

A Brief History of Obama's White House Tribal Nations Conferences

By: **Rob Capriccioso** December 2, 2011

WASHINGTON – On this, the day of the third White House Tribal Nations Conference held over the past three years, Indian Country Today Media Network takes a moment to reflect on the meetings held to date.

The first White House Tribal Nations conference, staged with great fanfare in fall 2009, was a historic novelty. It saw President Barack Obama fulfill his campaign pledge to federally-recognized tribal nations to attend and host a meeting of them to hear their concerns. It saw him promise that all federal agencies would develop a plan for tribal consultation to be submitted in 90 days for his administration's review. The 90-day deadline came and went with most agencies fulfilling Obama's pledge, but there were some stragglers—leading some Indian officials to wonder just how much power Obama was bound to wield on tribal issues if his own agencies weren't meeting his tribal-specific deadlines.

Still, despite the pitfalls of working with the federal bureaucracy, the success of Obama's first meeting – and his willingness to keep a campaign promise to Indian country – kept many tribal leaders buoyant. The excitement was easy to maintain, especially because many tribal legislative successes were to unfold in the coming months—the passage of the permanent reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, the Tribal Law and Order Act, and the Cobell settlement among them. All along, Obama kept hiring Natives to his administration and his staffers seemed to be saying the right things, such as encouraging a strong government-to-government relationship with tribal nations.

By the time the White House held the second Tribal Nations Conference last December, Indian leaders were feeling encouraged to become more proactive—to try to get specific outcomes from an administration that seemed eager to please. So they were willing to push hard for a clean congressional Carcieri fix to a Supreme Court decision that threatened tribal sovereignty, and they wanted to see better outreach from the White House. On those fronts and others, the Obama administration came through, reaching out to tribes and expressing strong support for the legislative fix. Even with that support, though, bills to that effect have stalled for the past two years in Congress, signaling to Indians that Obama himself does not hold all, or even most, of the cards on federal Indian issues in contemporary American politics.

At the same time, by last year's meeting, tribal advocates were more willing to highlight areas of shortfall of the Obama administration, such as the president's seeming aversion to apologizing out loud to Indian nations for sins of the American past, despite the fact that American presidents and foreign leaders all seemingly less committed to indigenous rights than Obama were open to

doing so on other Native matters. Why has he been slow to take such a stand in this area, some have wondered. If he is going to go as far as he has, why not take the next logical step?

They were also more willing to pick apart Obama's words, such as when he announced that the U.S. was "lending support" to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at that second meeting. Did he mean that the U.S. was going to actually ratify the document, some tribal leaders were quick to ask. As it turns out, no, the signal of support was just that—no formal paperwork would be signed, leaving some to this day concerned about what it all meant. From the outset, one fact seems abundantly clear: the Obama administration is not yet ready to fulfill all tenets of the declaration toward Indians. Doing so would probably have to upend the way the federal bureaucracy itself is built in how it deals with Indian issues, and no one has heard the Obama administration yet call for a radical change to the current structure.

Today, December 2, 2011, marks Obama's third White House Tribal Nations Conference (physically held at the Department of the Interior, like the last two, because White House officials say there is not enough room at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to house all the tribal leaders comfortably). The Obama administration is expected at this meeting to once again highlight its commitment to tribal issues, including a recent announcement of a trust settlement with the Osage Nation; a newly proposed regulation that would make Interior Department Indian land leasing less paternalist; and a fresh Interior plan for tribal consultation, as well as the seating of a trust reform commission.

All of these developments – and the others that the Obama agency heads in attendance at the meeting are sure to trumpet – have been no doubt welcome by the hundreds of tribal leaders expected to be in attendance at this third meeting. But whether these commitments have been bold enough to satisfy the hopes of Indian country will remain the biggest question when the day concludes.