

THE STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE

By

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I dare to say, someone heard me knocking on doors. Thank you for letting my people in to hear their message.

With that respect, I am the messenger of the five Tribal Chairmen and Indian Tribes located in all or part of North Dakota. These include Chairman Charles Murphy of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Chairperson Alice Spotted Bear of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold, Chairman Carl McKay of the Devils Lake Sioux Tribe of Fort Totten, Chairman Russell Hawkins of the Sisseton/Wahpeton Sioux Tribe, and the people of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

As Tribal Chairmen, we are democratically elected by the people of the reservations we represent much like you represent your respective districts. The non-Indian world continues to call us Chiefs, somewhat of a tradition from stories and movies they have seen on Saturday matinees. Today, our respective governments operate "quite like" state government in that the councils are the legislative body and the chairmen, the governors. I said "quite like" because it is not the same. In our respective tribes, to operate in an Indian consensus way of life, we continue to pay a great deal of respect to our history, tradition, culture and way of life in weighing our decisions. Each of our tribes vary to different degrees as to what ranks as a priority and again it reverts back to roots. Thus, I have come to a conclusion that a Chairperson is a spokesman or statesman of what his/her people wish to be said. This differs a little from the governor's position as a politician being a member of the Democratic or Republican Party, whichever may be in power. To the Chairperson, he/she is Indian first, Democrat or Republican second. To the Indian, he/she is first American with all federal recognition, then state citizen. Today, I would like to offer the contribution of the state citizens which seems to be continually left out.

As a public servant as you are, I wish to offer you some of my principles on the proper service and future for North Dakota and all of its citizens. First, I would like to do something that has never been done. Second, I would like to start new businesses. Third, I would like to offer fresh approaches to old routines, and fourth, I would wish to discover new ways of using present resources.

In the first element, the concept of never been done is actually a challenge of cooperative pursuit by the Tribes and the state in concert to provide and procure benefits to its citizens. This is a monumental task, for it will take both sides a great deal of patience to break down the barriers of long lived prejudices, jealousies and what not. A prime example is in a recent election, an Indian running in an independent race was perceived as if communist, a renegade, an activist, anything except a concerned citizen trying to improve the economy or service to that population. New businesses must be created or we will all watch our children move to the cities.

There are many legislative ways both state and federal that can enhance the American Indian and his neighboring state citizen. With the economy as it is today, we cannot continue to complain about the farm prices. We must develop new ways in which to help that economy. The fresh approach to the old routines is that collectively, the Indian and non-Indian communities through local support and trade-offs can attract and should attract outside interests in this state.

With these basic principles in mind, I would wish for you to listen closely and feel the small piece of history we have, as Indian people, contributed. I think each farmer or person that has been on a farm in this body of lawmakers will identify with the concept of taking off your shoes and walking on the earth letting the granules of nature touch you; and you in some respect having a feeling that there is something

more in farming than money. To the Indian, there is more to Mother Earth and nature than to sell your respect and dignity in selling Mother Earth.

With that, I would like to share an actual happening with you. It starts, "What can we do to Americanize the Indian?" The question was earnestly put by a man who was about to assume control over our country's Indian affairs. He was appalled by the fact that over a hundred native tribes within the United States still speak their own languages and make their own laws on the little fragments of land that Indians reserved for their own use when they sold the rest of the country to the white man. The Commissioner-elect was a kind and generous soul, but his Anglo-Saxon pride was ruffled by the fact that so many Indians preferred their own way of life, poor as it was, to the benefits of civilization that Congress longed to confer on them. Perhaps, if Indians did not realize that they needed more Indian bureau supervisors and bigger and better appropriations to make real Americans out of them, it might be necessary to use a little force.

A bronze-skinned figure in the audience arose. "You will forgive me," said a voice of quiet dignity, "if I tell you that my people were Americans for thousands of years before your people were. The question is not how you can Americanize us but how we can Americanize you. We have been working at that for a long time.

Sometimes we are discouraged at the results. But we will keep trying. And the first thing we want to teach you is that, in the American way of life, each man has respect for his brother's vision. Because each of us respected his brother's dream, we enjoyed freedom here in America while your people were busy killing and enslaving each other across the water. The relatives you left behind are still trying to kill each other and enslave each other because they have not learned there that freedom is built on my respect for my brother's vision and his respect for mine. We have a hard trail ahead of us in trying to Americanize you and your white brothers. But we are not afraid of hard trails."

American history, written by the scribes of the conquerors, has been written as the story of a great European conquest. What was conquered, according to the European historians and their students, was an almost empty land, dotted here and there with wild savages. These children of the wilderness, unable to live alongside civilization, proceeded to disappear as their land was settled. The "vanishing Indian" became the theme of song and folklore, of painting and sculpture, of fiction and of the special sort of fiction that sometimes passes as American history. How far this oft-told story deviates from the truth we are only beginning to discover.

As yet, few Americans and fewer Europeans realize that America is not just a pale reflection of Europe - that what is distinctive about America is Indian, through and through. American cigarettes, chewing gum, rubber balls, popcorn and corn flakes, flapjacks and maple syrup, still make European eyebrows crawl. American disrespect for the authority of parents, presidents, and would-be dictators still shocks our European critics. And visitors from the Old World are still mystified when they find no peasants on American soil. But the expressions of pain, surprise, and amused superiority that one finds in European accounts of the habits of the "crazy Americans" are not new. One finds them in European reports of American life that are 200 and even 400 years old. All these things, and many things more important in our life today, were distinctively American when the first European immigrants came to these shores.

Indian gifts of corn, tobacco, white and sweet potatoes, beans, peanuts, tomatoes, pumpkins, chocolate, American cotton, and rubber, and American life would lose more than half its color and joy as well as more than half its agricultural income. Without these Indian gifts to American agriculture, we might still be back at the level of permanent semi-starvation that kept Europeans for thousands of years ever-ready to sell their freedom for crusts of bread and royal circuses. And if we lost not only the Indian's material gifts, but the gifts of the Indian's spirit as well, perhaps we should be just as willing as Europeans have been to accept crusts of bread and royal circuses for the surrender of our freedom. For it is out of rich Indian democratic tradition that the distinctive political ideals of American life emerged. Universal suffrage for women as well as for men, the pattern of states within a state that we call federalism, the habit of treating chiefs as servants of the people instead of as their masters, the insistence that the community must

respect the diversity of men and the diversity of their dreams - all these things were part of the American way of life before Columbus landed.

We need to remember that the Europe that lay behind Columbus as he sailed toward a New World was in many respects less civilized than the lands that spread before him. Politically, there was nothing in the kingdoms and empires of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to parallel the democratic constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy, with its provisions for initiative, referendum, and recall, and its suffrage for women as well as men. Socially, there was in the Old World no system of old-age pensions, disability benefits, and unemployment insurance comparable to the system of the Incas.

The author of the American Declaration of Independence and of our first Bill of Rights freely acknowledged his debt to Indian teachers. Comparing the freedom of Indian society with the oppression of European society, Thomas Jefferson struck the keynote of the great American experiment in democracy:

Imperfect as this species of coercion may seem, crimes are very rare among them (the Indians of Virginia); so much that were it may a question, whether no law, as among the savage Americans, or too much law, as among the civilized Europeans, submits man to the greatest evil, one who has seen both conditions of existence would pronounce it to be the last; and that the sheep are happier of themselves, than under the care of the wolves. It will be said, that great societies cannot exist without government. The savages, therefore, break them into small ones.

Here Jefferson put his finger on the quality that distinguishes American attitudes toward government from continental attitudes. The caution against aggrandizement of governmental power, the preference for local self-government even though it seems less efficient, the trust in the ability of good neighbors to settle their own problems by mutual accommodation without totalitarian rule - these are enduring elements of our American democracy.

The state and Tribes must continue to build on its primary successes of the Commission it has developed to carry out related educational advancement, economic development and, the first of its kind in the United States, a Youth Alcohol Prevention Education Program with the Tribes. For it is through these endeavors that the core of community cooperation will maintain high integrity in all of society. The networking of the Governor's Forums on Job and Training along with Economic Development Commission must be given the fullest support to enhance jobs and hometown security to all looking for a better way of life.

Although it has been a downturned economy for most of North Dakota during the last 4-5 years, the Tribe I represent can say we have contributed in the state's overall economy. In 1975, our reservation saw 15,000,000; in 1983, 25,000,000; in 1986, 56,000,000 of federal dollars actively sought after by a very progressive tribal government. Unemployment dropped from 74% to 43% at one point and can do better with the endorsement of the state. Other successes are very evident such as the Devils Lake Sioux and the venture the state has pursued or is presently pursuing for the Three Affiliated Tribes and the town of Killdeer. Overall, the five Tribes have improved rather than drained the economy of the state in 1986 to over 100,000,000 dollars.

But it is much much more than dollars that we talk of here, we talk about humanity, respect for one another's vision. Employment plays a large factor in securing a place in the sun along with education which is and has been a top priority of all Tribes represented here today.

Like other North Dakotans, Indians need and want job opportunities.

When we look at indicators showing projections for economic activity for the state, we see that those projections are bleak. Economic conditions for Indian people have been bleak only when times were good for the state in general.

Why is this so? Why aren't the economies of the reservations linked with that of the state? So that when times are good for the state, times will also be good for the reservations.

North Dakota is predominantly a farm state and its economy generally follows agricultural trends. There are farmers and ranchers on North Dakota's reservations and their operations do follow the agricultural trends, but for the most part the reservations' economies do not. The oil and coal industry affect reservation economics minimally.

The private sectors on the reservations are very small - three of the reservations have a manufacturing plant - and while there are numerous individually owned businesses, there is little hope that the private sector can absorb the unemployed labor force - neither can the public sector, such as government and schools. So in large part, reservation economies consist of transfer payments to individuals (welfare). Economic development requires capital formation and reservation economies are not set up to foster such an undertaking. In order to be a truly viable economy, independence is desirable but maybe interdependence is more realistic. Some attempts have been made to include reservations in the Industrial Commission brochures. That is fine - but we need more of those type of linkages. For our part - we need to put information about our areas forward.

The spirit that I would like to convey here today is that of cooperation, that of North Dakotans who have a huge stake in the future of this state as we have had in its formation. As we move toward the Centennial, the bi-cultural differences should be noted and respected, the bi-cultural conflicts resolved. The notation of the birth of the state should be marked and celebrated with all the glory such festivities deserve. Looking back at the past shows your concern for the future. Our concern for the future of all North Dakotans should begin now, with plans for a better, second 100 years.

Megwetch - Thank you

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