

State of the Tribal-State Relationship

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Thank you for the honor of addressing the state of North Dakota's Tribes. I want to thank everyone here today: all the leaders of this great State, all the Tribal leaders, all the people who live in North Dakota. I want to give special thanks to all the young people who made the trip here. Thank you.

How is your imagination today? Good? Fantastic!

I am ecstatic. I am excited because we are going to put that imagination to work starting right now. I want you to see the future of North Dakota and the future of our Tribes. What does it look like? Does it look happy? Does it include the young people in this room today? Is it everything we want it to be?

No? Then let's change that. We can do it. And we can do it starting today. When we leave here each one of you will have the opportunity to change North Dakota and our Tribes for the better. I do not claim to be a diplomatic miracle worker but I am a person who has big ideas, common sense and a work ethic that does not tolerate failure. I am a leader with values, with dignity and respect for my people, for the people of my fellow Tribes and for all the people of North Dakota. Most of all, I want to work with each of you to reach a common goal: "Prosperity for our Tribe and for North Dakota; prosperity for every human being living in the boundaries of this great State."

Also imagine this: economic development existing within our reservations, ripe with potential and a competitiveness that mirrors state and national averages. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, North Dakota has the lowest unemployment in the nation. North Dakota also ranks as the state with the best economy. You've done a good job. North Dakota's population is booming, while California and New York are losing people. As you know, this State's prosperity has a lot to do with the economic development programs assisting your economic growth and job opportunity for all the residents; and perhaps just a little bit to do with all this new oil.

While other states are floundering in debts and deficits, North Dakota has a balanced budget. While Washington DC is trying to deal with a 16 TRILLION dollar debt, North Dakota has stashed away surplus funds for rainy days. This stable and flourishing economy, especially the conditions and strategies that made it possible, is what we need on our reservations.

I don't have to stand here and read the statistics. We all know where Indian Country stands in the area of economic development and employment. We need the State to share its prosperity and help the North Dakota reservations help themselves. We are asking for a helping-hand, not a hand-out. We ask the state with the best economy of all 50 states to fund comprehensive workforce and business specific training programs that enable, but don't limit our potential. We are asking for your help and cooperation to fund new training on the reservations: Occupational training that will help our people gain employment and be an asset to their employers; Management training so local businesses will survive and prosper so the newly trained employees will have jobs to go to, jobs that are not government jobs, jobs that are long term.

Our Tribal leaders must play a role in this. We have to make policies that encourage investment on reservations. We need to do what it takes to make an environment friendly to business. We've been looking at entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with the North Dakota Secretary of State regarding the Uniform Commercial Code. By working with the State in ways like this we can develop a friendlier business environment that attracts investments from outside the reservation.

I have pledged to bring more transparency to our Tribe's government. This is important, not just so people have more faith in their tribal government, but so outside businesses feel more comfortable investing in our reservation. I encourage the other Tribes to do what they can in this way, as well.

I've said we are asking for a hand-up, not a hand-out. We want a partnership with the State, not charity. So, what would North Dakota get out of this investment in Indian Country?

Imagine, Indian Country with an unemployment rate that matches the state, a prospering economy that not only has enough jobs for Tribal members, but jobs for its non-Tribal neighbors. As a return on its investment, this state will see a decrease in dependency on welfare and other dependent social programs. Today one quarter of North Dakota's welfare payments come to my Turtle Mountain reservation. Imagine a Turtle Mountain economy that does not require 25 percent of North Dakota's welfare funds. Imagine this happening with all reservations in the state. The new-found prosperity can be reached in Indian Country [that] will benefit businesses all over the state. Imagine, decreased crime rates, and most of all, decreasing the "F" word: "financial deficit."

Now that I've stirred your imagination, and not-so-subtly anticipated your generosity, let's continue with help to expand our medical facilities to fight diseases such as cancer, diabetes and hypertension; increase housing funding to renovate existing homes to make them warm and livable during these cold North Dakota winters as well as building new homes for the 16 percent of our families who are homeless. Imagine rebuilding our roads so when a person drives on them, they don't have to get a bee-line every 300 miles; and funding to increase law enforcement to make our reservations a safe and happy place to live. Our elders are especially hard hit by these adversities; we value our elders by taking care of them. I ask you to help us to do that. Keep imagining, if you will, funds to buy-back land. Yes, I said buy-back land that was given away, so we can expand our reservation and provide more opportunity for our people to become land owners, to increase farming and agriculture, and funds to restore, beautify and develop our natural resources to attract tourism.

Let's continue to use our imagination, and your generosity, where it has never taken us before: "INDIAN GAMING." We Tribal leaders need to adhere to the principles of good government, including transparency and agency accountability. We need to work together with the State to promote fiscal responsibility, to operate with consistency and clarity to ensure fairness in our gaming compacts. We need to respect the capabilities and responsibilities of each sovereign Tribal nation in order to fully promote Tribal economic development. Self-sufficiency and strong Tribal governments, and a fair gaming compact helps with that. I just recently signed a new Gaming Compact with Governor Dalrymple and I believe we both can see that Tribal gaming not only helps the Tribes but also the economy of the State. We may get jobs from the casinos, but the dollars generated there are spent all over North Dakota; yet another partnership between the Tribes and State where everyone wins.

Now open your imagination, and your wallets, just a bit more and look at these young people. They are our future. Only 26 percent of our Native American students who graduate are college ready. Only 23 percent have job readiness skills when leaving high school. Over half will not graduate from high school. These are scary statistics. It is our fundamental obligation as leaders to ensure that children in our communities have the best possible education, promoting life-long skills that are competitive in society. High quality learning environments are comprised of several elements, such as a strong curriculum, employing certified and skilled teachers, and keeping our standards of education high in order to have the proper tools and fundamentals to teach our children properly. We need our colleges and universities to implement an array of academic and vocational programs to fulfill our children's dreams to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, entrepreneurs, researchers, and yes, senators, governors tribal chairs and even President of the United States. The Tribal colleges have done a fantastic job with this and we need that to continue and to expand. We ask you to keep this in mind in the coming days when the North Dakota Association of Tribal Colleges submits a bill to the State Legislature to fund a special two-year initiative in workforce development. We've been blessed in Turtle Mountain in that we've been able to build a new high school in Belcourt and a new Ojibwa Indian School. Other reservations haven't been as fortunate. All of our educational facilities must be kept updated, either through remodeling existing buildings, or building new schools as needed. Our classrooms need to be equipped

with the latest technology. Our education system needs to equip our students to thrive in the global economy. And most importantly it needs to promote a safe and healthy environment for every student. How can we imagine our future being prosperous without investing in education?

When I hear the word “imagine,” I hear the song “Imagine” by John Lennon.

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us and the world will be as one.”

With this global economy and with other states and countries continuing to develop and improve, we cannot afford merely to occupy a seat. It could take years to catch up with the rest of the world. If our prosperous State cannot find in its heart to invest in economic development, affordable quality housing, an effective health-care system, and assistance in developing high quality educational systems on our reservations, then our imagination is not developed and we rob our children of theirs.

Imagine what we can do if we work together.

Migwitch, Thank you.

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