

**FAREWELL ADDRESS OF
TEX G. HALL, PRESIDENT
THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS
OCTOBER 31, 2005**

Dosha and Good Morning! On behalf of the NCAI Executive Committee I am pleased to welcome all of you to the city of Tulsa located in the great state of Oklahoma. The spirit, pride and culture of the Indian tribes of Oklahoma are everywhere and you have made all us feel right at home.

The theme of our convention is “Celebrating 30 years of the Indian Self-Determination Act.” During this convention, as you meet and listen to tribal leaders and advocates from across the nation, you will see for yourself just what a watershed moment in history that was when President Nixon signed the Indian Self-Determination Act into law. Because of that Act, Indian tribes have taken over control of their own housing, schools, health care, forestry, and countless other programs.

You probably remember that when this was just starting to happen, nearly everyone thought that there was no way Indian tribes could handle the new responsibility. Well you know what – we proved them wrong. Not only did we make these programs work for Indian people, we made them work better. We made our Indian communities stronger and a better place to live. That is the legacy of Self-Determination.

As you know, this is my last address to you as NCAI President.

This is both a joyful and sad occasion for me, because I love this institution and have enjoyed serving as your President every minute of the last four years. I know that, no matter where life takes me, I will look back with happiness and pride on this time we shared together. These past four years have been the most thrilling of my life and it has been a privilege and honor to serve them here at NCAI.

I want to thank and recognize my tribe – the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation – and the councilmembers and staff who are here. They lent me to you so I could work on your behalf. And with them I want to recognize Chris Stearns who has been both a political advisor and friend. Would you all please stand.

I want to also recognize the NCAI staff. Please stand. They work tirelessly day in and out to bring the vision of NCAI to life.

And I want to recognize the NCAI Executive Committee. Please Stand. For all of the work that we have done together to make NCAI the most respected tribal leaders organization in the country.

But most of all, I thank the people of Indian Country, for the opportunities you have given me to these past 4 years. I want to thank you for your friendship, loyalty, support, and the remarkable strength you have given me each and every day.

Four years ago, I ran for the office of President with the goal of making NCAI a greater and stronger institution. I promised to make NCAI work effectively for all tribes, large and small. I am honored and grateful to report that, with your help, we have delivered. Today, we are leaving the NCAI in stronger shape than when we started.

We have rebuilt NCAI's finances and put them in sound shape. In fact, we received an unqualified opinion on our 2004 Audit. And today NCAI has attracted record level membership from among Indian tribes. In fact, NCAI's member tribes now represent 70% of all of the tribal members in Indian Country. Together we have turned NCAI into one of the most respected organizations in Washington, D.C.

That is a legacy that speaks not to the power of the Presidency, or of any one person. These changes could only have happened because Indian leaders from across the country joined forces and set aside their differences. NCAI's greatest strength has always been its unity. And that is where the strength of NCAI lies in the future.

With leaders, with members, and with friends such as you, NCAI can only continue to get stronger.

With our Executive Committee, we revised the NCAI Constitution and streamlined the resolutions process. We restructured the committees so that NCAI is now the umbrella organization for all of Indian Country. The leaders of national issue organizations such as Sally Smith on health, Ryan Wilson on education, and Ernie Stevens on gaming, now co-chair NCAI subcommittees. We elevated the NCAI – NIGA Task force. Yesterday, there were over 100 people in attendance. When our brothers and sisters in the Gulf States were battered by Hurricane Katrina, NCAI stepped in. This fall, NCAI collected over \$ 5 million for Katrina victims! I was proud to stand with Ernie Stevens in Bismarck ND and present a \$50,000 contribution from the Sycuan Band in California and donate it to the Red Cross for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. NCAI made sure that the help we gave went to all tribes, whether or not they were federally recognized. The Hurricane didn't make a distinction among its victims, so neither did NCAI.

When the Rhode Island state troopers assaulted the men, women and children of the Narragansett Tribe for simply exercising their sovereignty, we stood together with the Tribe and fought for their vindication.

Four years ago, Trust Reform was not as much an issue but a one-sided plan called BITAM that the Interior Department wanted to force on us. It was at Spokane that we said no. We not only beat back that attack, but we put together our own national tribal leaders task force on trust reform and, together with the Cobell plaintiffs, we put forward a 50 point trust reform and settlement plan to Congress. On July 20th of this year, Senators John McCain and Byron Dorgan introduced the Indian Trust Reform Act of 2005, S. 1439, based on our proposal.

I am pleased to report that this bill, while not perfect, stands a very good chance of being enacted into law and truly reforming the broken trust system. Just last week, the House joined the Senate and with the leadership of Chairman Pombo said they too were going to introduce a bill to settle this issue once and for all. None of this has come easy, and there were many who said that Indian Country did not have the will to stand up to the Administration. But we did. And it has paid off.

In the past four years, we also went to work on elevating the political power of Indian people. The Native Vote project has been a smashing success. In the 2004 elections, Native Americans came out to vote in record numbers. And not just in federal but also state and local elections. I set a goal of reaching 1 million Indian votes and for the first time ever, Indian Country did just that. On some reservations, there was an Indian voter turnout of 80 to 90%. That is 30 to 40 percent higher than non-Indians.

With the 2006 mid-term elections just around the corner, I cannot think of another NCAI initiative that has more potential to change the face of Congress and how Indian tribes are treated than the Native Vote project. We are going to continue to build on our efforts and with the help of Indian nations work together to recruit Indian candidates to get them into office. So look around you, you may be sitting next to the next Congressman, Senator or Governor.

NCAI set up a Task Force on Violence Against Women and through this initiative established a nationwide network of domestic violence and sexual assault activists. Violence against Native women has reached epidemic proportions in many Indian communities. American Indian and Alaska Native women experience the violent crime of battering at a staggering rate of 23 out 1000 women compared to 8 out of 1000 for White women. Together with your help, NCAI is making that statistic a thing of the past.

Our Task Force members have worked hard to educate Congress and the public about the unique nature of violence against Native women. We stepped in and worked with Congress to make the Violence Against Women Act stronger and more responsive to the needs of reservation communities. That bill is now in conference and when it is finally passed into law and signed, we will have made a real difference in the everyday lives of our wonderful Native women.

NCAI also expanded the scope and impact of the Sovereignty Protection Initiative. One of the most important new components is the Supreme Court Project. Staffed jointly with lawyers from the Native American Rights Fund, the Supreme Court Project has filed over 15 briefs in the Supreme Court and the federal Courts of Appeal to protect Indian sovereign powers.

The Supreme Court project not only assists tribes in court, but also works with them on strategy to ensure that only the cases which favor the tribes on facts reach the Supreme Court. The project has also successfully asked the United States Justice Department to weigh in on the side of tribes in important cases and to convince the Supreme Court not to accept cases which are dangerous to Indian Country.

NCAI has been very active in coordinating the briefs in the Kansas tax case which will be the first Indian law case the Supreme Court decides under new Chief Justice Roberts. NCAI is going to carefully vet Judge Samuel Alito whom President Bush nominated to replace Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. This seat is the swing vote on Indian issues, so the Supreme Court Project is going to make the position of Indian Country on the Judge Alito very clear to the Senate Judiciary Committee

Over the past four years, NCAI has stepped up its commitment to advocating for tribal priorities and funding for tribal Programs. We have all been let down by the federal budget process. In order to change this and elevate tribal needs and priorities, NCAI took a major role in the BIA/Tribal Budget Advisory Council which I have co-chaired for the past three years. NCAI also created a new initiative to look at the budgets for all Indian programs, not just the BIA and I.H.S. And, NCAI has directly participated in the 2007 BIA and HHS budget formulation.

I want to especially acknowledge the great friend and powerful ally we have in Senator Byron Dorgan, from my home state of North Dakota, who is the ranking member on the Interior Appropriations Committee. Together with Senator Kent Conrad, also from North Dakota, who is the ranking member on the Budget Committee, they are the first line of defense in fighting cuts to Indian programs.

Earlier this year, the President signed the national Energy Bill into law. NCAI fought for the passage of this bill and made sure that the bill protects the trust relationship and balances the protection of tribal lands with the need for tribal economic independence. The energy bill is nothing short of an amazing opportunity for Indian tribes to seize economic control over their own natural resources. For centuries, the federal government allowed others to come into our lands and develop our resources without our consent, or simply seized control of our land to get to our resources. The new energy bill will change all of that. Earlier this fall, I called together a national summit in North Dakota of tribal leaders and industry experts to review the bill and explore its opportunities. I believe that Indian tribes can reap billions of dollars with the right energy resource planning and growth strategies.

There is, however, one glaring problem with the bill. Section 1813 is a potential give-away to big oil at the expense of Indian sovereignty. A group of oil companies tried to slip in a provision into the energy bill that would have allowed the Secretary of the Interior to unilaterally approve rights-of-way over our reservations for the oil companies to run their pipelines. I am glad to report that NCAI stopped this one-sided give away.

But this is a problem that is not going to simply go away. Section 1813 still lets both the Interior and Energy Secretaries conduct a study of Indian lands and file a report on what the value of energy rights-of-way should be and how much should be paid to tribes. We are going to need a team that knows how to work with the Energy and Interior Departments to protect our lands and rights.

Here are just a few more highlights of work that NCAI has been doing for you:

We established the annual State of the Indian Nations Address which is broadcast around the country and covered by the national news media.

NCAI established a blueprint for the creation a national Tribal Nations embassy in Washington, D.C.

We have partnered with NIGA to fight the intrusion of labor unions into Indian casinos and businesses.

NCAI established a national fitness campaign. We partnered with Nike and received funding from Nike for the now famous “Just Move It” campaign

NCAI has worked hand in hand with our friend from Kansas, Senator Sam Brownback, on a Congressional Apology Resolution to Indian Country for the terrible and unjust treatment of Native Americans.

And we have stood side by side with Native Hawaiians in their efforts to achieve federal recognition.

Throughout all of these battles and initiatives, I have tried every day to never lose sight of all the great men, women and children of Indian Country that I serve.

As I leave NCAI, I have a few thoughts about the future of NCAI and the kind of leaders you have to choose to guide you in the years to come.

First, we must always strive to ensure that NCAI works for the people. NCAI is only as good as its ability to treat all Indian tribes the same – large or small, gaming or non-gaming, treaty or non-treaty, direct service or Self-Governance. Our leaders have to practice unity and fairness at all times.

Second, NCAI must not be afraid to stand up to those who would harm us. There is no other way to put it. Sometimes our sovereignty and our culture are on the line. As Indian people, we know that there is no other group in this country that has the sovereign powers that we do. Sometimes that calls for a fight. We need leaders who are not going to back down when your rights and resources are at stake. Ask yourselves, when everything on the line, at that point who do you want speaking for you in front of Congress and at the White House?

Third, NCAI must grow. It is the role of the leaders you choose to breathe new life and direction into the organization. NCAI needs women and men of vision. Men and women who have a track record of delivering jobs and economic growth back on their own reservations. But also men and women who are spiritually strong, wise, and compassionate. They must possess the rare ability to stand toe to toe with the Nation’s leaders in Washington but also relate to the elders, ranchers, farmers, teachers and children at home.

I want to thank all the tribes that have supported me and NCAI – for putting your trust in me for the last four years. You can be sure that I will always be there for you.

I will be active on Trust Reform as Co-Chair of the tribal workgroup and with your resolution will help lead negotiations with the Senate and House. I will still serve on the Indian Gaming Task Force, and also as the newly re-elected Co-Chair of the BIA Tribal Budget Advisory Task Force. And I will continue to work closely with my home state Senators, especially with Senator Dorgan, on new national tribal initiatives.

When I campaigned for office, I borrowed a quote from a great friend of Indian Country, Senator Robert Kennedy. He said, "Some men see things as they are and ask 'why?' I dream things that never were and ask 'why not?'"

Lately, a lot of folks have been asking me if I will take on the biggest challenge of my life, and run for Statewide office back in North Dakota in 2008. I think that today, I am saying once again, why not?

Through all of the challenges, new and old, I will always care deeply about NCAI and the many friends I have made throughout Indian Country. I have truly enjoyed these years at NCAI, but I will always continue to dream of the future.

So, it is with my deepest gratitude to the people of Indian Country, with respect and admiration for my fellow tribal leaders, and with love for NCAI and the power it has to make this our Nation greater that I say goodbye and step into the future and face the challenges it brings.

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