



**Through the Eyes of Our Children:
Hope for a Restored Native America**

6th Annual State of Indian Nations Address

**Joe A. Garcia, President
National Congress of American Indians**

**January 31, 2008
Washington, D.C.**

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Introduction

Tribal leaders, White House officials, Members of the U.S. House and Senate, Congressional staff members, Indian organizations, friends and family, and all those listening or watching across the country:

As we come together today, I call upon the Great Spirit to be with us. May He continue to watch over the great and sovereign Indian Nations, and protect the United States of America.

Let us remember today those serving in the United States Armed Forces who stand in harm's way on our behalf.

The Indian Nations support the armed forces. Our people serve in the military at a higher rate than any other group. Let us keep them all in our prayers, and support them in word and deed.

I thank those of you listening today for your commitment not only to the sovereign Indian Nations, but also to the United States.

The State of Indian Nations

My friends, I am pleased to report to you today that together, as Indian Nations, we are growing stronger everyday. And we achieved much in 2007:

- We helped persuade Congress to pass the Indian Child and Family Violence Protection Act into law, so that tribes can more easily provide child welfare services and child abuse prevention programs.
- For the first time we secured direct tribal funding from the Department of Homeland Security to help fight terrorism and respond to catastrophic events.
- We also assisted in a series of Congressional hearings about the public safety crisis in Indian Country and developed a reform agenda to make our communities safer. And we secured funding from Congress to create three new grant programs to help combat the fast-growing meth problem in Indian Country.
- Following years of negotiation, we had a successful conclusion with the passage of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- And after ten years we achieved the first step of a long overdue recognition of Native Code Talkers from World Wars I and II. Legislation to award these heroes Congressional medals has been introduced in the House and we hope to have it introduced in the Senate soon.

It was a good year for Indian Country!

The State of the Indian Nations speech is traditionally a look ahead at our goals for the coming year. This year, however, I will begin a little differently.

Today, let us think not only about what we are working for, but who we are working for: the children of our Indian Nations.

There are success stories, like that of 12-year-old Leroy in southeast Alaska, whose family finally got a home thanks to the Tlingit-Haida Regional Housing Authority.

There's 10-year-old Angel, who was saved from the streets of Portland, Oregon by Urban Indian Health Programs, when the Native American Rehabilitation Association took his mother in for addiction treatment.

And there are countless Indian boys and girls who stay on the right track thanks to mentoring programs offered through the Boys and Girls Clubs.

But there are also tragic endings, such as two homeless sixth-graders on the Flathead reservation in Montana who died recently to alcohol-related causes, and the fact that the nation-wide Native youth suicide rate is three times the national rate.

Looking at life in Indian Country through the eyes of a child, there is often more risk than opportunity.

Poverty, lack of jobs and preventative health care, inadequate juvenile rehabilitation, shortfalls in education—all these problems push too many young people into failure, robbing them of full and worthwhile lives.

So our needs today are profound.

- Native children face devastating poverty. According to the most recent census data nearly a third of Native children live below the federal poverty level. On reservations, it's over 44 percent, with half of those living in what is defined as “deep poverty.”
- With fewer than half of Native young people graduating from high school, and more than 8 in 10 eighth-graders reading below grade level, we need better education programs that work for our communities.
- We need intervention programs for at-risk Indian youth, and improved law enforcement overall.
- Finally, inadequate health care, and a lack of information about healthy lifestyles, are stealing years – sometimes decades – from Indian lives. Life expectancy for the average American is 76 years, 20 years longer than the life expectancy for males on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, who have the shortest lifespan of all Americans.

Yet in the face of all this need, I think of the day I held my children for the first time, and then when I held my grandchildren. I remember a flood of emotion. This new life meant new joy—and new responsibility—in my own life.

I remember realizing in a personal way just how helpless children are. They are shaped less by their own decisions than by ours.

So I want to spend a little time with you today addressing the challenges that come clear when we consider the future of the Indian Nations through the eyes of a child.

Economic Development and Financial Literacy

First, Economic Development. If we want to reduce poverty for children—and for all Indian families—we must create economic opportunities in our communities and give our children the skills they need to make the most of those opportunities.

I have often stated that in order to maintain and improve our economic status, we must “grow our own” and make this a part of our life, not just an inclusion here and there, but continuously promote this in education efforts.

Let me tell you a success story. It’s about the Lickety Split Chocolate company, managed by 25 Navajo and Ute children from ages 8 to 15. They live in San Juan County, Utah, where the poverty rate exceeds 40 percent.

It got started when a VISTA volunteer suggested to some kids that instead of asking for money, they could make money. With a little help from some adults to get an award from the Small Business Administration, these Indian children came up with the idea for Lickety Split Chocolates. And after only a couple of years, they’re making big sales, including providing their candy to the Rotary International Convention, among others.

In a place where more than half the population is Native, yet less than one percent of businesses are Native-owned, these young people created their own opportunity and are gaining business and financial skills that will change their lives and the lives of those around them.

The younger they start, the better. Lickety Split candy is a sweet beginning. But we need more investment to improve opportunities for Native youth to learn and exercise financial skills.

Financial literacy programs can help more of our youth see opportunities amidst the poverty in their communities. Nearly nine out of 10 Native students receive a failing financial literacy score. The good news, though, is that when Native youth get financial education, the outcome is often great success.

When our children grow, they need to know that there will still be business and economic opportunities for them, like those offered by successful government contracting programs. The federal government’s 8(a) contracting program is one way entrepreneurs in Native communities build Native economies by helping our people secure government contracts. This in turn increases jobs and business opportunities.

As I testified before Congress last fall, contracting has become a new and vital branch of enterprise development for tribes, villages and communities.

In 2008, we will continue to make our case to Congress to maintain 8(a) contracting programs to raise both revenue and business sophistication in Indian Country and Native Alaska. 8(a) contracting is a way to create more success stories.

Before I leave the matter of economic development, here's one more thing that we're working on, literally, today.

As you know, the President and Congress are now debating an economic stimulus package to help prevent recession.

But with unemployment at an average of 49 percent, Indian Country is in perpetual recession.

The rest of the nation will get a multi-billion-dollar stimulus package that does not help our communities.

Most of the current proposals are focusing on personal income tax rebates. But with unemployment rates as high as 80 percent in many of our communities, these packages leave us behind.

Indian Country needs immediate stimulus to tribal government spending. And the way to do that is through tax-exempt bonds.

All governments finance their capital infrastructure projects through tax-exempt bond financing. State and local governments issue tax-exempt bonds to build stadiums, convention centers and other public structures to attract business. All other levels of government can do this, but not tribal nations.

A small adjustment in the tax-exempt bond laws would result in an immediate infusion of capital expenditures; stimulating tribal governmental spending and tribal economies.

All tribes are asking for is for access to the same tools available to all other governments in this country to stimulate economic growth in our communities.

As the economic stimulus bill is being debated and proposals are being put forth for state and local economies, we ask Congress to not forget tribal economies. The Congress must include tribal tax exempt bond clarifications in order to immediately stimulate our economies.

Successful Students

The second point I'll make is the need for better, culturally-appropriate education.

Young people in Indian Country regularly walk in two worlds: the culture of the U.S., and their Native culture.

The Santa Fe Indian School has in its curriculum a "Community Based" component that reflects the lives of children through the eyes of their community. The incorporation of Native language, culture, tradition, respect, values, and principles are an every day part of the formal, academic experience in grades 7 through 12. This is a most successful approach to continuing the inclusion of our way of life which promotes the continued existence and success of our children in two worlds.

To learn through the eyes of an Indian child, education must also respect the child's way of life.

To Native people, science is not just systematic knowledge about matter and motion. It is the reconciliation of how our beliefs support those facts.

Geography is not just names and places. It's our relationship with the land, acknowledgement of sacred sites, and how and why we conserve our world.

And American history is not just a tale on a page. It's our lives, our families' stories, and we have always been mindful that what is done today affects life tomorrow.

As our young people make their way in the world, we must be sure they are grounded in the wisdom of our culture.

The Cradleboard Teaching Project of the Nihewan Foundation is a great example.

The Cradleboard Project is a curriculum for elementary, middle school and high school students in five subjects: Geography, Social Studies, Science, History and Music. It takes a comprehensive approach, integrating the history and culture of the Indian Nations into general lesson plans that meet National Content Standards.

Six years ago, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. In his State of the Union address on Monday President Bush hailed the success of the legislation. But it has not been successful for Native children – Data from the *National Indian Education Study* indicates that test scores continue to lag behind for students in grades 4 and 8. We are still being left behind, and this must change.

We know that part of the reason for poor academic achievement among Native students is the lack of more culturally- based programs like the Cradleboard Project. And federal law must give us the flexibility to integrate Native culture into the curriculum in our schools.

The Cradleboard program and many others, such as travel exchanges between the Blackfeet Tribal School in Montana and the Sidwell Friends School here in Washington, DC, help our young people to know they are special people with a living culture that is more than just words on a page. It is a way of life.

It is also time for funding equity in education.

The disparity between the amount spent per student at BIA schools compared with public schools is a national disgrace. In 2004, BIA schools will spend about \$3,000 per student, less than half the amount that public schools nationally will spend.

Once again, Native students are being left behind.

Students attending school on the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona should have the same opportunities as students going to school in inner city Detroit or rural Arkansas. We call on Congress to address the education funding gap and give our children the education they deserve.

Juvenile Justice and Law Enforcement

Third, we must make sure that our communities are safe.

Too often, Indian children are victims or witnesses of violent crime. There is a growing recognition of the public safety crisis occurring in so many of our communities. Senators Byron Dorgan and Lisa Murkowski are currently leading an effort for a bi-partisan bill to enhance public safety on Indian reservations and increase coordination among state, tribal, and federal law enforcement.

We call on Congress to pass these changes into law, and to match them with the resources to see them through.

In addition, our communities need the prevention, early intervention, and alternatives-to-incarceration programs that are necessary to get at-risk youth back on track.

Take for instance the Alakanuk Tribal Council Youth Program. They're reducing juvenile crime, improving court responses and developing intervention services by putting elders in direct contact with high-risk youth. They're keeping youth out of trouble with after school and summer education programs and offering parenting classes to support the family.

This kind of personal involvement at the community level is what turns around the lives of Indian youth in the greatest need.

That's why we are urging Congress to include a ten percent set-aside for tribal governments in the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. With these additional funds, our communities can develop supplemental support and alternatives to incarceration. With counseling, mentoring, family support, education, and vocational guidance, we can turn lives around.

Health Care

Finally, I want to mention health care.

I am sorry to report that the eyes of our children do not see doctors and nurses nearly enough.

Indian health care services have not been updated in 16 years. Almost two decades of health modernization has left Indian Country behind. Federal funding for Indian health services has not kept up with the growth of the Indian population, and reauthorization for this critical legislation has been delayed for too long.

The Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 2007 will help bring Indian health care into the 21st Century.

It will increase outreach and enrollment for Indians in Medicaid and S-CHIP.

It will protect Indian health care providers from discrimination in reimbursement.

It will mandate a relationship among states, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Indian health providers.

And it will clarify cost-sharing among the government agencies that pay for Indian health care.

As Senator John Thune stated on the Senate floor last week, —“if anybody cares seriously about improving the quality of life on reservations in this country and addressing what are deep economic needs, it starts with some of these very basic services...it starts with healthcare.”

We applaud our many Congressional supporters in this effort, but we need more champions to step up and demand a vote to stop the health care despair engulfing Native communities.

We need the Senate to pass the bill now, and we urge the House to follow-up with passage this session as well.

Conclusion

As we begin 2008, the view through the eyes of a child shows us that there is much to be done.

Just as an Indian child's cradleboard links the past with future, our work as the National Congress of American Indians connects our heritage with a better tomorrow through the work we do today.

We seek greater economic opportunity and financial literacy, especially by treating Indian Nations with the same legal respect given to states.

We seek to better educate our young people, and to make them more aware of our culture.

We seek to turn around the lives of our young people who make poor choices early in life early on.

We're working to make Indian Country safer.

And finally, we call on Congress to honor the longstanding federal promise of equity in Indian health care.

In addition to this action, voices from Indian Country deserve to be heard in the upcoming presidential election. That is why we have launched the National Congress of Americans Indians' Native Vote campaign. We are organizing at the grass roots level and, with your participation; we will achieve a higher Native turnout than ever before.

Through the eyes of a child, we see too much hurt, and regret, and loss.

But through our own eyes, we can see opportunity, find answers, and make lives better.

It is time to change the view through all eyes. And with your help, we can make 2008 a powerful year for change.

As Indian people it is our promise before the world that our ways will remain, our people will thrive, and our Nations will stand through time.

May it always be so.

Thank you.

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