



National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

HHS Hubert H. Humphrey Building Great Hall
Washington, D.C.
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“Celebrating Tribal Nations: America’s Great Partners”

by

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Good morning. Once again we are grateful that November has been designated by presidential proclamation as a month to recognize the rich heritage of American Indians and Alaska Natives and their valuable role in helping to create the unique culture and greatness of America. Our theme this year: “Celebrating Tribal Nations: America’s Great Partners” reminds us of the many and varied contributions of American Indian and Alaska Native people to the building of our great nation.

It also brings to mind the unique government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the United States of America. This year marks the 20th anniversary of Tribal Self-Governance. The United States Constitution recognizes 562 Indian nations as governments. Hundreds of treaties, federal laws, and court cases have re-affirmed that Indian nations retain the inherent powers to govern themselves. This partnership has resulted in great strides for Indian people in health status and overall quality of life issues. There is still a long way to go to reach parity with the rest of the U.S. population, but as we work together diligently in this endeavor, we are steadily getting closer to that goal.

We at the IHS have been honored to work closely with Tribes that have decided to take responsibility for their own health care programs. Today this working relationship has translated into more than half of the IHS budget being assumed directly by Tribes in support of their communities’ health needs.

The text is the basis of Mr. McSwain’s oral remarks at the Opening Ceremony for National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month at the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., on November 6, 2008. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.

This year's Heritage Month theme, *Celebrating Tribal Nations: America's Great Partners*, reminds us of the importance of the contributions of American Indian and Alaska Native people to the rich fabric of our nation, and how our cultural heritage has become a part of the history and heritage of all Americans.

The influence of American Indians and Alaska Natives on the culture of America is profound. As illustrated so wonderfully by the National Museum of the American Indian just across the street, Indian art, language, philosophy, and spirituality are woven into the fabric of our nation. Our system of government is based on Indian governing concepts, and our language and geographic places are heavily laden with Indian words and derivatives of words.

Our country's freedom has been won and defended by American Indian and Alaska Native veterans. American Indians and Alaska Natives have participated with distinction in every war this country has waged. The honor guard here today is composed of just such distinguished Indian veterans. It is well recognized that American Indians and Alaska Natives have consistently had a higher per capita rate of military service than any other ethnic group.

Indian soldiers served as auxiliary troops in the Civil War and were active in the American West in the late 1800s and early 1900s, accompanying Gen. John J. Pershing's expedition to Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa in 1916. American Indians were also recruited by Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and saw action in Cuba in the Spanish-American War in 1898.

More than 12,000 American Indians served in the United States military in World War I. And in World War II, more than 44,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, out of a total population of less than 350,000, served with honor. The now famous Indian code talkers took part in every assault the U.S. Marines conducted in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945, transmitting messages in their native language -- a code that the Japanese never broke.

American Indian and Alaska Native men and women on the home front also served their country with pride. More than 40,000 Indian people left their reservations to work in ordnance depots, factories, and other war industries. Indian troops also fought during the Korean conflict, and approximately 42,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, more than 90 percent of them volunteers, fought in Vietnam. In the 1980s and 1990s, they saw duty in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf. And it continues today, as American Indian and Alaska Native soldiers serve in Afghanistan and Iraq and other locations, joining in the fight against global terrorism.

America's political system also owes a debt to early American Indian and Alaska Native influence. The Great Peace Law, which made it possible for the confederation of five Iroquois nations to function in harmony for several centuries, was used by colonists as a model for the United States constitution . . . and a model for democracy.

This is the true story of American Indian and Alaska Native people; one that bears little resemblance to what we read about in most history books and what we see in most museums. This true history, as told by Indian people and other reliable scholars, is still emerging. For example, across the street from this building is the magnificent National Museum of the American Indian, a place that for the first time will tell the world the story of this nation's first people as told *by* this nation's first people. It is a story that is still being told, a story that will continue for as long as our people continue.

And individual American Indians and Alaska Natives have taken a place in the sciences, education, arts, business, and government. As we recognize the heritage and contributions of

past American Indians and Alaska Natives, we also celebrate the vital role that Indians play in today's America and in the America of tomorrow.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have contributed their land, resources, languages, philosophies, and their lives to this great nation of ours. Our songs, our stories, our art, our traditions have become a part of the culture of our great nation, and remain as living monuments to the strength and beauty of an enduring culture.

Thank you so much for your kind attention and for attending this ceremony.