

DEFENDING OUR INALIENABLE RIGHTS

**We cannot Fail our Children
Presidential Address**

**PRESIDENT JOSEPH DELACRUZ
National Congress of American Indians**

**SPOKANE, WASHINGTON
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I have the honor and privilege to welcome scores of Indian Government Delegations, and hundreds of individual members to the 41st Annual Convention of the National Congress of American Indians. At this convention, we celebrate the fortieth birthday of this grand organization we call NCAI. From humble and uncertain beginnings in 1944, the National Congress of American Indians has grown to become the single-most important and influential voice for the hopes and aspirations of Indian peoples throughout the United States.

Over the decades, NCAI has been led and guided by many different people from many nations -- all of whom contributed to the organization's greatness. Even with the frequent changing-of- the-guard, NCAI has steadily advocated Indian Rights, Treaty Rights and the right of Indian peoples to govern themselves without external interference. Methods of achieving these things have changed over the years, but, our commitment to these principles has remained unaltered. Forty years after the founding of NCAI, the organization remains dedicated to the idea that Indian Rights, Treaty Rights and the right of self-government cannot be negotiated away or sold to the highest bidder. Owing to the dedication and wisdom of our predecessors, these principles remain non-negotiable.

Our commitment to these principles is illustrated by the 41st Annual Convention theme: "OUR INALIENABLE RIGHTS: Treaties, Land, Culture, Sovereignty, and Government, the Power and Responsibility". "OUR INALIENABLE RIGHTS" is a reminder to us all that we, each of us and all of us, have a high duty which we must perform. We have a duty to recall the achievements of our Grandfathers and recognize the great sacrifices they made to preserve and ensure our inalienable rights.

The courage and strength of our Grandfathers has been passed to each of us to continue the long journey. Just as our Grandfathers served the people, so must we serve our peoples. We must give our peoples a vision of what we, as peoples, will become in the future ... how we will survive and prosper in peace and freedom.

We have inherited the powers and responsibilities of our Grandfathers to

ensure that the rights of our peoples continue to be preserved and practiced. We have the duty to our children and their children that they will be able to enjoy the rights and natural wealth given by the Great Spirit. Just as our Grandfathers could not fail us, we cannot fail our children and their children. We must be tireless in our pursuit of a full life and freedom of our people.

These annual NCAI conventions give us the opportunity to renew old friendships and make new ones in the time-honored tradition of our peoples. We may have changed the setting, but the meaning of our gathering remains the same: we set the agenda for the future of our peoples. Our agenda must permit us to face the modern challenges and find new ways to ensure the heritage and future of our peoples,

I have stood before this assembly, as the president, on three previous occasions. Since the beginning of my first term, I have seen a slow, but systematic, emergence of an increasingly anti-Indian climate in the general American society. We saw the beginnings of organized anti-Indian sentiments in the early 1970's after Wounded Knee, the March on Washington D.C. and after the Justice Boldt fishing decision. But, then we recognized the opposition was made up of a very small faction of non-Indians. Things have changed for the worse since then.

What has changed during the last three and one-half years is that the small, organized opposition we faced in the 1970's has become better organized and well-financed. They have begun to successfully infect the views and opinions of larger numbers of middle-American citizens -- taking advantage of the Reagan "New Right" movement.

If this process is allowed to continue to grow, we will soon face an openly hostile Congress and an openly hostile Executive Branch no matter which party takes over the White House. We will face increasing hostility all around us. For the first time in the long history of relations between Indian and Native Nations with the United States, we face a totally new challenge: A growing popular sentiment among ordinary American citizens that Indians and Native peoples should be "equal to all other Americans", and, that we should not enjoy what they call "special rights" or the benefits of Treaties signed by our Grandfathers. The process by which changes are being made in popular opinion involves a sophisticated, well financed propaganda campaign encouraged by the forces of the so-called "New Right".

The New Right, an important segment of the population supporting President Ronald Reagan, has joined forces with our usual detractors to target Indian peoples, to abrogate our treaties and to steal our lands: They seek to take our natural wealth and deny us our heritage as the first peoples of this continent.

How will the anti-Indian forces work to achieve these things? The focal point of this expanding campaign to discredit Indian leaders and Indian peoples is

a seemingly innocent popular initiative in the State of Washington given the number "four-five- six."

Initiative four-five-six seems innocent because its supporters say that it is designed to promote "equal rights" for Indians and to "send a message to Congress" that it should intervene in Indian Affairs and "straighten out the mess".

In truth, Initiative 456 is a deliberate and calculated , effort to create the appearance of popular support among voters for the abrogation of Indian Treaties, and the termination of the U.S. Trusteeship.

Supporters of Initiative 456 are attempting to create a Political steamroller that they hope "will sweep across 32 states which have an initiative process. The visible target for these efforts will be tribes throughout the land. If such a political steam roller is successful, the Congress of the United States would very quickly become an openly hostile opponent to the rights and interests of Indian and Native nations.

Initiative 456 is the first political hurdle that anti- Indian forces must now overcome if they are to create the illusion of wide-spread popular support for anti-Indian and anti-treaty legislation in the U.S. Congress. They now claim 208,000 signatures on their petition, and they have succeeded in placing the ballot measure on the November Washington state ballot. Numbers like that can be powerfully persuasive to Congressmen and Senators.

Six years ago, we worked together to defeat a Congressman by the name of Jack Cunningham who campaigned as an anti-Indian candidate; we worked in the United Effort Trust to reverse the backlash which followed the release or the American Indian Policy Review Commission Report. We must now work to defeat Initiative four-five-six in Washington State. We must "Nix-four-five-six: the Condemned Initiative"

Four-five-six has been condemned by most of the state's large circulation newspapers, the Washington State Delegation, the state's governor and many churches, labor unions, environmental groups and even non-Indian fishing organizations like Trout Unlimited. The initiative has been condemned by lawyers who see four-five-six as unconstitutional. It has been condemned by major television stations and other public leaders. You would think with all this, the Initiative would be doomed. In fact, it is alive and well.

Our Campaign to "Nix - 456" has only begun, and we have a long way to go in the next eight weeks before the election. The people of Washington State are badly informed about the Initiative and the damage it will do to Indians and non-Indians alike. But, they will decide if it is successful or not. The "Nix - 456" Campaign must succeed in persuading Washington's citizens to condemn 456 to oblivion. By so doing, the elected officials, organizations and tribes will have prevented a disaster that would affect every Indian in the

U.S. Initiative 456 is not merely a local or regional concern. It is a targeted political effort which threatens to roll from the West to the East -- to the Halls of Congress.

Not only are we faced with the four-five-six political challenge, we have unfinished business with the U.S. government.

During the last two decades, we have learned that the policy of the United States Government has been aimed at the elimination of Indian Nations and terminating our special political status. Both Democratic and Republican Administrations have promoted the same policy. The termination policies of modern days which are often associated with the Eisenhower Administration were originally given birth during the Truman Administration. The policy of termination has remained the same -- only the strategy has changed from administration - to - Administration. What does this mean to Indian leaders and Indian peoples? It means we must become more disciplined and more clear about our cultural and political goals as we deal with the United States. We must finally recognize that Indian Affairs is viewed by Republican and Democrats through the same kind of eyes -- their policies of termination and assimilation are the same, The goal of the U.S. government has been to break down our cultures and our political and economic systems. How they work to achieve that policy is the only difference, When we notice a shift in U.S. Administration or Congressional behavior, we are not seeing a change in fundamental policy, we are only seeing a change of strategy. '

Since 1948, NCAI has called upon the United States to work with Indian and Native Nations to promote Indian self-determination. In 1964, the Johnson Administration responded to that call by broadening categorical grants beyond the BIA. Through this period, Indian governments and communities experienced an initial flush of growth and increased local decision making. By the end of the 1960's, however, it had become clear that the Johnson program had increased Indian dependence on U.S. agencies and agency guidelines for spending program funds. Johnson's Administration began to control Indian Governments and communities through tens of federal agencies.

In 1970, the Nixon Administration announced a so-called policy of "self-determination without termination". Indian governments began to work with regional offices of federal agencies. In the beginning of this period, we experienced more direct attempts by U.S. agencies to control and direct Indian government decision-making. Self-determination began to mean that: "Indian Governments and communities should accept federal agency standards and the social and political values of the Nixon Administration if funds were to be made available.

This was particularly true in education programs.

The Ford Administration continued the Nixon strategy of giving symbolic

meaning to Self-Determination while carrying out a program of economic, social and political modification of Indian Governments and communities through federal agencies.

President Gerald Ford's Administration gave birth to a new and even more dangerous strategy with the technical label of "incrementalism." What does this label mean? In plain terms it means "step-by-step economic and political strangulation of troublesome Indian Tribes" -- Indian tribes that dared to forge their own economic, cultural and political paths different from the United States Government approved path.

The Carter Administration continued the Nixon and Ford program, and began to implement Ford's strategy of incrementalism. The evidence of this strategy was and is active Justice Department investigations of certain key Indian Government leaders -- leaders who advanced ideas about Indian sovereignty and Indian control inside reservation boundaries. Audits of Indian Governments began with the intent of intimidating our political leaders and their Councils. The Audit became a useful device to frighten unwilling Indian Governments to align their policies with the U.S. Government. The intent of increasingly intense pressures on Indian Governments was to force acceptance of federal agency control. Ronald Reagan's Administration has continued the policy of all previous administrations, but with a twist. Reagan's Government has worked to accelerate the "incrementalist" strategy with more audits, but the Reagan people have added direct interference in the internal affairs of Indian Governments, pressures to force Indian Governments to accept dependence on state governments and selective budget cuts.

In January, 1983, two years after he began the accelerated pressure on Indian governments, Reagan announced his commitment to self-determination and "government-to-government relations." Within a week, the Executive Committee and the Executive Council of NCAI urged the Reagan Administration to implement the Self-Determination and government-to-government statement of January 14, 1983. NCAI called for a dialogue with Indian Leaders to formally define how Indian governments and the U.S. government would agree to mechanisms and procedures for government-to-government relations. In May of 1983, after having had no response to NCAI's earlier communications from the White House, I sent a communication to the White House calling for a specific process to define government-to-government relations. The White House didn't formally respond even though numerous informal talks took place. I issued a third communication to the White House in June of 1983, outlining a specific government-to-government process. To this date, over a year later, we have received no formal response from Ronald Reagan's Government on the implementation of a U.S. government wide, "government-to-government process.

I can only conclude, after nearly two years, the Reagan Administration was

not serious about actually formalizing government-to-government relations with Indian Nations. All evidence points to the U.S. Government twisting the normal and accepted meaning of self-determination, and government-to-government relations to continue the policy of past administrations -- "get the U.S. Government out of the Indian business". We call it termination and assimilation.

I believe Indian Nations have a right to exercise self- determination within the meaning of this Assembly's resolutions and position papers since 1948:

1. Indian Self-Government according to our own systems and ideas of Government.
2. Indian Government and Indian Community control over our Economic future and finances without external interference.
3. Social values and standards in education, community life and customs defined and established by individual Indian and Native Nations according to their own wants and needs without external interference, and
4. Natural resources, water, wildlife and land controlled under the laws and institutions of Indian Nations.

In a sentence, Indian self-determination is our right to freely choose our own social, economic and political future without external interference. We have said in so many ways that: It is the U.S. Government's responsibility, under treaties and other agreements, to work with our governments and our people to "elevate our nations to a position of equality" with the United States and other Nations in the world. This is the meaning of self-determination.

I believe the ordinary meaning of government-to-government relations is the establishment of mutually acceptable procedures between friendly governments to achieve better relations and a healthy respect between governments. It does not mean bureaucrats "consulting" with us before the federal government does what it has already begun to do. It does not mean federal agency interference in our internal affairs. It means that there is a certain distance between our governments, and the U.S. government which must be respected. It means establishing mutual respect for the separate and distinct powers of our governments. It means establishing direct and formal inter-governmental mechanisms between our governments to advance Indian self-determination, and quickly resolve disputes. We do not have such a mechanism now. We have a defined legal relationship through treaties, but there is no political structure or system through which the United States and Indian Nations can deal with each other. We are forced to deal with countless agencies, regulations and U.S. laws like any ordinary citizen. Our governments and peoples should no longer be treated like just an interest group in the American body-politic. We should have real and formal government-to-government relations consistent with true self-determination, and not merely the illusion. Concrete and realistic measures must be taken

to make government-to government relations real.

In Bismark North Dakota, and in Green Bay, Wisconsin, I called upon this Assembly to become more specific and accept the challenge to work for a new political relationship between our nations and the United States. I repeat my call to you today.

We must say that enough is enough! Our people can no longer accept substandard homes, hunger and ill-health. We can no longer accept a U.S. Government policy of termination knowing the our future is always in jeopardy. We can no longer accept interference in our governments and our communities! Enough-is-enough! We can no longer accept living as the poorest-of-the-poor. We can no longer accept simple survival! We are human beings! Enough-is- Enough!

We can accept nothing short of prosperity for our peoples. We will accept nothing short of full control, under our own laws, over our territories, our lands, our water, our wildlife and our future.

We need a new political relationship between our nations and the United States, based on mutual respect and non-interference in the true meaning of self-determination. We must exercise our free choice for an economic, political and social future. We need a new political relationship which guaranties respect for our borders, our people, and our governments. OUR INALIENABLE RIGHTS have far too long been in the hands of U.S. Courts, the U.S. Congress, and the U.S. Executive Branch -- they have been seriously eroded.

We need a new Political Relationship with the United States which we define and which the United States has negotiated with us in a climate of mutual respect. We can accept only a reaffirmation of our right to self-determination -- our freedom to choose our own future as our Grandfathers have directed. We must take the initiative for ourselves and our children to defend our inalienable rights.

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