

# **Native American Apology Resolution**

## ***S.J.Res.15***

**Testimony of  
Senator Sam Brownback  
before the  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**

*May 25, 2005*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am honored to sit before this Committee today to speak about an issue that I believe is very important to the health of the United States and has lain unresolved for far too long. That issue is our nation's relationship with the Native peoples of this land.

Mr. Chairman, every Member of this Committee is very familiar with the legacy of the Native Tribes on our continent. We know that long before 1776 and the establishment of the United States of America, this land was inhabited by numerous nations. Like our nation, many of these peoples held a strong belief in the Creator and maintained a powerful physical and spiritual connection to this land. They sowed the land, tilled it, journeyed it, and protected it.

My constituents in Kansas have a similar attachment to the land. Like many in my state, I was raised on the land. I grew up farming it and caring for it. I, and many in my state, established a connection to it. We care for our nation and the land of our forefathers so greatly that we, too, are willing to serve and protect it, as faithful stewards of the creation God has blessed us with. I believe without a doubt that citizens across this nation share in this sentiment and know its unifying power. Americans have stood side-by-side for centuries to defend and benefit this land we love.

Both the Founding Fathers of the United States and the indigenous Tribes that lived here were attached to this land. Both sought to steward and protect it. There were several instances of collegiality and cooperation between our forebearers – for example, in Jamestown, Virginia, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and in aid to explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Yet, sadly, since the formation of the American Republic, numerous conflicts have ensued between our government and many of these Tribes – conflicts in which warriors on all sides fought courageously and in which all sides suffered. Yet, even from the earliest days of our Republic, there existed a sentiment that honorable dealings and peaceful coexistence were preferable to bloodshed. Indeed, our predecessors in Congress in 1787 stated in the Northwest Ordinance, “The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians.”

Many treaties were made between this Republic and the American Indian Tribes. Treaties, we know, are far more than words on a page. Treaties are our word, our bond.

Treaties with other governments are not to be treated lightly. Unfortunately, too often the United States of America did not uphold its responsibilities as stated in its covenants with the Native American Tribes. Too often, Mr. Chairman, our government broke its oaths to the Native peoples.

For too long, relations between the United States and the Native peoples of this land have been in disrepair. For too much of our history, Federal-Tribal relations have been marked by broken treaties, mistreatment, and dishonorable dealings. I believe it is time we worked to restore these relationships to good health. While we cannot erase the record of our past, I am confident that we can acknowledge our past failures, express sincere regrets, and work toward establishing a brighter future for all Americans. It is in this spirit of hope for our land that I have introduced Senate Joint Resolution 15 to extend a formal apology from the United States to Tribal governments and Native people nationwide.

I want my fellow Senators to know that the resolution I have introduced does not dismiss the valiance of our American soldiers who fought bravely for their families in wars between the United States and a number of the Indian Tribes. Nor does this resolution cast all the blame for the various battles on one side or another. What this resolution does do is recognize and honor the importance of Native Americans to this land and to our nation – in the past and today - and offers an official apology to the Native peoples for the poor and painful choices our government sometimes made to disregard its solemn word.

Mr. Chairman, this is a resolution of apology and a resolution of reconciliation. It is a first step toward healing the wounds that have divided us for so long - a potential foundation for a new era of positive relations between Tribal governments and the Federal government. It is time - it is past time - for us to heal our land of division, all divisions, and bring us together as one people.

Before reconciliation, there must be recognition and repentance. Before there is a durable relationship, there must be understanding. This resolution will not authorize or serve as a settlement of any claim against the United States, nor will it resolve the many challenges still facing Native peoples. But it does recognize the negative impact of numerous deleterious Federal acts and policies on Native Americans and their cultures. Moreover, it begins the effort of reconciliation by recognizing past wrongs and repenting for them.

Before I close, allow me to commend President Bush for his poignant words in Latvia earlier this month. His expression of regret for America's choice to stand idly by as the Soviet Empire swallowed up the Baltic Republics and its complicity in the Yalta agreement that followed "in the unjust tradition of Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact" was to me very moving and significant. I was also encouraged by the President's statement that as America matured as a democracy, "The only way we found to rise above the injustices of our history was to reject segregation, to move beyond mere tolerance, and to affirm the brotherhood of everyone in our land." I sincerely hope we

can affirm the brotherhood of this land between all people groups, especially the Native people with whom the United States' Government has a special covenant relationship. The United States is admired by many around the world as a beacon of freedom and a respector of human dignity. I hope we can recognize our wrongs against our Native brothers and seek healing.

Martin Luther King, a true reconciler, once said, "The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community." This resolution is not the end. But, perhaps it signals the beginning of the end of division and the faint first light and first fruits of the creation of beloved community.

In the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, I worked with the Chairman and Ranking Member of this Committee, Senator Campbell and Senator Inouye, in crafting this apology resolution. I also reached out to the Native Tribes as this bill was being formed, and I continue to receive helpful and supportive feedback from them. The resolution before us today, S.J.Res.15, is identical to the version that was approved unanimously by this Committee last year. I sincerely request that my colleagues in this Chamber, and those in the House of Representatives, would join together in support of this important resolution.