

WHAT DOES AN OBAMA ADMINISTRATION HAVE IN STORE FOR INDIAN COUNTRY? A CHALLENGE!

What would an Obama presidency hold in store for Indian Country? Can any of the favored few -- the American Indian super delegates who were so wooed by the various campaigns -- reveal any promises made?

A hint for Indian Country might be found in a recent talk to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in which Obama told them: "Yes, we need to fight poverty. Yes, we need to fight crime. We need to strengthen our cities. But we need to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution."

He told them, according to a New York Times article, that while he intended to be a supportive partner if elected, the mayors should not count on significant additional help from Washington.

"Change," he said, "comes from the bottom up, not from the top down."

That challenge has the ring of a new movement fomenting in the national black community. Perhaps the leadership in Indian Country should take heed.

That movement started on May 17th 2004 with an impromptu harangue by Bill Cosby to an audience which included the entirety of the American black elite. It was a glitzy celebration in Constitution Hall on the 50th anniversary of the historic *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Instead of a comic monologue, they got an earful on the let down they should all feel at the failure of the black community and their leaders to live up to the promise of that great court victory provided for their people.

Ridiculed by his detractors (many of whom are those in black academic circles) as "Cosby's pound cake speech," it is nonetheless a speech that could change the course of politics and history in black America.

Download it and read it; just google "Cosby's pound cake speech." As you read it, you'll be thinking, "Right on!" as many in his black audiences are doing as he makes his way around the country on a circuit of call-and-answer meetings.

He talks of a dysfunctional society, with young girls having babies fathered by young boys, and children murdering children in gang warfare, and black leaders making excuses for them. He talks of mothers crying in court as their children in orange suits stand in chains before the judge. And he asks the question, "Where were you when he was two? Where were you when he was twelve? Where was his father? And why isn't he here now?"

He throws the blame back to the community, and prophecies doom if they don't do something about it, because nobody else can do it for them. Most certainly not the white

man, not the government, not even God. “You can’t keep asking that God will find a way,” he shouts, “God is tired of you.”

Inspired by Cosby, journalist Juan Williams followed up with a book titled ENOUGH, with a subtitle “The phony leaders, dead-end movements, and culture of failure that are undermining Black America – and what we can do about it.” Then Cosby, along with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, came out with *Come on People*, a manifesto and a guide for communities to raise themselves up from victims to victors. In the May 2008 Atlantic magazine is an excellent article by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *This is How We Lost to the White Man*, about Cosby’s ongoing mission. All are excellent reads.

When I go home to the reservation, and as I hear about gangs, drugs, epidemic alcoholism, violence and crime there and on other reservations, it strikes me that Indian country should take note of the Cosby challenge. It is likely that we will hear that same challenge from President Obama, if he is elected, and on down through the federal agencies. Change, they will tell us, comes from the bottom up, not from the top down.

I briefly talked about this recently in a lecture to a group of teachers, and one of them asked, “Does Indian Country have a Bill Cosby-type person to carry out such a crusade?” I responded that it would take a person of great courage, and a person not in tribal politics, because too much of what he or she would have to say would be unpopular truth -- not the stuff to get him or her elected or re-elected to office. Cosby, for example, was immediately castigated and ridiculed by black political and academic leaders after his pound cake speech, with the charge that he was “blaming the victim.” (Incidentally, Rev. Jesse Jackson’s recent suggestion that certain parts be cut off Obama’s reproductive organ was over the charge that Obama was “talking down to blacks” when he invoked Cosby’s challenge to black males to take paternal responsibility when they father children.)

It might have to be an American Indian organization that should initiate a movement to rally tribal communities to organize against crime and behavior that offends their culture, especially on the part of the youth. Such a movement would involve cultivating, first of all, the traditional and spiritual tribal leaders, then community leaders, then public officials, including police. The tribal governments might consider enacting sanctions to help the communities enforce moral or ethical codes. Indian press would be important in their support on the Op-Ed pages. Heading up the movement would take a leader with courage and candor and integrity, and a thick skin.

It’s a massive challenge, indeed; but it is something that must be done for the sheer survival of tribal society.

Think about it.

Charles E. Trimble is an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He is President of Red Willow Institute in Omaha, Nebraska.