

STANDING WITH DIGNITY:  
PROTECTING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND  
TRADITIONAL WAYS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Before I get into the essence of what I am going to talk about, I am going to say a few words in my own language, my own spiritual guide. [Praying in her own language]

All right, back into the history, just a little bit. For us, as indigenous peoples, first there was the coming of the pilgrims, or non-Indians. They were looking for freedom, for a new way of governing themselves without the oppression of kings and dictators. So, they went out and studied the indigenous government of the Six Nations people. They looked to our ways to learn a new way for themselves. We heard about this earlier today – the United States government was actually modeled after the indigenous government of the Six Nations peoples. I have always been told they only left out two things from the original form – the rights of women and decision-making by consensus. Other than that, the foundations of the United States were modeled on the indigenous traditional system. Something the non-Indians seem to have forgotten very quickly.

This was a new type of government that was foreign to the Europeans. They created what they called the Constitution of the United States of America, the “supreme law of the land.” This supreme law talks about anyone born within the United States, and talks about the people of the United States. But during all this talk about these different things and different rights that everybody had within the United States, Indigenous people were left completely out of those same rights. Quickly, we began to see our people being violated and our traditional governments being torn apart by genocide, lies and fraud. Even though the founding origins of the

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U.S. government stemmed from our traditional laws, when they made it into their laws, they put us outside of our own laws in their way. They did this in their way, but not in our way – and that is why some of us are still here fighting to have our ways and our laws recognized and respected for the first time in U.S. history.

One of the first Acts was passed in 1848, the Dawes Act. This was one of the first Acts under which the collective system of the indigenous people was being broken up into individual rights. Then in 1924, we have what's called the Citizenship Act for Indigenous People of America. Under this Act, I guess, if we were not citizens before then, then we were made citizens under this special Act of 1924. After 1924, then we have the Indian Reorganization Act. Under the Reorganization Act, the United States of America dictated the type of government required for indigenous people to be "recognized" under federal laws. Under this government, the U.S. had all the controls so that these Indian tribal groups could no longer hold their own destiny in their hands. They now had what you call a "trustee," which is the Department of Interior. Every little thing that the Indian does, you have to go through your trustee because now, after I don't know how many years, since they have been working with each other, the United States of America decided that the Indian people were no longer capable of handling their own affairs. We signed treaties with them. I guess we were capable then. Then, we regressed into being a ward of the government.

In 1946, the Indian Claims Commission Act was passed into law. This is an Act again of Congress by which Indian people were to be paid for the lands that were taken by agreements or treaties. It's not an instrument to extinguish any Indian title. That's not what it was written for. Unfortunately, that is how it was used and under this Commission, many indigenous nations of people and their ways of life were totally destroyed.

And then, one of the most recent Acts I want to mention is the Indian Religious Freedom Act. In the U.S. Constitution it states that everyone has the right to freedom of religion, to worship in their own way. That is everybody else - all except the indigenous people or the Indian people. So in order to give us a right to worship, an Act

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was passed in 1978. I guess this will be the last Act. Later, I will talk a little about the Distribution Act, which is the most recent Act affecting us.

Now, I heard some of the speeches that were here this morning, some of which I agreed with. The individual who just spoke for example, I totally agreed with what he had to say. He is an indigenous person of another nation. I'm sure he understands us as well as we do. We go to the history of what happened to our people. Sometimes it's really sad, real sad. And then as we walk, me as I walked through the last 60 years of my life, I look at what is happening those last 60 or 70 years.

Basically, let's go back to the Citizenship Act, one of the first Acts. I do believe that the Constitution does read that everyone who was born in the United States is a citizen of the United States. I guess when you look at that 1924 Citizenship Act, we were citizens of the United States only because that Act says we were.

Then again, we look at some of these Acts, and we look at the 1946 Indian Claims Commission Act. Under this Act, in my opinion, the Department of Interior, who now claims to be our trustee, had a conflict of interest. If your trustee is also representing the United States of America, and trying to take your land away at the same time, that is a conflict of interest. The way I see it, I may be wrong, but I see the Department of Interior is not my friend.

In 1974, the Department of Interior, supposedly trustee to indigenous people, brought a lawsuit against my sister Mary and myself. A lawsuit saying we were trespassing on Western Shoshone homelands, that was because we had our livestock out there - that was our economic living, was raising some livestock. The U.S. took us through the court systems of the United States of America. The Federal Court, the Appeals Court of San Francisco, and then the Supreme Court of the United States of America, which, I believe, was in 1985.

The Supreme Court made a decision, that the Department of Interior was allowed to accept payment on our behalf, as our "trustee", under the Indian Claims Commission finding. For a payment for our land, something like 15 cents per acre. That was

probably the lowest time in my life, because I couldn't believe that this could happen in America, but it did. I was devastated. At that time, I realized that we as indigenous people, we have no constitutional rights. We have no rights under the constitution of the United States, which is in reality the laws of the indigenous people copied by others and now used against us.

And as we look at these things, and we think "All right, we don't have Constitutional rights, then what other kinds of rights are there?" We have what the Creator gave us. We have our traditional ways, our traditional spirituality, we have our culture. These are the things that America did not give us. These are the things that the Creator gave us - laws that we as indigenous people must live by. And I use the word "must" live by.

In order to keep our indigenous Creator's laws, we have to then break the laws of man. The reason why I say that is because our way of spirituality is tied to our land. We don't look at the land as real estate. It is the mother to life, not only to our life but to the life of all life out there. The winged ones, those that live in the water and flies through the air. We always refer to them as our brothers and sisters.

Then we also look at the sacred things to us. The sun is sacred, the air is sacred, the water is sacred, and the land is sacred, because these all pertain to life. You take the water away, there will be no life. You destroy the air, there will be no life. You take the land away, there will be no life. From land come all the necessities of life. Everything we need in life comes from the Earth Mother. And during that time when I was growing up, my grandmother used to tell us, "You girls are like the Earth because you do create life and you nurture that life until that life returns to its earthly mother, the Earth, for its existence."

So with that, now we have the United States of America offering us 15 cents per acre for our life, because the land is life, water is life. But these are all the Earth. The first government in the whole world that is making an offer to buy our birth rights - our rights as indigenous people. I wouldn't be surprised if in the years that come, that this type of practice by other nations of the world is

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even going to go as far as to say, “We are going to buy your rights whether you like it or not.” And that is what is facing us today.

Another thing that happened here not very long ago, as a matter of fact, I think in 2004, was the Acts passed in Congress. Now they are going to distribute that money to us. And the Senators and the members of the House of Representatives from the State of Nevada all got together, and they made a decision that somehow, someway, that through the mighty Capitol Hill, that they were going to push this Act so that they can pay us 15 cents an acre for our land.

I never did want to sell my land because my land is my home. It's always been home. It's been the home of our people. And it will be the home for our future generations. But here, now, we have the federal government, the federal legislatures, destroying our ways. It is the destruction of our ways, because we don't want to sell our Earth. We don't want to sell our mother. And yet through federal legislation, this is what they want to do to us. Please think about this. And I look at it like this: if it can happen to us, it's going to happen to someone else, over and over again. After all the United States seems to think that it is free to make all kinds of decisions where it's going to affect all kinds of nations of the world. I wouldn't be surprised somewhere in the near future, either in Central or South America, that there will be something like the Indian Claims Commission Act for these people. I wouldn't be surprised that maybe they will even take this to the Middle East and to Africa, where they still call our people tribes. They talk about the tribes here in the United States, or the Western Hemisphere, or they talk about the tribes in Africa. We're put in the same category. However, they can talk. And the reason why I look at that is because the United States did come to us as a nation for a treaty. Treaties can only be written by nations, not tribes. And I think that is one of the United States' supreme laws of the land, is that a treaty relationship then becomes international law. And when I look at all these things that have happened in the history, it's just a pattern of the same history.

Now, let's look at what happened on the land. In the 1950s, they tested nuclear weapons on our land. Soon afterwards, thousands of sheep died and the United States denied that it was nuclear testing.

They called it atomic testing at the time. Nuclear testing, atomic testing – the same thing. Millions of sheep died. I don't know how close they were to the area where they were doing this testing, but as we know nuclear radiation causes cancer. Many people in our area do have thyroid cancer. Many people are affected in different ways from radiation from the nuclear testing.

Then they went underground with their nuclear tests. What is under the ground? You have the aquifer water systems. They tell you that it affects nothing, but we don't have to be a scientist to realize that once something so powerful explodes, that it's got to vent some place. And every time that they do nuclear testing, it has to vent, I don't care what anybody says or tells you.

There's a lady in our town and she used to watch the geysers that were active in our area and they capped the geysers off. And she used to tell us every time they do an underground nuclear test, down at the Nevada Test Site, which is approximately 6 to 8 hours drive from where we're at, she says the geysers blew, it blew its cork. So, I would actually say that it's maybe about 500 to 600 miles from the original area. But we see all of this.

And I saw a lot of difference from the time they did put a test ban treaty into effect because we were in the livestock business. We saw the calves being born, so many born. It was sad to see little babies come out deformed. It was sad. And then, we started to see the mama cows develop sickness within their own bodies. A mother cow that has had a calf 3 or 4 times, now she has a baby and her little tits can not bring that milk out. It was plugged somehow, someway. Some of their tits were like a piece of rock. They could not feed their babies. But you know what? After they put that test ban treaty into affect, we no longer have those types of deformities. At least, it's not as obvious. It was really sad. But I think if this is the kind of deformities that can be in the livestock, it can also happen to the human children. It can happen to any child of the Earth, anyone of us. We are all affected by that.

I think it is not right to bring this kind of illness to the creation. It is not right to bring this type of illness to all life. We're talking about human rights here, and is it not human rights to have

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good health? And with a nuclear testing, and nuclear waste dump, I don't feel safe at all. Now we have biological testing done at the test site, chemical warfare development, all these kinds of testings done there. I think it's wrong. I think these are crimes against humanity and crimes against all life being perpetuated by the governments of the world. They have no right to do that. That is not what they are about, I don't think. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I'm wrong. But anyway, when you see all these activities that go on, you cry for a while, deep inside. Your tears fall. But after a while you run out of tears. I used to hear the old folks talking about crying from within from your heart. So I assume now that this is all we have left: very little tears that we cry from within. And I think as people, as we watch what is going on in the world, we watch the inhumane activities of us against the other, and it's wrong. Governments against especially the poor, whom they think is weaker. I think those type of acts are totally wrong.

We see the destruction of the water all over in the United States, I guess all over the world by industries. And I can say that probably the gold mining industries because they are the ones that are destroying our water in our lands at home. But these industries, that is the multinational industries, are all over the world, and they don't give a damn about what happens to us as long as they get money for their companies. It means very little to them. And I think that's wrong. I think that is a violation of any human rights because they are destroying our air, our water.

In the State of Nevada they pump what they call virgin water, drinkable water. I guess there's at least, let me say, to be on the safe side, at least 4 or 5 mines out there that all do water pumping. They call it "dewatering". And each of them pumps over 20,000 gallons of water per minute, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days out of the year. To me, this is destruction of life. There are some areas where they have been pumping this water now for many years. The springs are drier in the mountains. It's devastating. The only thing or the only life that can be up there is man because he can carry water on his back while he goes up there. The rest of the animals depend on the natural water source which won't be there. We have to consider not only that current effect, but in the future, because look at what's

going to happen to the future generations. Being an indigenous person, we are taught that we have to think about the seventh generation which is yet to come. Whatever decision we make, we have to think about those that are still of the Earth and yet to come. I remember one time my grandmother said to me, she said, "Hey, you're not that important. It's that future generation you have to think about. You have to think about the young babies that are not here yet. You have to think about your own babies that might come. You have to think about your grandchildren and your great grandchildren and so forth down the line." It's my reminder of the responsibilities that we have as indigenous people. What's worse is the fact that we can't carry on our responsibilities to the generations yet to come. We can't do our responsibilities because the United States of America is telling us you can't do this or you can't do that. It has taken away our ability to fulfill our responsibilities, the responsibilities that have been given to us by our creator and not by man. These are the responsibilities that we have and these are the responsibilities that you carry on.

And again, as I was saying, we have to look at all these things that are going on. Right now also we have air contamination. The States of Idaho and Utah are complaining about the State of Nevada's lack of regulation of mercury coming from the gold mines in Nevada. They say they are contaminating the air with mercury. You know that little mercury that sits in the thermometer. Well, a thermometer happened to break at one of the high schools in Reno, and they closed classes until it was cleaned up. And yet we have mercury contamination in the States of Nevada, Utah and Idaho many, many times higher and they do nothing to stop the mines, but still they had to close the doors to the school for one thermometer. Yet mining goes on. Contamination goes on. This violation of the human rights not only of the indigenous people, but all of the people that live there continues. It's against the health of our people. It's against the health of the people and not only the people but all life thereafter. I would like to see people take more responsibilities for the health of all life. The indigenous way of thinking is that you are not the only important things out there. We as human beings, we are not the only important things. We have other life out there. We didn't

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give them their lives so we have no right to take away their life. Those little animals, birds, the other things, they have a simple right as we have. In the indigenous ways, our life can not exist unless they are out there because they are a part of the Earth. If you ever look at yourself, see how perfectly your body is made. Look at how perfectly everything is made. Can man do that? I don't think so. I think there is a plan for each and everyone of us. There's a conduct that each nation of people should carry on. Or should I say tribes. In our days, we had the white tribe, the black tribe, the yellow tribe and the red tribe. Those are the nations of the world, from which all of us come from. So when we look at these, I don't know the indigenous practices of the different nations of the world, but it would be interesting, to me it would be very interesting to understand these practices. I think that as we walk through life we should look at all rights, not only the rights of man and the humans, but we should also look at the life of the other creations out there because they are part of us. They are children of the Earth. They were created by the Creator as well. They have equal rights. Let's give them their equal rights. Let's leave a place for them. Let's leave them clean waters, lots of space and clean air.

We refer to the winds as the air. We refer to sun as the fire for many different places. So when we hear people talk about the winds and the fire, they are usually referring to the sun. So with these thoughts I would like to say as these young people walk through life, that they do think about future generations, which could be their grand babies, great grand babies. When you are out there in the world, there might be some future politicians out here, think about the babies that are not here yet. Because the way we see it as indigenous people, they are the future generations. And our duty is to protect the rights of those future generations. And all I'm saying is please give us a right to take care of our future generations. We'll take care of yours too, if you let us. And to the American politicians, I would like to say this: You have denied us the rights as human beings. You have denied us the rights under your Constitution. You have denied us the rights under groups of laws. What do we have? Do we have anything? Are we human? Are you going to treat us as human, with human dignity? That is the question I have for you

because as I see, and like I said, I walked through the court system of the United States of America, I watched the Indian Claims Commission do its work. I watched the so called trustees, actually not our trustees, but they are the ones that are out there destroying our way of life, and so I would like each and every one of you to look at this and find out for yourself what I said is the absolute truth, there's no lie in it. One of the things I have never been able to understand is why is the white man trustee for the indigenous people? I want to know the responsibilities of a trustee not from what's written in Congress' handbook. I want it written "this is our responsibility to the indigenous peoples." I also want to know from the government, who ever that may be, is what is meant by "gradual encroachment." Is that the law of the United States of America? If someone can find me or tell me where I can find these laws, I will be more than glad to look at it for myself for my own little eyes. But I no longer want the United States of America to use the word "taken" and "taken from you" or we "gradually encroached" on you. Tell me where in the Constitution, in an Act or a Resolution of Congress can I find this? I am really sick and tired of being treated not as an animal, but below the dignity of an animal, below the dignity of a human being. I want to see the Western Shoshone, other indigenous people, and other people to stand with proudness and dignity, and with honor of their families, their tribes. So with that, I want to thank you for listening. Thank you very much.