



National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month November 2004

“Preserving the Treasure”

Keynote Address
of

Charles W. Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.

Assistant Surgeon General
Director, Indian Health Service
November 1, 2004

OS



ACF



AOA

CDC

CMS

FDA



SAMHSA

President Bush has proclaimed November as a month to recognize the rich heritage of American Indians and Alaska Natives and their many valuable contributions to the culture and greatness of America. Our theme this year, *Native Culture = National Treasure, Keeping it Alive and Well*, reminds us of the importance of preserving the diverse cultural heritage of our people, and of how our cultural heritage has become a part of the history and heritage of all Americans.

To all American Indians and Alaska Natives across the nation, I would like to say - that in order to survive as a people, we must work to keep our traditions, our languages, our art, our music, our stories, our values - *our heritage* - alive. To all other Americans I say - in order to keep from losing forever a valuable part of our history that began even before the birth of our nation, we must all commit to preserving these unique cultural treasures for the benefit of generations to come.

The influence of American Indians and Alaska Natives on the culture of America is profound. Indian art, language, philosophy, and spirituality are woven into the fabric of our nation. Our system of government is based on Indian governing concepts, and our language is heavily laden with Indian words and derivatives of words.

Our country's freedom has been won and defended by American Indian and Alaska Native veterans. As the war on terrorism takes its toll on America's mind and heart, we are reminded that American Indians and Alaska Natives have participated with distinction in every war this country has ever known. The honor guard here today is composed of just such distinguished Indian veterans. It is well recognized that, historically, American Indians and Alaska Natives have a higher per capita rate of military service than any other ethnic group.

Indian soldiers served as auxiliary troops in the Civil War and were active in the American West in the late 1800s and early 1900s, accompanying Gen. John J. Pershing's expedition to

Mexico in pursuit of Poncho Villa in 1916. American Indians were also recruited by Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and saw action in Cuba in the Spanish-American War in 1898. More than 12,000 American Indians served in the United States military in World War I.

In World War II, more than 44,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, out of a total population of less than 350,000, served with honor. The now famous Indian code talkers took part in every assault the U.S. Marines conducted in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945, transmitting messages in their native language -- a code that the Japanese never broke.

American Indian and Alaska Native men and women on the home front also served their country with pride. More than 40,000 Indian people left their reservations to work in ordnance depots, factories, and other war industries. American Indians and Alaska Natives also invested more than \$50 million in war bonds, and contributed generously to the Red Cross and the Army and Navy Relief societies.

Indian troops also fought during the Korean conflict, and approximately 42,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, more than 90 percent of them volunteers, fought in Vietnam. In the 1980s and 1990s, they saw duty in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf. And it continues today, as American Indian and Alaska Native soldiers serve in Afghanistan and Iraq and other locations, joining in the fight against global terrorism.

America's political system also owes a debt to early American Indian and Alaska Native influence. The Great Peace Law, which made it possible for the confederation of five Iroquois Nations to function in harmony for several centuries, was used by colonists as a model for the United States constitution . . . and a model for democracy.

This is the true story of American Indian and Alaska Native people; one that bears little resemblance to what we read about in most history books and what we see in most museums. This true history, as told by Indian people and other reliable scholars, is still emerging. For example, across the street from this building is the magnificent National Museum of the American Indian, a place that for the first time will tell the world the story of this nation's first people as told by this nation's first people. It is a story that is still being told, and one that will continue for as long as our people continue.

Some Indian Tribes and cultures have managed to endure through centuries of exploitation, hardship, and disruption of their traditional lives. However, many Tribes and traditional cultures did not survive. Many rich cultural treasures, including an estimated 150 unique native languages, are lost forever. This vanished history and heritage is indeed a tragic loss.

However, much has also been saved. Although entire native languages have been lost, many individual words still endure, as a part of American language and culture. In fact, Indian words are so much a part of America's everyday language that we are not even conscious of their origin. At least half of all our state names are derived from Indian languages, including Texas, the home state of President Bush, which derives from an Indian word meaning "friends." Hundreds of American rivers, lakes, cities, creeks, mountains, plains, and foods derive their names from Indian words. Four of the five Great Lakes bear Indian names, and over a third of the counties in New York and Michigan have names drawn from Indian languages. Indian words are also represented in political and philosophical concepts. For example, the word "caucus" comes from an Indian word meaning "counselor."

And many Tribes have endured. American Indians and Alaska Natives have taken a place in the sciences, education, arts, business, and government. As we celebrate the heritage and

contributions of past American Indians and Alaska Natives, we also celebrate the vital role that Indians play in today's America and in the America of tomorrow.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have contributed their language, their philosophy, and their lives to this great nation of ours. Our songs, our stories, our art, our traditions-- must not become fossils of the past, but remain as living monuments to the strength and beauty of an enduring culture.

Thank you for attending this ceremony.

* * *