

4. President Clinton's 1994 Conference with Native Leaders

... By the 1990s, many agreed that a new era had come. New laws were made to encourage tribal self-rule. On April 29, 1994, President Bill Clinton invited the leaders of the 547 federally recognized tribes to the White House, and 322 came to hear what he had to say and make their own demands. Clinton was the first Democrat to hold office since 1980 and his liberal agenda included promises of progress to Native Americans. During the succeeding years of his presidency, he signed into law the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1994), the American Indian Trust Management Reform Act (1994), the Tribal Self-Government Act (1994), and the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act (1996), and he also encouraged a new Strategic Plan for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1997).

I say to the leaders of the first Americans, the American Indian and Alaska natives, welcome to the White House. Welcome home.

So much of who we are today comes from who you have been for a long time. Long before others came to these shores there were powerful and sophisticated cultures and societies here: yours. Because of your ancestors, democracy existed here long before the Constitution was drafted and ratified ...

I believe in your rich heritage and in our common heritage. What you have done to retain your identity, your dignity, and your faith in the face of often immeasurable obstacles is profoundly moving, an example of the enduring strength of the human spirit.

We desperately need this lesson now. We must keep faith with you and with that spirit and with the common heritage so many of us cherish. That is what you came to talk to me about and what I would like to respond to today.

In every relationship between our people, our first principle must be to respect your right to remain who you are and to live the way you wish to live. And I believe the best way to do that is to acknowledge the unique government-to-government relationship we have enjoyed over time. Today I reaffirm our commitment to self-determination for tribal governments. I pledge to fulfill the trust obligations of the Federal Government. I vow to honor and respect tribal sovereignty based upon our unique historic

relationship. And I pledge to continue my efforts to protect your right to fully exercise your faith as you wish.

Let me speak for a moment about religious freedom, something precious to you, something deeply enshrined in our Constitution. For many of you, traditional religions and ceremonies are the essence of your culture and your very existence. Last year, I was pleased to sign a law that restored certain constitutional protections for those who want to express their faith in this country.

No agenda for religious freedom will be complete until traditional native American religious practices have received all the protections they deserve. Legislation is needed to protect native American religious practices threatened by Federal action.³ The native American free exercise of religion act is long overdue. And I will continue to work closely with you and members of Congress to make sure the law is constitutional and strong. I want it passed so that I can invite you back here and sign it into law in your presence.

And to make certain that you can obtain the ritual symbols of your religious faith, in a moment I will sign a directive to every executive department and agency of Government, not just the Department of Interior, instructing them to cooperate with tribal governments to accommodate wherever possible the need for eagle feathers in the practice of native American religions.

This then is our first principle: respecting your values, your religions, your identity, and your sovereignty. This brings us to the second principle that should guide our relationship: We must dramatically improve the Federal Government's relationships with the tribes and become full partners with the tribal nations.

I don't want there to be any mistake about our commitment to a stronger partnership between our people. Therefore, in a moment I will also sign an historic Government directive that requires every executive department and agency of the Government to take two simple steps: first, to remove all barriers that prevent them from working directly with tribal governments, and second, to make certain that if they take action affecting tribal trust resources, they consult with tribal governments prior to that decision. It is the entire government, not simply the Department of the Interior, that has a trust responsibility with tribal governments. And it is time the entire Government recognized and honored that responsibility . . .

All governments must work better. We must simply be more responsive to the people we serve and to each other. It's the only way we'll be able to

³ These would include, for example, the use of certain drugs and of eagle feathers in religious ceremonies.

do good things with the resources we have. I know that you agree with that. More and more of you are moving to assume fuller control of your governments. Many are moving aggressively to take responsibility for operating your own programs. Each year the Bureau of Indian Affairs is providing more technical services and fewer direct services.

One avenue for greater tribal control is through self-governance contracts. There are about 30 self-compacting tribes today. We're working with Congress to raise that number by 20 tribes every year. We'd like self-governance to become a permanent program. But we must ensure services will still be provided to the smaller tribes that do not choose to participate.

What is the goal of a better and more equal partnership, and more empowered tribes and more efficient government? Ultimately it must be to improve the living conditions of those whom we serve. And that must be our third and final principle.

Together we must position American Indians and Alaska Natives to compete economically as we move toward the 21st century . . .

We must do more to create jobs, raise incomes, and develop capital for new businesses. I know there are more success stories in Indian country every year but not nearly enough as the people who bore witness to your conditions here today so eloquently said. Strengthening tribal economies will require new thinking and the courage to change. It will require investing in the health, the education, and the skills of American Indians and Alaska Natives, as we must do for all Americans . . .

Our goal is clear: to work with you to enhance economic development in every tribe . . . This great, historic meeting today must be the beginning of our new partnership, not the end of it.

I'd like to make a point about economic development that has to do with gaming . . . My goal is this: I want the tribes to continue to benefit from gaming, and I want current disputes over the 1988 gaming regulatory act to be worked out. I strongly support the process now underway to achieve that goal. But just as with the national economy, we know we can't solve every problem overnight. The important thing is to create policies that give every tribe the chance to have a strong economy in the long run, to develop the will and the consistency to stick with those policies over time, and to keep working and talking together . . .

There has been a great deal of debate this year about the budget of the Indian Health Service . . . But I believe the health needs of tribal communities and families and children clearly require special attention. Therefore, I have amended next year's budget to restore more than \$120 million in funding for the Indian Health Service.

Finally, as we heard so eloquently today, there is in America, across the lines of race and class and religion, a profound concern for our children. Too many are poor or sick or unsupervised. Too many are likely to use

violence or be the victims of violence. Too many are unprepared intellectually for life or work. Yet nothing is so striking in tribal communities as your love of family and extended family and your devotion to your children. Every segment of our society could well take a lesson from you. But in spite of your best efforts, too many of your children also suffer from poor health and inadequate education. And we are trying hard to address those problems . . .

As we look back on the American journey, the test ahead is always whether we are moving in the right direction of more tolerance, wider justice, and greater opportunity for all. It is the direction that counts, always the direction. And our choices will set that direction.

Of course, as you well know, our history has not always been a proud one. But our future can be, and that is up to us. Together we can open the greatest era of cooperation, understanding and respect among our people ever. I know that we will. And when we do, the judgment of history will be that the President of the United States and the leaders of the sovereign Indian nations met and kept faith with each other and our common heritage and together lifted our great nations to a new and better place.

[At this point, the President signed the memorandums.]

In keeping with a tradition that goes back to the early days of our Republic, I want each of you, in leaving, to receive a miniature replica of the Jefferson Indian Peace Medal. On the front is a picture of our third President, Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and one of the chief architects of our democracy. When you receive your medal, you will see on the back two hands clasped one with a cuff showing three stripes and three buttons, the other wearing a bracelet engraved with an eagle. The hands join with the inscription, "Peace and Friendship."

As we pray and as we leave, let us hope that this is the beginning of true peace, true friendship, and true progress.

Thank you.

Source: Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William Jefferson Clinton, 1994, 1 :800-3, reprinted in Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Documents of United States Indian Policy* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000 [1975]), pp. 343-5.

Further exploration: Students might be interested in comparing the Indian policies of different presidential administrations by consulting the legislative record.