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November 13, 2007

NATIVE AMERICANS: Remarks to National Congress of American Indians Annual Convention

Via satellite

Hello everyone. I am so sorry I can not be with you in person today. But I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk with you via satellite on the first day of your 64th annual convention.

[Click here to read Hillary's Native American agenda.](#)

I especially want to thank Joe Garcia and the Executive Board for their outstanding leadership. And I'd like to recognize Arlan Melendez, one of my campaign co-chairs, and Melanie Benjamin, for their tremendous support and friendship.

Finally, I want to honor all of you gathered here today for your leadership and service in your nations -- and for your contributions to our shared future. Your commitment to our environment, to the ties of family and community that bind us to each other, to making decisions based not on just their impact today -- but on generations to come -- is important for all of us to remember.

Unfortunately, the United States has not always honored its obligations to Native Americans -- and Indian Country still feels the effects every single day. During the past seven years, the situation has only gotten worse. We've seen funding cuts and failures to honor tribal sovereignty. President Bush has discontinued the tribal government liaison position within the White House and Intergovernmental Affairs Office -- a position started by my husband. Five of the eight U.S. Attorneys fired by Attorney General Gonzales were leaders in prosecuting violence on Indian lands.

Well, I believe it's time for a new beginning. It's time for our government to work together as partners again, like we used to. I'm proud of what we accomplished together during the 1990s.

I was honored to visit reservations during my time as First Lady and to work with tribal leaders to support my husband's initiative to train and fund 1,000 new Native American teachers. And as President, I will restore that partnership and renew our shared mission to lift up our families and build the future our children and grandchildren and future generations deserve.

I will start by fully supporting tribal sovereignty and honoring the government to government relationship between tribes and the federal government -- not just with talk, but with action. I'll sign an Executive Order that commits our government to regular and meaningful collaboration with tribal governments. And I will always honor our federal trust responsibility -- it's not just a law, it is a fundamental moral obligation, nothing less.

Second, as President, I will appoint Native Americans to key positions throughout the federal government. I'll restore the senior position in the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. This person will serve as my liaison to Native American communities. And I'll work to appoint Native American judges and others who truly understand tribal sovereignty and respect the needs of Native communities.

Third, improving healthcare in Indian Country will be at the top of my national agenda. It is unacceptable that the average life expectancy for American Indians is nearly five years less than the rest of the population. It is unacceptable that Native Americans are more than four times as likely to die from diabetes and more than 50% more likely to die from pneumonia or influenza. It is unacceptable that while the federal government spends nearly \$6,000 for each Medicare recipient -- it spends only \$2,000 per person for Indian Health Service medical care.

I was proud to co-sponsor the Indian Health Care Improvement Act Amendment. This bill will expand coverage for qualified Native Americans in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, a program I helped to create as First Lady. It will also elevate the Indian Health Services Director to the Assistant secretary level.

When I'm President, Indian healthcare will be a national priority along with quality, affordable care for every single Native American family. I won't rest until I get it done.

Fourth, I will work every day to ensure that every child in Indian Country has the chance to live up to his or her God-given potential. I'll start right at the beginning, by increasing funding for the Indian Head Start program. A National Geographic study from last September revealed that tribal languages are the most vulnerable to extinction in the entire world. That's one of the many reasons why Head Start is critical. It provides a foundation for the continuation of native languages and support for tribal cultures. In fact, more than 80 different languages are spoken in Indian Head Start programs.

I've also proposed universal pre-Kindergarten for all Native American children, because studies show that providing four-year olds with a high-quality early education leads to higher achievement and graduation rates and higher-earning jobs.

I'll increase support for Tribal Colleges and institutions serving Native American students. These institutions play a critical role, providing culturally-relevant teaching, community outreach, and research services to tribal communities. So it's time the federal government gave them the resources they deserve.

Fifth, as President, I'll work to improve housing for Native American families. Today, roughly 90,000 Native American families are homeless or under-housed, and an estimated 200,000 housing units are needed immediately in Indian Country. So when I'm President, we'll invest in building and rehabilitating affordable housing on Indian lands. That means both increasing funding for the Native American Housing Block Grant and modernizing the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act.

Sixth, I'll work to support energy efficient development in Indian Country. I fully support the rights of tribal governments to shape their own environmental policies. I'll support your efforts by creating and expanding federal-tribal partnerships to promote solar, wind, and other renewable sources of energy.

As part of a national weatherization initiative, I'll work to weatherize every low-income home in Indian country. Last winter, the average fuel bill for our families was nearly \$900 -- it's expected to jump to \$1,000 this winter. So weatherizing homes is a win-win proposition: good for the environment and for our budgets.

Seventh, we need a renewed focus on law enforcement efforts on Native lands. It's simply outrageous that when American Indians are twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes, there are fewer than half as many police on tribal lands as non-tribal lands. And with the methamphetamine crisis affecting so many communities, the need for law enforcement resources in Indian Country is greater than ever.

I'll start by improving the collection of data on crime in Indian country. We can't truly fix the problem unless we truly understand it. I'll also make the investments we need to step up law enforcement in Indian Country and promote state-tribal cooperative agreements to reduce crime and keep our families safe.

Finally, on this observation of Veterans Day, I want you to know that as President, I will stand up for our veterans every day. As you know, Native Americans have one of

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the highest rates of service of any group in America. At the end of the twentieth century, we had nearly 200,000 Native American veterans in America. I believe one of the most fundamental obligations of the next President is to keep faith with these veterans -- to provide the healthcare and benefits they've earned and the respect and gratitude they deserve. So I'll fully fund the VA, I'll cut the red tape, I'll create a new GI Bill for a new generation of veterans. I will never back down and never stop fighting for those who fought for us.

In closing, I want again to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today -- it means a great deal to me. And I urge you to do everything you can to make your voices heard in this election. Your votes can make the difference in electing a President who is a true partner with Indian Country. If you give me the honor of being elected, I will be that partner.

Thank you all very much.

Paid for by Hillary Clinton for President

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