

**Testimony
of
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Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
Before the
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Committee on Indian Affairs
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Good Afternoon, Chairman Hoeven, Vice-Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I would also like to extend a thank you to my fellow Montana Senators, Steve Daines and Jon Tester, for their service on this Committee and for welcoming me here today. This is my first hearing since being confirmed as Secretary of the Interior and it is truly an honor to be here before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs to discuss the Trump Administration's vision for Indian Country. I am also fortunate to share the panel today with an esteemed group of Tribal leaders from across the country. I look forward to working together with each of you as equals to grow and strengthen Indian Country.

I entered the Department just a few days ago, but the importance of my mission to partner with American Indians and Alaska Natives is one I do not take lightly. It is an issue of incredible importance to me personally. Regardless of political party, our duty as Americans is to uphold our trust responsibilities and consult and collaborate on a government-to-government basis with Tribes from Maine to Alaska.

Growing up in Montana, I learned very quickly that our Tribes are not monolithic. There are seven federally recognized Tribes in Montana, along with the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians who are in the midst of the federal recognition process. Each of them are spread throughout the entire state, working on their diverse priorities to provide for their people. In whatever form their economic development takes, from online lending to energy development, all tribes are sovereign and we must respect their right to self-determination.

In my experience, one thing is clear: sovereignty should mean something. As Montana's lone Congressman, I made it my priority to remain accessible to each of our Tribal members, from the Crow Nation to the Blackfeet Nation, so we could collaborate on their priorities on a leader-to-leader basis. I viewed them as equals, not rivals. We shared and debated our priorities and ideas while seeking common ground. As a warrior, I respected their culture and traditions greatly and I agree with the core value, 'if you have to fight, fight for your people.'

I am incredibly proud of the work Congress did to advance Montana tribes' priorities, such as the Blackfeet Water Rights Settlement, which was signed into law as part of the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act. The warriors of the Blackfeet Nation, led by

Chairman Harry Barnes, greatly sacrificed time and resources for this historic achievement. Congress also made tremendous headway on the Little Shell Federal Recognition bill, which passed out of the House Committee on Natural Resources for the first time in history. And lastly, Congress worked with the Crow Nation to support their energy development potential by extending the Indian Coal Production Tax Credit and demanding their rightful seat at the table with the federal government to actualize their treaty rights. I am grateful to have Chairman A.J. Not Afraid sitting next to me today to tell his story about their future goals and priorities for success and look forward to working together in my new capacity of Secretary of the Interior.

I now have the honor to lead the very Department that, unfortunately, has not always stood shoulder to shoulder with many of the Tribal communities for which it is tasked to fight. Many reservations continue to struggle with high unemployment rates and a lack of business opportunities. Indian schools, roads, and houses are literally falling apart. Despite all this, the Administration has an opportunity to foster a period of economic productivity through improved infrastructure and expanded access to an all-of-the-above energy development approach. I fully understand that not all nations have access to energy resources or choose to develop them and I respect their position. As I have mentioned earlier, sovereignty should mean something and the decision to develop resources is one that each tribe must make for itself.

The President has remained steadfast in his commitment to infrastructure and seeks to address the excessive maintenance backlog that directly impedes our nation's economic growth and potential. Safe roads and bridges support Tribal economic self-determination by incentivizing investment in tribal communities. My team at Interior is already working to identify these top priorities within Indian country. I look forward to working with each of you here today and the Tribal leadership across our nation to continue this important discussion.

While economic development and infrastructure investments will play an important role in revitalizing Native communities, the immediate issues facing the Bureau of Indian Education must be addressed to ensure long-term stability in Indian country. I read the Government Accountability Office (GAO) High Risk Report for 2017; the determinations were disheartening and devastating. Words cannot capture how terrible it is that children in schools overseen by Bureau of Indian Education are so poorly served. Each of them deserves a high-quality education that prepares them for the future. Having served as Chairman of the Senate Education Committee during my time in the Montana State Legislature, I have a keen interest in education in rural communities. It is unacceptable that some of our students are attending schools that lack the most basic necessities, like insulation and clean water. We must also craft clear standards, develop measures for assessment, hire qualified teachers and principals to provide much needed leadership, and hold people accountable for mistakes. I do not expect to resolve these issues quickly, but I am personally invested in making real changes that will last.

There are plenty of other issues I know we will grapple with during my tenure at Interior. I have plenty to learn, but with your assistance I remain optimistic that we can work together with Tribes to foster stronger and more resilient Native communities.

Conclusion

One of the great privileges of my life was participating in the memorial ceremony for Michael Bell, a fellow Navy SEAL from the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribe. In between deployments in 2006, he was tragically murdered. Mike was a warrior I had the privilege of instructing as he began his SEAL career. To meet his family and pay respect to the life and sacrifices he made was truly humbling. In an incredibly moving tribute that same day, I was adopted into the Assiniboine family as an honorary member, and given a name and song.

I carry the honor of my traditional name, Wowonga Intacha, *Seal Leader*, with me today. As Secretary of the Interior, I will hold true the sacred words of my song, ‘as I walk this road in life, I will help people as I go.’ That said, there is strength in numbers, which is why I will need each and every one of you to assist me. This includes being accountable for your actions as we warrior ahead and make tough decisions to strengthen Tribal communities. In the SEALs, we are frequently reminded that “The Only Easy Day was Yesterday.” As we begin the hard work before us, we must recognize that failure is not an option. I am here to listen, to accomplish your goals, and to move Indian Country forward to the best of my ability.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with the Committee. I look forward to working with you all and Tribes across the country to better the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education, and all programs at Interior that impact Indian Country.