executive Order 13175, "Consultation and Coordination with Tribal Governments." This Order mandates that all agencies have an accountable process for meaningful and timely input by tribal officials in the development of regulatory policies that have tribal implications. The federal agencies are implementing consultation plans and the level of tribal consultation is at historic levels.

Fourth, President Obama recognizes that a comprehensive response to address the needs of tribal communities means federal agencies must work together. Federal officials across various agencies are working together on a wide range of issues to improve the lives of Native Americans.

This combination of greater engagement, greater representation, greater consultation, and interagency collaboration is the foundation upon which we will help build stronger tribal communities and enable the United States' relationship with Indian tribes to flourish.

Following these guidelines will enable the United States and tribal leaders to work together and build a brighter future for tribal communities. Indeed, it is the only way to establish the proper foundation to address the many issues that have vexed our relationship for decade after decade impacting generation after generation of Native peoples.

We have serious work ahead and we are making progress.

This Administration is addressing the many challenges facing tribal communities by addressing funding needs. Last year, in the face of an economic crisis, President Obama took immediate action to help all Americans by signing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to spur economic activity and to create new jobs. This law allocates more than \$3 billion to help tribal communities. These funds are being used to renovate schools on reservations across the country, spur job creation in tribal economies, improve housing and energy efficiency, and support health facilities and policing services.

In addition, President Obama's Fiscal Year 2011 budget request proposes \$18.482 billion, a 5%

increase over the Fiscal Year 2010 budget, in total federal funding for Native American programs. This funding will help to increase educational opportunities, promote economic development, support lending in low-income communities, combat crime in tribal communities, and increase access to health care. While funding increases do not make up for our past failures, they do reflect President Obama's commitment to honor the United States' government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes.

If we're going to bring about real change to tribal communities, we must develop a comprehensive approach for Native Americans. Last month, President Obama signed a law, the Affordable Care Act, which includes important provisions for Native Americans, who continue to face gaping health disparities. Signing this law is a major step in fulfilling our responsibility to provide health care to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

President Obama recognizes that education is essential to ensuring a viable and prosperous future for tribal communities. The Affordable Care Act provides significant federal funding to support tribal colleges and institutions serving Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians.

President Obama acknowledges that Native Americans are struggling to preserve their languages. He supports greater flexibility in the use of education funds to meet the needs of Native students, including allowing funding for Native language immersion and Native language restoration programs.

Improving public safety in tribal communities is a top priority for the Administration. President Obama supports federal legislation, the Tribal Law and Order Act, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the tribal justice systems and better prevent crime in tribal communities. In addition, the President supports initiatives to hire new Indian country Assistant United States Attorneys to prosecute cases involving violent crime on Native lands and provide additional federal agents to support law enforcement efforts in tribal communities. Addressing crimes involving violence against women and children on Native lands is a particular priority of the Administration.

In December, the Administration announced that it reached a settlement agreement with plaintiffs in *Cobell v. Salazar*, one of the largest class action lawsuits ever brought against the United States. The agreement, which requires legislative and judicial approval to become effective, settles claims regarding the federal government's management of trust accounts maintained by the United States of more than 300,000 individual Indians. Pending for more than thirteen years, this protracted litigation cast a shadow over the United States' relationship with Indian tribes and with individual Indians. This agreement lays the foundation for reconciliation between individual Indian account holders and the federal government and for more effective management of Indian trust assets for future generations.

Renewable energy development is one of President Obama's highest priorities, and the United States has come far in development of renewable resources under the President's leadership. New jobs are being created and many more are coming in the clean energy sector. We are working closely with tribes to assist them with the exploration and development of tribal lands with active and potential energy resources. To achieve this result, we are finding creative solutions that will bring affordable, clean energy to Indian country. In addition, we are removing administrative barriers that hinder renewable energy development by streamlining and expediting the permit process for energy development and transmission across tribal lands.

As we engage tribal leaders about the solutions to address unemployment on tribal lands, we know for certain that we need many approaches. Each tribe is unique and tribal voices must be heard if we are to create jobs in tribal communities. Tribal leaders say that entrepreneurship is a key to

successful economic development in tribal communities. Federal agencies are assisting tribes to improve infrastructure that will foster business creation, educate youth in entrepreneurship and financial literacy, and provide other technical assistance to business owners.

President Obama supports efforts to increase access to information technology in underserved areas. Many tribal businesses are located in geographically remote locations and are hard-pressed to succeed without access to high speed broadband internet use. In order to ensure that tribal businesses are able to compete on a global playing field, tribal communities must have greater access to broadband. Through investment in infrastructure, green technology, information technology and education, President Obama has gone beyond talk and made possible “a new and better future” for tribal communities.

Climate change adaptation is a priority for President Obama and tribal communities are on the front line of this challenge. In an era where the challenge of climate change confronts the world, the original stewards of this continent can teach us essential lessons regarding proper and effective stewardship. Tribal communities have long considered the impact of their actions on generations ahead – a philosophy grounded in responsibility and setting the necessary antecedent foundation for sustainability. Combating climate change is particularly crucial for Alaska Native communities which are among the first communities in the United States to experience its devastating impact.

During the White House Tribal Nations Conference, tribal leaders recommended that President Obama reexamine our position regarding the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We welcomed the dialogue with tribal officials. Ambassador Rice said this week that this is “an important recommendation that directly complements our commitment to work together with the international community on the many challenges that indigenous peoples face.” The United States will undertake a formal review of the Declaration, and will engage in consultation with Indian tribes and seek input from interested nongovernmental organizations.

We are moving in the right direction but our work is not done. Improving healthcare and addressing health disparities, providing a sound education for Indian children, ensuring that Native people enjoy a safe community free from the impending peril of violent crime and setting a foundation for sound and sustainable economic development – these and so many others are our objectives.

On behalf of President Obama, I thank you again for your commitment to tackle the many issues facing indigenous peoples. Our commitment to greater engagement, greater representation, greater consultation, and interagency collaboration is the foundation upon which we will build stronger tribal communities and enable the United States’ historic government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes to flourish.