

Third White House Tribal Nations Conference Launches to Less Fanfare

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

WASHINGTON – Less clapping, less excitement. The mood was noticeably dimmer during the introductory session of this year's White House Tribal Nations Conference. The president and host of the event, tribal leaders learned, would not be in attendance at the a.m. portion. Instead, he was to show up later in the afternoon to meet and greet the hundreds of chiefs and tribal representatives who made the costly trek to the nation's capital to talk Indian country shop.

President Barack Obama's absence was concurrent with no major news on Indian issues being presented at the morning gathering. Perhaps big news was being saved for Obama's promised presence in the afternoon, some Indian leaders hoped.

Instead, a report was released, titled "Achieving a Brighter Future for Tribal Nations," which contained 41 pages of Obama administration progress on Indian country issues to date. No doubt, the list has been impressive – from passage of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to the Tribal Law and Order Act to the \$3.4 billion Cobell settlement. This week alone, the Interior Department announced a new consultation program, a new land lease rule, and a new commission on Indian trust reform. Yes, a lot of good has been done.

But the boldness has been missing, according to some tribal leaders. Tex Hall, chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara Nation, would like the president to have taken a lead by now on apologizing out loud to Indians for the sins of America's past so that everyone can move forward on the right footing. Derek Bailey, chairman of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, has asked for more regional outreach from the White House, especially in areas of Indian country that he feels are perennially neglected. Robert Odawi Porter, president of the Seneca Nation, thinks it's important to note that the Obama administration has actually sometimes subverted tribal sovereignty, such as through its position on cigarette sales in his home state.

"Indian country deserves a 'bail-out' much more than Wall Street," Porter said to hammer home his concerns. "With the same kind of investment tax incentives that are doled out to corporate America, Indian nations could regain economic prosperity and provide for our people with much less dependence on the American government."

And a bevy of tribal leaders want to know if this so-called progressive administration is truly willing to advance Indian sovereignty by following the tenets set forth in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. At last year's summit, Obama said he leaned support to the document, but no official signing of it has taken place. And it's not clear that many in his administration understand that the philosophy of the declaration might actually upends the

status quo of the way the federal government has dealt with Indians since the beginning.

If UNDRIP were being followed, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and all of the Department of the Interior's bureaucratic ways of dealing with Indians might be radically changed; Indian affairs might be sent to be dealt with by the State Department to truly carry out the government-to-government relationship that the Obama administration touts it so desperately wants to have with Indian tribes; and there might be a bit more unrest from the average American citizen if they were helped to understand the extent of what tribal sovereignty – and respecting it – means.

Instead, at this third conference – at least in the morning – tribal leaders got Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar telling them that, “We recognize we have a lot to do,” after presenting a laundry list of accomplishments—accomplishments that will no doubt be used to secure Native votes for the president in the coming months. And they got Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget Heather Higginbottom telling them in a wonky speech that times are going to be tight in the 2013 budget. And they heard Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan talk with enthusiasm about making several visits to Indian country.

Been there, done that.

And then the secrecy began when administration officials broke out into private sessions with tribal leaders to discuss matters behind closed doors. Which meant that the thousands of tribal citizens back home have no real idea what was said in those meetings, and whether they can really hold this administration and their own elected tribal leaders accountable.

During the first White House Tribal Nations Conference in 2009, these sessions were open to the press, and there was much greater transparency for the tribal citizens back home. In the past two years, however, that transparency has dramatically waned, so the press has been forced to rely on what people say was said during the sessions, rather than directly reporting the news that impacts the tribal citizenry of America. With so many in the administration and in Indian country having their own spin on most details, it's a difficult task.

Maybe Obama will make some big news this afternoon. Maybe he will change the tide, make this all exciting, and fill us in on the secret meetings.

Maybe he will help tribal kids understand why new leasing, consultation, and land restoration programs will make them better, stronger Indian people. Maybe he will inspire Indian youth to create a revolution of change.

But that is a whole lot of hope to put on one man's shoulders.