

Indian Republicans: Oxymoron or Political Potential?

It used to be said that Indians were taken for granted by the Democrats and written off by the Republicans. If that were true in the past, it certainly has changed with the realization on the part of both political parties that Indian votes in certain states can mean win or lose in key congressional or presidential races. There is also realization that growing wealth of many tribes from casino earnings could mean impressive financial contributions to political campaigns.

In Indian Country, I would guess that registered Democrats outnumber Republicans probably sixty to one, and if there were more registering to vote, it would be more like 80-1. Most of the blue spots on political maps of Republican-dominated red states are invariably counties with Indian reservations.

In my own family, Democrats have ruled largely unopposed. And they tend to be “yellow-dog Democrats,” as Kirk Kicking Bird described it to me: “They’d vote for a yellow dog before they’d ever vote for a Republican.” And I can see certain relatives cringing now as I ‘fess up to all Indian Country....

I’m a registered Republican, and have been for the past 27 years.

The reason I converted back in 1980 is a long story, and to tell it would take more stretching than my conscience would allow, anyway. So I won’t.

At the end of my tenure at NCAI, I found myself pretty much unaffiliated, having honored the NCAI constitution’s provision for non-partisanship for the previous six years. I had been a lifelong Democrat, but I began to get tired of the condescending and patronizing attitudes that prevailed in much of the Democratic Party in those days. From my experience in Washington I found fertile ground in Republican offices for promoting ideas that were generally embraced by the GOP – those of development and tribal self-sufficiency mainly.

Certainly to me it was not a case of great sacrifice – selling my soul for the Indian cause, as it were. And I did not see myself as a “mole” among the Republicans, a spy to keep Indian country informed on their nefarious plans. I have never joined an effort to undermine it. I felt that I could educate and cultivate them to the Indian cause – influence their attitudes from within.

I’ve taken much ribbing for my latent political choice. For instance, at ceremonies marking my inauguration to the Omaha Press Club’s “Face on the Floor” caricature gallery, one of the roasters remarked “We always thought that Chuck was one of a kind until Ben Night Horse Campbell changed parties.”

But that is to underestimate GOP strength in numbers in Indian Country, albeit not by much. There has long been a solid base of Indians in the GOP, many from the Oklahoma tribes, particularly the Five Civilized Tribes.

And if we look at it historically and critically, we will find that partisan lines have not been clearly drawn between friendlies and hostiles in the Congress. The termination era was led by

some very staunch Democrats as well as Republicans. Termination itself was not the brainchild of President Eisenhower, but was an outgrowth of the Truman Administration, with a Democratic majority in the Congress.

The 1970s era is seen by many as the most prolific in history in terms of positive policy and legislation, all of which bolstered tribal sovereignty and self-government. It was President Nixon's 1974 *Indian Message to Congress* that set the stage for that era.

In the late 1970s, we observed partisan role-reversal when Arizona Republican Barry Goldwater took on Democrat Senator Adlai Stevenson III over the creation of a Select Committee on Indian Affairs. Under the leadership of Senator Stevenson (D-IL), the Senate committees were reorganized, and the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee was done away with along with its Indian Affairs Subcommittee. Realizing that the streamlining effort would not leave a forum for Indian input, NCAI and other Indian organizations pushed for the establishment of a Select Committee. Stevenson argued that if Indians were given a special committee, then why shouldn't special committees be created for Blacks, Hispanics and Asians? In the most succinct statement I have ever witnessed, Goldwater explained the sovereign status of Indian nations and their unique relationship to the Federal Government, which no other ethnic or racial group enjoys.

As Ron Toya suggested in his ICT column of July 28, 2006, tribes need to diversify their political portfolios to cover both sides of the aisle. We should not write off the Republicans and take the Democrats for granted. On either side of the aisle there is a wide spectrum of ideologies and interests, and we need to deal with all of them, educating them on the Indian issues, and cultivating their support.

The new Reagan administration brought some excitement to Indian Country; perhaps more relief than joy, after sitting out four years in the SCRUD (Small Communities and Rural Development) office in the Carter White House. In Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign, there was an Indian team that included such stars as Billy Mills and Peter MacDonald, as well as several other Indian heroes of the time. And at the 1984 Republican Convention in Dallas, there were many Indians in attendance, including some well-known tribal leaders. And in the ensuing frenzy for political appointments, Indians claiming allegiance to the GOP emerged from all quarters to vie for high positions.

In 1984 the American Indian National Republican Federation was spawned. I was one of the people who devised the structure and wrote the constitution and bylaws for the new AINRF organization. The idea sprang from the positive response and support I received from the Republican National Committee in our fight against the so-called Backlash Bills in the late 1970s. Then, along with Kirk Kicking Bird and Bob McLaughlin or Standing Rock, I wrote the Reagan platform in 1984, which was adopted word for word by the NRC.

The AINRF was placed in the Heritage Groups Council of the National Republican Committee, with Hispanic and Asian groups and other ethnic interests. This gave us another field to cultivate among those groups; and they, as minorities themselves, responded favorably.

The AINRF organization did not have in mind supplanting the tribal leadership or their

organizations in dealing with the Republicans on policy or legislation. Instead, it was to help make the Party's leaders more aware of Indian positions, and to warm up relations between the Party and the Tribes. In various campaigns, for example, AINRF offered to assist Republican Congressional candidates to get tribal support. This we did by helping them lay out pro-tribal position papers on key issues of sovereignty, jurisdiction and development. Then we provided guidance in communicating with tribal leaders among their constituencies.

These were exciting times, and we felt we gained a foothold in the Republican Party. But, although it had a solid core of serious people with their main interest being that of giving voice to Indian Country in the Party's priorities, some AINRF leaders saw the organization mainly as a base of support for their personal ambitions for high office. Arguing, and jockeying for position in a growing atmosphere of intrigue dragged the NARF down and finally sank it.

It was a noble effort, and should be tried again. We should have learned by now what gross ambition and power-hunger will do, and put in place an organization that can deal with it. It would be good to be in a "win-win" situation where the tribes would be safe and confident, whichever party is in office.

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