

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BUILDING RELATIONS: ALASKA NATIVES, ANCSA AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

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I have worked with the federal government for the past seven and a half years. Much of what I do is work with attorneys, though I myself am not an attorney. But I have worked so closely with attorneys over the past seven years that I have a very distinct understanding of how important all of your work is, for our federal government and for policy making. In the White House, you really couldn't publish a single paragraph without first getting it approved by our lawyers and if there's something you want to do to progress policy going forward, you need your lawyers from the White House and from the agencies to opine on those things.

I'm first going to talk a little bit about what my work was like at the White House. I'd like to spend some time on that to give you a sense of what exactly it was that I did. The first four and a half years I spent in D.C., I worked at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), an office many people have never heard of. The OMB is generally seen as kind of a mixed bag. Many folks in government call it "the bottleneck," or the place where policies sometimes go to die. But my experience there really taught me what the federal government was about. It was the place where you could see across every single cabinet agency, and

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where you could understand the process of how both policies and budgets are implemented.

It was funny because about a month before I started interning at OMB, I had almost no idea what I was going to be doing! In fact, when I was six months into my work, I was handling so many different sorts of tasks on a daily basis that I only had half an understanding of what the big picture was. And the reason for that is that every single document—policy document, budget document, you name it—anything that’s going public or going through Congress has to first go through OMB for review. This makes sure that the document is legal and that it follows regulation, but perhaps more importantly, that it follows and supports the President’s priorities. So that is a very important part of OMB’s daily work.

Additionally, OMB possesses the institutional knowledge of the federal government in many ways. OMB is unlike most other White House offices because it retains mostly career employees. Its employees span administrations, both Republican and Democrat, and they have decades of knowledge about past policy processes and budget environments. This knowledge is indispensable in the federal government. It is an immense resource for the many folks who come into government as political appointees, those who come and leave with a specific president.

I can remember countless times when I would meet with folks who were trying to get a policy across the finish line. They would have a partner at the federal agency trying to implement that policy and, of course, when they came to see us, what would they say the federal official told them? They told them that OMB is blocking it, that OMB is holding it. We became, not just the bottleneck, but also the folks who were constantly given the blame for things not moving along. But OMB must ensure that everything that goes through the process is actually something that we want to release.

And so that is really where I learned about federal government. I worked across a very, very diverse range of issue areas. I started with tribal legislative policy, I moved on to international affairs, which took me to Afghanistan, Iraq, with national security issues—that was a very, very interesting experience for me. I also had the opportunity to work on energy issues. Over the four and a half years that I worked at OMB, I think I may have literally worked with every single cabinet agency in a very in-depth way. This does not even mention the huge number of independent agencies I worked with. So it was, despite the fact that OMB has a mixed reputation, one of the best experiences I’ve had in government. I was able to bring that foundation from OMB to my next position at the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA), which I just recently departed from.

I am assuming many folks here don't know what the Intergovernmental Affairs Office is. It is another one of those offices whose title doesn't reveal much about its role. When I first heard the name I thought: "Oh, this is the IGA. They do nation-to-nation work outside of the government." That is not true. The IGA is actually responsible for managing the state, local, and tribal governmental relationship with the federal government. My responsibility in particular was to manage the relationship between the federal government and the 567 federally-recognized tribes across the country. In addition to that, I also managed relationships with non-governmental tribal stakeholders—Alaska Native corporations, intertribal organizations, and individuals as well. So it was a pretty broad portfolio! On top of that I also worked on Arctic issues, climate change issues, and a variety of other things.

I will never regret those two and a half years there. They were some of the best years of my life because of the work I was able to do there. I was able to create entirely new initiatives, which had never existed before. One of the initiatives that I'm most proud of is Generation Indigenous. Generation Indigenous is the President's Native youth initiative. He is, I believe, the only president in history to ever have a Native youth initiative, and there is a really interesting side story about how that initiative came to be.

I actually had the opportunity to organize the President's first trip to Indian country, the Standing Rock Sioux Nation in North Dakota. And on that trip, it became obvious to me that the President and the First Lady love to talk to kids. They love talking with young people and having very frank discussions with them. The reason they like that so much is because young people tend to speak without an agenda. The President and First Lady like to hear that authentic viewpoint. So when they decided to go to Standing Rock, we set up a meeting with the President, First Lady, and six young people in this very small elementary school classroom, in a very intimate environment. No one else was allowed in the room and they just had a conversation. It is really incredible how much the voices of young people can have an impact on us. The President and the First Lady deal with a lot of different issues, very serious issues, on a daily basis. They hear some pretty terrible things and you would assume after six years that they would have developed some sort of desensitized skin that the words of these young people wouldn't be able to penetrate. That was not true at all. It was exactly the opposite.

The week after we went out on that trip, the President called a few of us into the West Wing's Roosevelt Room. I was about five or six months into my job, I didn't know the President well, and I found myself sitting right there across from him! He started to talk about these stories of these young people. There were stories of suicide, there were

stories of homelessness, a lot of substance abuse, broken families. We know a lot of this through statistics, but it is very different to hear it from the mouths of the young people experiencing these things. They shouldn't have to experience such things. And so as he sat there across from me, he started tearing up, and he started crying. That was one of those moments I will never forget in my life: that the words of these young people could bring the leader of the free world to tears. And that is also the moment that I realized that he was on our side. The President not only really supported tribal issues and what we are trying to achieve, but he really felt deeply about the issues that we cared about. That was really the starting point of Generation Indigenous, which is now thriving here in Alaska and across the country. We've had people who have been participating in this initiative from Maine to Florida, and the First Lady and President are both very connected to this cause.

Another wonderful experience I had at IGA was the ability to organize the President's trip to Alaska, to bring him up here and take him around our state. That was one of the most incredible experiences in my life, in my career, and probably one of the most incredible experiences I will have throughout my career. So that's an overview of what my federal service has looked like. I just wanted to give you guys more flavor for what it was that I was doing out in D.C. Beyond all that, I am 100 percent an Alaska girl.

I grew up all over Alaska. I grew up in the Mat-Su Valley, Kenai Peninsula, Bristol Bay, Lake Iliamna. My parents really like to move for some reason. I'm not really sure why; I'm pretty sure they thought it was character building. When I was younger, I thought it was a big thing, having to rebuild your friendship base, get used to a new school, get used to a new environment. But as I reflect on those days, and having had that multi-dimensional experience, it has really helped me to become who I am today. Like many of the folks here in the audience, I spent my summers going to my mother's Alaska Native village, spending time with parents and my grandparents, aunts and uncles, and probably a hundred cousins. So the whole family was there, and it was those days that grounded my childhood. That was when I got to spend the most time with my grandparents and learn about their values and traditions. I learned about the values that defined my grandparents' generation, which they passed down to my parents, and which my parents have passed down to me. Things like respect for your elders, respect for your community, respect for animals and the environment. My grandparents used to reminisce quite a bit about the old days, about how the communities were more cohesive and everybody lifted each other up, everybody supported each other, because that is what you had to do to create and sustain a healthy community. My grandpa was actually one of the last traditional leaders of my village. Leadership in his age was a little bit different. Leadership for him meant that he was

responsible for ensuring everyone had what he or she needed to survive. If a family had a poor hunting or fishing year and others had a better year, he was responsible for ensuring that folks knew about it and that those people were taken care of. That was leadership back then. Leadership wasn't a designated position; rather it was ensuring that everyone was cared for and that everyone had what he or she needed to survive.

But of course those days weren't without challenges. Those days had great struggle, which my grandparents would also talk about. If the community had a poor hunting or fishing year, you were going to go hungry. If you didn't have heating oil or wood, you were going to be cold. And of course it was a time of transition as well. The cash economy had arrived in rural Alaska, and both of my grandparents actually ended up going into commercial fishing. These were the days before we had motorized boats, called the "sailboat days," which many of you have probably heard of. These were the days where folks commercially fished out of their sailboats and relied on brawn to make their living. The reason I mention this is because it shows the sacrifice and the adaptability that was required of our very recent ancestors, such as my grandparents and great grandparents. It was not something they had chosen, but instead something they realized they had to do to survive and ensure the wellbeing of their children and their children's children. They had to adapt and evolve while also taking care of their children, their traditions, and their culture.

And so it is interesting for me to reflect on the fact that my family was, just a generation ago, engaging in a subsistence lifestyle and speaking Athabascan as their primary language. This is especially interesting when you compare this semi-nomadic way of life to where I currently am, living in Washington DC, working at the White House, and now starting my own business. Often times I think about how I ended up here or people will ask me: how is it that you went from point A to point B? And of course this is something that didn't happen in a vacuum. This is something that happened because of the sacrifice of my predecessors, my grandparents, my great grandparents, and my ancestors. Because the struggle wasn't just in the past couple of generations. It was generations before that as well. Folks always had to fight to survive. Folks always had to do what they could to ensure that their children would have a better life than they did and have more opportunities than they did. And it really speaks to their resilience and to their ability to be adaptable for the good of their children.

For instance, my maternal grandparents, when their children were getting a little bit older and they were advancing in school, recognized that there weren't great educational options available to them in their Native village. And so they made the decision to leave and to move to Anchorage with their nine children in tow. This is a very common story

that I'm sure many folks can relate to. They left their village, they went to Anchorage. My maternal grandparents had zero formal education or training. They couldn't read or write. So going into an environment like Anchorage was clearly very difficult and there were very few opportunities for them. But they did what they had to do. My grandpa became a janitor. My grandma was a housekeeper. And they supported their nine children and they ensured that their children had everything that they needed to survive and to achieve a high school education.

Back then, for my grandparents, who were devoid of any education whatsoever, a high school education was a really big deal for them. And they pushed all of their kids to get that high school education. Their children gained literacy, they had opportunities that came out of that education, and it was worth it for my grandparents to have made that sacrifice to leave everything they knew: their home, their lifestyle, their family, and their friends. The only life they had ever known, essentially. And it is interesting because none of my mother's siblings went to college, and my mother never went to college or earned a college degree. The same thing happened on my father's side. I oftentimes wonder why that is. I think it goes back to what I mentioned earlier, that even attaining a high school education in my parents' generation was a huge deal. That was the key. And when it came to a higher education, which for them meant college, there was just a complete and utter lack of knowledge about what that was. There were no mentors, there was no guidance, and there was no one who'd done that before. They didn't know where to find the information, such as which schools were available. It just didn't really exist. Essentially the same thing was true for my father's family.

And so it goes back again, this difference that a generation makes, or even the difference that less than a generation can make. My grandparents had little to no education and weren't able to read or write: compare that to me standing here today. I was very fortunate to have earned two Ivy League degrees and to have worked in various capacities at the White House. I keep going back to this question that folks often ask me: how did I end up where I am today? I used to struggle with that question quite a bit, because I was looking for the one particular thing that enabled me to reach the position that I'm currently in. I realized over time that this question was actually the wrong question to ask. I think the correct question is actually: what were the multiple factors that influenced my ability to be where I am today? I think one of the major factors was that of the sacrifice and resilience of my parents, my grandparents, and my ancestors, who fought day after day to ensure that their children and their grandchildren had a lot more opportunities than they had. Another major factor was encouragement from my parents. My parents, despite not having a college education, were incredibly committed. The question was never whether you were

going to college. Instead, it was: where are you going to college? They really set that standard for all of their children, that all five of us were going to college no matter what. Despite the fact that they didn't have their own experiences with higher education, they knew that it was important. A third and also very important factor is information. My parents had very little information and very few resources to lean on when it came to looking at pursuing a college education.

But for me as a young person, having grown up all over the state and also having exposure to Anchorage and the outlying locations, I had experience with The CIRI Foundation, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, the Heritage Center, and a variety of different tribal organizations, all of which were pushing a college education. Not only asking, "How do you apply?" but also asking: "How do you pay for this? Where can you go? How do you work this process?" As I think about the forty-fifth anniversary of ANCSA, which is the theme of today's conference, I can see a direct link between that law and where I am today. These institutions, many of them, are either the direct or indirect result of ANCSA. They have created this immense amount of information for Native people to draw on which helps us get to where we need to go. And of course there are different opinions about ANCSA, some positive, and some negative. The economic impacts have been wonderful, but we also still continue to struggle to secure our rights to hunt and fish for subsistence purposes.

We also struggle, as I have seen myself, with a lot of federal misinformation. A lot of folks at the federal level have a thin understanding of Alaska and who Alaskan Native people are. It is very difficult to try to understand the political and legal differences between our Alaska Native system versus the system of the lower forty-eight tribes. It is much simpler in the lower forty-eight in many ways. You have some treaty tribes, you have large tribes that are federally recognized, and they control the economic vibrancy in their communities. So it is easy to understand the governance and economic drivers as they are typically controlled by a single entity. Whereas here in Alaska, we have a much more complicated system. And it is not even necessarily the federal government's fault that folks do not understand this, but it can definitely get discouraging when you always have to explain and explain again. Because folks have a low base knowledge and the folks that are in government are not always really *in* government, for decades and decades. Instead, they tend to come and go and it is a full re-education process. I know this because I spent seven and a half years educating folks on ANCSA and on our situation in Alaska.

But that said, President Obama's administration has certainly made some pretty incredible strides when it comes to their work on Alaska. For instance, we currently have the Arctic Council Chairmanship. With

that, President Obama signed an executive order on Arctic coordination that created a large interagency body called the Arctic Executive Steering Committee. It is headed by a friend of mine, former Ambassador Mark Brzezinski, who is essentially the person responsible for ensuring that the federal government is focusing appropriately on the Arctic. This is something that has never existed before. It has been incredible to see the work that has come out of that process. The GLACIER Conference was part of that process. And the President's trip to Alaska can even be considered part of that process. It has definitely helped heighten Alaska's standing in the federal government and on a national scale. It has also helped us share the issues that we are experiencing here in the state, whether it is budget issues or issues with climate change, a huge concern for many folks across the state.

But as the President always says, we have a lot more to do. We really do. With the impacts of climate change especially it has become even more important that we as Alaska Natives have representation in Washington, D.C., and that we start to engage more in national politics, because times change and we cannot always rely on our congressional representatives to get past the finish line on policy that needs to be enacted. The President has seen this firsthand. He has had a Congress that hasn't been incredibly friendly to the administration over the past eight years. So he has had to be both innovative and creative when it comes to what work they do on the administrative side. As the executive branch, when you cannot rely on federal legislation as an option to forge policy, you instead look inward. You need to decide what it is that we can do, and ask what authorities do we possess that we can use creatively to ensure that we can get some of this work done. That spans across multiple different issues, including climate change and immigration. Across the board, we have used the executive power in extremely creative ways, which has helped a lot of different people.

Many folks ask: how do we secure this national profile for Alaska and Alaska Natives? How do we ensure that we continue to have a seat at the table, that we are national players? It is a great question. It is also one I have thought about quite a bit, especially in my work for the Hillary campaign. It does not come naturally to every campaign or every federal official to think about Alaska. We are way up here and folks oftentimes have never made a trip up here. We are not always able to travel down to D.C. to advocate for the issues that we care about. And so our interests oftentimes tend to fall by the wayside. One of the several ways that we can help in this process is by being more coordinated. It is very difficult to do in many ways, more so because it is something we have been trying to do increasingly across different corporations and different tribal groups. What I often see in Washington, D.C. is that folks will come to the table on similar issues but with very differing views and opinions on what should happen.

The low levels of understanding and misinformation that already exist about Alaska among federal government staff helps to confuse the situation. On top of this, folks are even less likely to pay attention to our issues when we are not presenting a united front. The other issue I have seen over the past few months is that it is much more difficult for Alaska Native tribal interests and governments to lean in to national politics, things like fundraising and the like, because, unlike tribes in the lower forty-eight, especially those which have a strong economic base through gaming or other means, we do not have a federally recognized tribal entity that has a commercial mechanism. It is all vested in the corporations. And because they are corporations and not federally recognized tribes, they are not allowed to give to federal campaigns, because that's illegal. Our tribes mostly have federal and state money, and so, unlike tribes in the lower forty-eight that can give vast amounts to different campaigns, we get overshadowed because we do not have a mechanism to exercise our political power in campaigns. There are some ways to work around that, but some are more effective than others.

I think another thing that would be helpful would be to have more Alaskans in D.C. I know everybody goes to D.C. only when they have to, and no one likes to stay very long. I have many friends who have come to D.C. and left and have come back and left. That being said, it is always great to have folks in D.C. for whatever period of time they are willing to stay. I cannot tell you how impactful it has been to be able to bring the Alaskan perspective to the White House. And that has had immense effects because it trickles down to the agencies and it becomes a part of the institutional knowledge of all the federal staff.

I am very proud of my time that I spent there, and I sincerely hope that we can get others to come to D.C. or work for the federal government here in Alaska because I cannot stress how important it is, especially as we struggle with climate change. We have villages that are falling into the ocean, the President flew over one of these villages, Kivalina, when he was up here last year. We continue to be at the frontline of climate change impacts and we need to seriously think about how to ensure that we continue to advocate in a powerful way. In the President's final tribal nations conference remarks, he stressed the importance of continuing to press on as Native peoples. He said lasting progress depends on all of us. It depends on our willingness to organize and mobilize and keep pushing for our communities. That especially resonates with me because none of the work the Obama administration has accomplished for Native peoples would have been remotely possible, not even a fraction of it, had we not had the active cooperation of tribal peoples and governments from across this country. My hope is that, as this administration comes to a close and the next administration comes to fruition, we will continue to have that outsized impact and continue to fight for our Native peoples.