

2023 State of Indian Nations Address
President Fawn Sharp
February 21, 2023

[Greeting in Quinault language]

Good afternoon! And thank you so much for being here today.

I am humbled by the presence of our tribal leaders. It has been the honor of my lifetime to walk and serve alongside my heroes. Thank you for this gift.

To our elders and our youth...

I am inspired by your strength and your passion. You are the very best of Indian Country, and I continue to learn from the examples you're setting in so many communities, from Maine to Arizona ... from Florida all the way up to Alaska.

To our partners and allies standing shoulder-to-shoulder with all of us in Indian Country...

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for your support and solidarity.

And to the NCAI Executive Committee, my close colleagues these past years....

Thank you for your service, your leadership, and everything you do to help this organization achieve the progress that our ancestors envisioned.

Over the past 4 years, I've had the opportunity to speak before Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples around the world... presidents and diplomats... corporate executives and grassroots activists. Time and again, I've found that—as our ancestors teach—one of the best ways to prepare myself... to center myself... to make sure I am hearing their voices and yours... is to fast.

Of course, many of you know firsthand about the power of fasting. In my experience, fasting helps me access what's in my heart—and the courage to act on our shared principles. Deep in a fasted state, I find clarity.

And today, I am clear about this: We have to show up.

For generations, Tribal Nations have sacrificed and prepared to meet the challenges that lie before us.

Eighty years ago, when NCAI was founded, there was no seat at the proverbial table for Native leaders. Day after day, decade after decade, we forged ahead with an agenda that many considered radical.

Today, after nearly 80 years on the frontlines of policymaking, standing at the side of our partners, we don't just have a seat at the table... we have influence and representation across the federal government, across the United States, and around the world.

And now, to make good on that progress—to stand up for our rights, defend our sovereignty, and safeguard our children's future—we have to show up.

After many years—and many lifetimes—I know that we are ready to meet this moment.

After generations of struggle and resilience, we are—all of us, together—as strong and united as ever.

Let me remind you what we have accomplished in the past 12 months alone.

This past year, Native people came together to secure advanced appropriations for Indian Health Services. No longer will our healthcare facilities be left to wonder when their budgets will be approved... or when their money will be sent... or whether they will be able to provide life-saving services to our people even if the government shuts down.

This past year, Native people came together to make sure that the Violence Against Women Act was not only reauthorized but expanded. The new act provides our tribal justice systems with crucial resources to protect Native women and children. And it makes clear for every would-be-offender: Violent crimes committed against Native women and children on our soil are under our jurisdiction.

This past year, Native people came together to achieve parity with state and local governments on critical pieces of funding. I'm talking about more than \$1 billion awarded in grants and loans to expand high-speed internet... \$580 million to provide long-awaited water resources... and nearly \$470 million for Tribal Nations living on the frontlines of climate change.

We have incredible momentum, and now it is up to us as tribal leaders to show up and demand more—more for our elders, more for our youth, and more for our future.

We must show up and make sure that the Farm Bill includes provisions to help repatriate our land, build our economies, protect our foods—our medicines. Passage alone isn't enough. We, as sovereign nations, must have a final say over what we do on our lands and how we choose to take care of our own people.

We must show up and fight for the return of our lands. Our land is sacred. It is essential for the full exercise of our sovereignty, the preservation of our traditions, and the health of our tribal communities. We're making progress in restoring our homelands, but we must redouble our efforts. Now is the time to push as hard as we can to secure favorable federal policies that promote the restoration of tribal land bases and that ensure our sovereign decisions are respected and upheld.

We must also show up and fight for federal funding at levels that uphold the trust responsibility and our legally binding treaties. Because while the Biden Administration has made historic commitments to meet the basic needs of Tribal communities, federal funding for tribal programs remains far short of the debt the United States owes to our Tribal Nations. And that's why we will continue to push for bills like the Honoring Promises Act, which seeks to provide funding to Tribal Nations at the levels we are rightfully owed—and at the levels we were promised.

Similarly, we must also show up on issues such as the inequity of **dual taxation** by demanding that the federal government affirm our authority to tax and regulate commerce on our own lands without interference from states.

The U.S. tax code fails to provide our Tribal Nations the same opportunities as states. Our present is the result of the blood, sweat, and sacrifices of our ancestors. Today, it's our turn to continue their struggle and fight to secure a better future for our Tribal Nations and citizens. We demand that the federal government provides Indian Country with the same economic tools and resources as state governments.

This fight is about so much more than money. It's about true parity in our status as sovereigns, so that we can exercise our inherent powers to better the lives of our own peoples.

And while I am speaking of our fight for parity, I'm very proud to say that thanks to so many Native people working in public service—showing up and making real change happen—we now have unprecedented access across the highest levels of government.

For the first time, we have a Native American woman in the President's cabinet. We have representation in the White House, Interior, the USDA, and the Department of Commerce, in the Treasury, the Office of Management and Budget, as well as the Indian Health Service, Army Civil Works, FEMA, the Small Business Administration and, as of just last week, there is now an office and representation in the Social Security Administration as well. .

We have more Native representation in Congress than ever before, with one Senator and four Representatives in the House—along with many Native and non-Native staffers working behind the scenes in congressional offices who actually understand Indian Country and who work *with* us to make real and lasting change.

I cannot overstate how much it matters that we have Native voices being heard—and listened to—at the highest levels of decision-making. These folks are helping us hold our trustee accountable by guiding the U.S. Government from within. They're breaking down political obstacles and building the pathway for communities that have been systematically excluded from government. And what's more, they're sharing the very best of what our collective brain trust has to offer the U.S.

It gives me so much hope to see Native people in elected office and federal leadership positions, making historic progress for Indian Country, for the United States, and for Indigenous Peoples around the world.

Now, as we celebrate this progress, we must remember the context in which it was made.

This past year—these past four years—have been fraught with economic uncertainty. Environmental degradation. A racial reckoning. A global pandemic. Unadulterated crisis.

Through it all, Indian Country stood tall. Against every kind of adversity, we have moved mountains.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, when many in the United States were still in flat-out denial about the pandemic, we recognized real and present danger... and we didn't hesitate to act.

I'll give you one example.

In South Dakota, the leaders of the Cheyenne River and Oglala Lakota Sioux tribes didn't waste time waiting for the government to start public health screenings. Instead, they moved quickly—first and foremost, to protect their elders. Tribal officials rallied support from the community and organized a team of folks to call and check on every elderly resident—every single day.

They built temporary shelters. They established a 24/7 medical hotline. They created a disinfection team to help essential workers stay safe—and stay open for business. They stocked frozen meat, so that in case of a food shortage, they could feed the community for free. They established checkpoints on all roads leading into the reservation. And when the governor tried to intervene, they pushed back. They stood up for their sovereignty, and they kept Tribal citizens safe.

That's remarkable in its own right—and even more so considering that we were rolling out this level of community care at a moment when governments with far more resources were stumbling in their own pandemic response.

It raises the question, if Indian Country doesn't have a trillion-dollar tax base... or a Center for Disease Control... then how is it that no matter how disproportionately our people suffered throughout the pandemic, we still led the way with higher rates of COVID testing and higher rates of vaccination?

For me, the answer starts with an understanding of loss. More than most nations, we know that when we lose anyone—especially our elders—we're losing even more than somebody we love. We're losing knowledge and wisdom that can't be replaced... culture and history passed down through generations.

And so at this time, to honor the memory of those we lost to COVID-19—our grandmothers and grandfathers, our parents and siblings, our teachers and friends—I ask you to please join me in a moment of silent prayer.

[MOMENT OF SILENCE]

Thank you.

Today, as we gather in-person for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19, it makes me very proud to say that we haven't just survived this pandemic. Like iron from a fire, we have emerged stronger and brighter.

Now is the time for us to collectively look forward and ask ourselves...

Where do we go from here?

After all, the crisis isn't over. And there is no shortage of challenges on the horizon.

For too many of us, **housing** that is safe, decent, and affordable remains out of reach. More than 70 percent of existing tribal housing stock requires extensive repairs, and while Congress recently allocated more than \$1 billion to Indian Housing Programs, we are still facing a housing crisis.

The Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act hasn't been reauthorized for more than a decade—and we won't have real, lasting change until it is. Only then will we be able to increase Native homeownership, improve veteran's housing, and end homelessness in Tribal communities.

And every election, when Native people try to exercise **our right to vote**, we run into the same age-old barriers: unequal access to voter registration, and antidemocratic requirements for traditional IDs and mailing addresses.

Our people were the last citizen group to gain the right to vote. That means, however much progress we've made, there's much more to do to close the gap in political equity. That's why we must organize to pass the Native American Voting Rights Act, to ensure that we have true parity with every other American voter.

Native disenfranchisement happens at the ballot box. It happens in federal budgets and state taxes. And now, we're seeing it happen at the Supreme Court.

In case after case, Tribal Nations' face dangerous threats to our sovereignty. The damage caused by adverse decisions—and the danger they create—are some of the greatest challenges facing Indian Country today.

Last summer, when the Supreme Court handed down the decision in the case of ***Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta***, the majority held that states and the federal government have concurrent jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed by non-Indians against Indians in Indian country. The ruling—and the reasoning it was based upon—is an affront to tribal sovereignty. Although it’s still too early for us to see the full consequences of this decision, we must not wait to fight back. Tribal Nations must be swift and decisive in demanding a legislative response to the Castro-Huerta decision.

I know how powerful our collective action can be because for five years now, I’ve been working closely with Tribal Leaders to defend the **Indian Child Welfare Act**.

When a lawsuit threatened to undercut our sovereign authority to protect the interests of our children, I stood with the leaders of the Quinault, Navajo, Cherokee, and Oneida Indian Nations, as well as the Morongo Band of Mission Indians. Together, we traveled to the Fifth Circuit for the hearing of ***Brackeen v. Haaland***.

And when the case went to the Supreme Court last November, we were there with an amicus brief signed by nearly 500 Tribal Nations and 60 tribal organizations. For hours, we sat together listening to arguments and questions that demonstrated a complete lack of understanding—let alone respect—for the sacred connection between Native People and our children.

We don’t yet know the outcome of the *Brackeen* case, but the strength, unity, and collaboration of our Tribal Nations gives me courage and hope. More than that, it gives me certainty—that if the Justices hand down any adverse decision, it will not go unanswered. I want to be absolutely clear: We will never give up on a single child.

We owe this fight not only to future generations of Native children—but also to the ones who came before us—including the 150,000 children who were separated from their families and forced into boarding schools. As our investigations continue to uncover the atrocities perpetrated in boarding schools across North America, we need to prepare ourselves—mentally, physically, and spiritually—to confront the full pain of that history. We must seek out the facts and own them so that we can eventually clear the path to an era of truth, healing, and empowerment.

Hear me. Hear us:

There is nothing anyone can do—no piece of legislation, no court decision—to separate Native People from that which our Creator has gifted to us. That’s true for children. And it’s also true for our sacred lands and waters.

There is a wise teaching, popularly attributed to Chief Seattle, that “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors—we borrow it from our children.”

At a moment when the Earth is in crisis, it isn’t just our children counting on us. The whole world is looking to us for leadership.

In January, I had the opportunity to attend the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. What I saw represented there is a global community who wants to deploy resources to fight climate change on a massive scale. Not just millions of dollars. Not billions of dollars. Trillions.

At the same time, the world's most powerful governments are falling short of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The world's largest companies are being sued by their shareholders for failing to protect their investments against climate risks.

In other words, the ivory towers are failing. And so, I ask you, in the absence of leadership, who is better qualified than Indian Country to restore our planet's most vital ecosystems? Who has a longer track record when it comes to sustainable forestry and water management? Who can offer a tighter nexus between dollars invested and actual on-the-ground change? That isn't just my opinion. It's a growing consensus. For two years running, the Department of State extended us diplomatic credentials to attend the United Nations' leading conference on climate change. And so, for the first time in history, we showed up at COP26 and then again at COP27. We made ourselves heard—and people around the planet are listening.

Because there's no denying: when you invest with a for-profit business, or even an NGO, it's hard to know exactly where your money is going. But when you invest climate funds with Tribal Nations, you can take it to the bank. Investors know we're going to repatriate lands. They know we're going to value water as a sacred resource. They know we're going to do everything in our power to protect the Earth because that's exactly what we've been doing for thousands of years.

Finally, traditional ecological knowledge is being taken seriously—as an equal and indispensable partner to Western science. It simply isn't possible to achieve sustainability... or prevent wildfires... or restore balance to nature without the practices that Tribal Nations have perfected for generations.

Earlier I mentioned the World Economic Forum. When I was there, I had a meeting with the Forum's chairperson, Klaus Schwab. This is a man with access to the world's leading scientists... the most powerful heads of state... the most influential business leaders... and do you know what he told me?

He said that one of the most confounding things about climate change is that it requires people to take a holistic view of life on Earth. And from his perspective, the only people who have a truly holistic understanding of nature and our place in it are Indigenous Peoples.

Now, that isn't breaking news to any of us. But when I hear it from the head of the World Economic Forum, to me, that signals a tipping point: More and more, global leaders are starting to recognize that they need our guidance—and our leadership—.

And here, I'll go a step further. The fact is, we have sovereign political status, a national congress, and an international network of advocates and allies. That is why we can never be reduced to a racial category or a special interest group. When politicians forget that we have political power, we remind them. When companies forget that we have economic and social power, we remind them.

And we are using that power to make incredible progress for the Earth.

As just one example from my own state when, back in 2018, the fossil fuel industry spent \$33 million to kill our campaign for Washington state's Initiative 1631. Reporters called I-1631 the most aggressive climate change initiative in American history. Why? Because it would have imposed a carbon tax and invested the money—an estimated \$1 billion—into clean air, water, energy, and local communities.

After the initiative failed, Big Oil thought the fight was over. But we came back even stronger. We pushed to include key measures from our initiative into a new bill for the state of Washington. And in 2021, that legislation passed. The Climate Commitment Act will reduce 95% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050—and 10% of the revenue it generates will go directly to projects with Tribal support.

In Washington state, we achieved what no governor—no president—has ever been able to. And just as we did with pricing carbon, Tribal nations are now leading the United States—and the global community—toward renewable energy.

As Native Peoples, we occupy a special place in the web of life. Our ancestors saw very clearly that the world was moving in an unsustainable direction. Today it falls to us, here and now, to fight for the Earth.

And so we will—together, all of us, united by our love for every inch of soil, every drop of water, and every living thing in creation.

When I was elected to this office, I stood before you and said that the real power and strength of Indian Country isn't in Washington, DC. The real strength and power of Indian Country lies within Tribal Nations.

One of the core tenets of NCAI is that we have profound strength in numbers—and in a unified voice advocating for Indian Country. Between all of us, we have generations of wisdom... lived experience... policy expertise... technical skills... a wealth of knowledge that can make a difference and save lives.

That doesn't mean we have to agree about everything. Just the opposite. Our perspectives are as varied and vibrant as our experiences—and those experiences have taken us to every corner of this country. We have lived in every socioeconomic condition, through every human possibility.

We are the descendants of our ancestors and the ancestors of our descendants. When we speak, generations past speak through us for the generations yet to be born. That means every Native voice is authentic. Every Native voice has value. And every Native voice is needed.

Our ancestors understood this very well. Collective effort is something they practiced with intention. One of the most powerful ways we can call on their strength is by working together.

That's why, when NCAI was established nearly 80 years ago, our founders envisioned a congress of sovereign nations—a congress led by tribal leaders. It's also why, as President, I've sought out opportunities to advance the interests of Tribal Nations by working closely with other national Native and Intertribal organizations. You have my word that this year, coalition building, and collective effort will be at the very top of NCAI's agenda.

No doubt, the challenges and confrontations I've described will continue, just as they have for every generation of Tribal Leadership. Back when NCAI was founded in 1944, we were formed in full-on defense against a powerful movement to terminate Tribal Nations. When all hope seemed to be gone, our founders focused on their duty to provide for the next seven generations. They were, as we are, determined to defend sovereignty.

Our legacy of resilience and achievement is what my dear friend and mentor, Billy Frank, Jr., had in mind when he used to talk about staying the course. And so, as proud as I am that NCAI will soon be marking its 80th year... as proud as I am of our history and achievements... let us look forward.

And here, I want to speak directly to the next generation of leaders—our youth. The problems of our time cannot be solved in a lifetime. We are up against challenges that will span generations. However much we do to plan for tomorrow, you are the ones who will make those plans a reality. Stay the course and make it your own. You are ready.

Which brings me back to where I started: We have prepared for this moment—not only for all our lives, but over the course of many lifetimes. We are the honored generation that gets to perfect the sacrifices made by the generations who came before us.

Today the state of Indian Nations is strong because our ancestors worked hard to make it so. If we work together, we can make their legacy—our Tribal Nations—everlasting.

This is the true strength and power of NCAI—the collective strength of Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, our allies—all of us—working together, standing united as one. When any Tribe—any single person—in Indian Country faces a challenge, we need all of Indian Country to show up.

As I look at the long path ahead, I can see clearly that we are ready to walk forward. No matter what challenges we'll face, we can and will emerge stronger. Because our story is so much larger than the traumas we've endured. Indian Country is defined—past, present, and future—

by our resilience and our potential.

If we exercise the rights that are inherently ours... if we step fully into our power... then nothing can stop us.

But first, we have to show up.

For our families... our communities... all Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples around the world...

For humankind and for our relatives in the oceans and in the sky.

Let us do what we can to build the future that our Creator intended, a future that all of us can share in peace.

The time is now. Let's get to work.

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