

Obama: Hope, not Answers...

Two recent articles in Indian Country Today caught my attention. One by Ron His Horse is Thunder and co-signed by several tribal leaders is titled "Is Obama's Election a 'New Day' for Native Americans?" The other article was by Lakota journalist Kevin Abourezk titled "Tribes shouldn't stop with stimulus win." Both pieces reflect the great stir of hope that Obama's election and subsequent actions have generated.

Abourezk's article starts, "Since the election of Barack Obama in November, an unfamiliar energy has infected the spirits of Native people across the country." He goes on to describe what the chairman of the Democratic Party's Native American Caucus called "a sense of renewal, a hope for meaningful change never felt before."

For himself, Abourezk writes, "I'll call it the Year of the Indian."

These and other articles describe euphoria running throughout Indian Country. And there is reason for the hope that President Obama's attitudes, words, and actions inspire across the land. Nevertheless, the real challenge remains ours. The President can only give hope; he can only inspire our actions. The rest is on our side to do something with it.

The same is true in the national black community. Louis Farrakhan in a speech to thousands of followers recently at the Nation of Islam's annual Saviors' Day convention, put it succinctly: "Brother Barrack has enlivened black people to possibility, and we must not let that energy die. And we must not allow our people to live in a false world of euphoria that would give way to great despair if we don't take on our shoulders the responsibility that God has placed on us to get up and do something for ourselves." "We must accept our responsibility to build our communities," he said.

Farrakhan's words are resonating throughout the black community in the US, far beyond his constituency in the Nation of Islam. His is the same admonition shouted out by Bill Cosby in 2004, who has since taken that message on the road. And, if we recall what President Obama has told us throughout the campaign, we would see that same message. "Change comes from the bottom up, not top down."

We have got to build our communities ourselves; nobody can do it for us. It is a message that must be taken seriously in the Indian community.

Farrakhan's warning about the "false world of euphoria that would give way to great despair" is especially important to us. Our euphoria is indeed justified. With the combined outlays from the stimulus "bailout" and the annual federal budget, we are seeing the largest funding ever for Indian country. We are seeing Native Americans being appointed to positions of influence and authority in the Interior Department and other agencies, and in the White House itself. We are also seeing new energy and focus in Indian affairs in the Congress. We are seeing the National Congress of American Indians more organized and more visible than ever in history, and more connected in the powerful offices of the Administration and the Congress. Again, as we so often heard throughout the 1970s, we hear "This is the Year of the Indian."

But we must keep in mind the historically unique situation America is presently engaged in – it is one of sheer economic survival, not growth. And like the ill-fated 1960s War on Poverty -- the very costly effort to eradicate poverty in America, this emergency situation we are in cannot last. As did the War on Poverty, it will leave the poverty sectors of the country, including Indian reservations, in shambles if we do not make the most of what is coming our way in terms of funds and in laws and policy recognizing and respecting our sovereignty.

True, on the national front this is the best that it has ever been; but it cannot and will not last. And we have to ask ourselves, “Will the people in our tribal homelands be better off after the money is spent?” If our leaders at the tribal levels do not engage the people in solving the challenges that face them in their daily lives, the answer must be a resounding “NO.” Things will not be better, they will be worse.

It would be good for us to keep in mind the words of Professor Bill Yellowtail of the Crow Nation, “First, we Indians must reconstruct the important value of Indian sovereignty. Notice that I did not say tribal sovereignty. Indian sovereignty is the personal autonomy and dignity that comes from self-sufficiency.”

President Obama offers hope, not answers. That’s our job.

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