

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 17, 2003

The Honorable John Ashcroft  
Attorney General of the United States  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Ashcroft:

As Chairman of the House Resources Committee, with the primary jurisdiction in the House over the federal government's trust relationship with Native Americans and Indian lands, I am writing you today to urge that the Department of Justice immediately open an inquiry into recent events on the Narragansett Reservation near Charlestown, Rhode Island.

On Monday, July 14, a contingent of Rhode Island state troopers conducted a raid of a tobacco store operated by the Narragansett Tribe and located on land held in trust for the tribe by the federal government. When tribal members questioned and resisted the authority of state law enforcement agencies to exercise jurisdiction on their reservation land, the situation quickly escalated to a violent melee which resulted in numerous arrests and eight individuals having to seek treatment at a local hospital.

Local news media cameras were present and recorded the incident as it unfolded. I am deeply disturbed by the images of the violent confrontation. These images conjure up memories from incidents decades ago, in a troubling time for our country, that no American should wish to see happen again. Additionally, these televised reports have outraged Native American leaders nationwide, who have expressed strong concerns that the civil rights of Native Americans, and the sovereign rights of the Narragansett Tribe, may have been violated.

I am aware that serious, complex and legitimate legal questions have been raised by the State of Rhode Island about the Narragansett Tribe's operation of a tobacco store. These questions have led to tension and conflict between the two governments. However, the place to resolve these questions is in a court of law, not in an aggressive raid that risks violent confrontation on tribal land where tribal members, state and tribal law enforcement officers, and innocent bystanders are all put needlessly in harm's way.

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It has been recently announced that the Rhode Island State Police is conducting an internal review of this affair. While this is a commendable step, due to the lengthy history of disputes between the Narragansett Tribe and the state, the complexity of the issues involved with the intersection of state and tribal law enforcement authority, and the high level of emotion currently running in Rhode Island, I believe that this review by itself is insufficient. Only the United States government, acting through the Department of Justice, will be seen as providing a fair and objective review of this incident and the surrounding controversies over the tribal tobacco store. I respectfully ask that you immediately pursue an inquiry into this matter and to keep me informed as to your findings.

Thank you for your attention to this most important issue and your continued consideration for Indian tribes and Indian people.

Sincerely,

  
RICHARD W. POMBO  
Chairman