

Mankiller lecture, 11/9/05

“Context Is Everything: History and Culture in Contemporary Tribal Life”

It is an honor to serve as the 25th Wayne Morse Professor. This has been an incredibly rich experience. I have especially enjoyed the time in the classroom with students and with my team teacher, Dr. Rennard Strickland. In conjunction with my visit, the Wayne Morse Center staff, Margaret Hallock, with the assistance of Kim O'Brien, sponsored a number of very important events, including an education summit, and a water rights conference. I appreciate the warmth with which the local Native community and the University community have embraced Charlie and I and welcomed us to Eugene.

My topic tonight, Context is Everything, grew out of my belief that, even after hundreds of years of living in our former towns and villages, too few Americans know very much about our history, culture or contemporary lives and issues. It is my belief that it is almost impossible to understand the challenges tribal people face in the 21st century without putting those issues in a cultural and historical context.

So let me begin with some very basic information about tribal governments. There are over 550 very distinct tribal governments in the United States with their own history, culture and language. The structure of tribal governments and the manner in which leaders are selected differs from nation to nation. The Cherokee and Navajo, the two tribes with the largest populations in North America select their leaders by popular elections. In Onondaga Territory, the women select their leaders and install them in an elaborate ceremony and only the women can remove them. In some tribal nations, the Council, or legislative body, is elected at large and the Council then selects their leadership. And in some of the Pueblos in New Mexico, gifted spiritual leaders select tribal leaders. Therefore, there were a dozen leaders of tribal nations here on the stage tonight, they may all hold similar understand but the way they were selected or elected could be quite different.

The land base and population of tribal governments range from those with millions of acres to some with less than 25 acres of land. And the population ranges from the Navajo and Cherokee Nations, each with an enrolled membership of more than 225,000 members to some governments with less than 100 members. It is important to note that the population or land base of a sovereign entity does not determine the degree to which it enjoys the rights to self-governance. Just as the tiny principality of Monaco enjoys some of the same international rights as China and the United States, tribal governments with a tiny land base and small population are sovereignty entities most of whom at one time entered into treaty agreements with the United States.

Tribal governments exercise a range of sovereign rights. Some tribal governments, such as the Onondaga, continue their original form of government and even issue their own passports for international travel, while other tribal governments must fight for federal recognition after centuries of outrageous exploitation. Native Hawaiians in particular are waging an inspiring battle to retain rights to some of the most coveted land in the Western Hemisphere. Though a few tribal governments are structured according to ancient traditions, others are either an adaptation of the traditional government or in some cases; governments are organized under recently adopted constitutions. The current system of government in the Cherokee Nation bears little resemblance to traditional Cherokee governance, which was a system of self-government semi-autonomous villages and towns. During the time when Cherokee villages enjoyed great autonomy, leaders of all the Cherokee people were necessary only in times of catastrophe or when the people had to defend themselves from an external threat. No single leader had the unilateral authority of a present-day Cherokee principal chief.

I have been asked, “Why do tribal governments exist within one of the most powerful governments in the world?” The person asking this question does not realize that tribal people lived in organized societies for centuries before the United States came into being. Well before the first U.S. colony was established the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) developed the Iroquois confederacy, a United Nations, for the purpose of peace, trade and friendship, an institution that remains in existence today.

When the United States was in its infancy it recognized tribal sovereignty in formal treaties with tribal nations. Between 1779, when the Delaware signed the first peace treaty with the United States and 1871, when the treaty-making era ended, the U.S. executed and the Senate ratified 370 formal treaties with Native nations. Though treaties were and are recognized as valid legal instruments and statements of federal policy, they have rarely been honored by the United States.

The treaty agreements often involved the United States government taking tribal land. According to the First Nations Development Institute, by the early twentieth century, the U.S. took more than 2 billion acres by treaty or official government confiscation. Many federal land policies further reduced tribal land holdings. And a number of late 19th and early 20th Congressional Acts set the stage for breaking up tribal lands which had been held in common. In the early 20th century, Cherokee people in Indian Territory, who held their lands in common, were devastated when they were forced to individually allot tribal lands. Individual allotment of lands had a profound effect on the culture, economy and life ways of Cherokee people. Though land was and remains critical to the cultural survival of tribal people and their governments, tribal governments now hold a tiny fraction of their original land holdings.

The dozens of anti-sovereignty groups who argue that tribal people should not have “special rights,” fail to understand that we gave up millions of acres of land and sacrificed many lives to retain our rights to self-governance. The Cherokee Nation, for example, presently has a very small land base but Cherokee people once controlled much of what is now the Southeastern United States. When states began to develop within the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation, they began to bitterly resent the presence of a separate, sovereign entity within the boundaries of newly created states. The State of Georgia, in particular, was an ardent opponent of Cherokee sovereignty. Georgia’s states rights stance coupled with the discovery of marketable natural resources on Cherokee land precipitated a very dark period in American history. Between 1836 and 1838, the United States Army marched Cherokee people like cattle from our Southeastern homelands to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The forced removal, known as the Trail of Tears, or the Trail Where they Cried, resulted in the loss of approximately 4,000 people, or ¼ of our entire tribal population.

It is truly remarkable that Cherokee people who had been forced to leave behind everything they had ever known for a new land and had suffered a staggering loss of lives, almost immediately began to rebuild their families, communities and nation in Indian Territory. By the mid-1840s, the Cherokee Nation developed a stable economy, established the first educational system west of the Mississippi, including a school for the higher education of women, a radical idea in that part of the world at that period in history. The Cherokee government built a capitol building, courthouses and other institutions of government, some of which are being used by the Cherokee Nation today.

It is often said that the character of an individual or a people can best be determined in times of extreme crisis. By keeping their vision fixed firmly on the future, even during times of unspeakable hardship, Cherokee people have demonstrated the depth and strength of their

character time and time again

One underlying reason for the tenacity of Cherokee people is the key role women have played in tribal life. Most people know little about Cherokee or Native women, except for a few almost mythical icons such as Sacajawea, an intelligent, resourceful Shoshone interpreter for Lewis and Clark's early nineteenth century expedition. This appalling lack of accurate information about Native women fuels negative stereotypes. Television, film, and print media often portray Native women as asexual drudges or innocent children of nature, while rail-thin white women are held up as idealized representations of female compassion, beauty and sexuality. In the media, as in the larger society, the power, strength, and complexity of Native women is rarely acknowledged or recognized.

While the role of Native women in the family and community, now and in the past, differs from nation to nation, women have played very significant roles in tribal society. Navajo women once controlled the economy by owning and managing the livestock, and Ojibway women trapped small animals, dressed furs and built canoes. Prior to the Cherokee removal, women were consulted in matters of importance to the community, the clan, the family, and the nation. When a man married a woman, he took up residence with the clan of his wife. Cherokee people trace their clan ancestry, their very identity, through women. There was once a women's council composed of women of each of the seven Cherokee clans. A special woman served as the chief beloved women. Female warriors, called War Women or Pretty Women, were considered tribal dignitaries. There was a belief that the Great Spirit sent messages through women. A woman's power was considered so great that special women were able to declare whether punishment or was to be inflicted upon those who had committed offenses against the people, or they were to be pardoned.

Once again we are seeing women assume leadership roles in their governments and communities at a time when the strong voices of both women and men are needed in the battle to protect tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. This battle is made immeasurably more difficult by the fact that so few members of Congress or their constituents across the U.S. know much about either the history or contemporary lives of Native people. When complex tribal land, water rights, taxation and jurisdiction issues are debated in the Congress or chronicled in media reports, it is difficult for people without any kind of historical context to understand the issues.

In recent years a number of misleading and mostly negative articles have been written about tribal governments, especially those involved in gaming enterprises. If these types of articles are left unanswered, they can ultimately impact federal policy as it relates to tribal governments and citizens. There is a direct link between public perception and public policies affecting tribal people. It is critical that tribal leaders themselves help shape the public perception and frame their issues. If they don't frame the issues for themselves, their opponents most certainly will.

While legislative and judicial threats to sovereignty have been clearly recognized and swiftly addressed by Native people, the challenge now is to understand that over the long term public perception has the potential to be as much of a threat as Supreme Court decision or anti-sovereignty legislation.

Many people who hear about present day jurisdictional and taxation controversies between state and tribal governments are completely unaware of the long history of government to government relations between tribal governments and the United States government. Comanche leader LaDonna Harris says, "Some people view tribal governments as 'play' governments because they learned nothing at all about them in high school or in political science classes. We have kept our

cultural and political autonomy, and few people understand that.

It is really pretty amazing how little many Americans have learned about the original inhabitants of this land now called American. Yet, over time Native people have had to learn everything about the larger society around them, as they read their literature, watch their films, worship in their churches, and attend their educational institutions. Every third-grade student in the U.S. is presented with the concept of Europeans discovering a “New World.” Only the most enlightened teacher will explain that this world was certainly not new to the millions of people who lived in on this land for thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

The lack of accurate information about Native people leaves a void which is often filled with stereotypes which either vilify or romanticize Native people. A few misinformed people apparently believe tribal people still live and dress as they did 300 years ago. During my tenure as principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, each summer tourists would visit Tahlequah, the capitol of the Cherokee Nation. Invariably one or more tourists would stop by my office to express disappointment when they saw no tipis or tribal people dressed in buckskin. When a crestfallen tourist asked, “Where are all the Indians?” I sometimes responded, quite truthfully, “They are probably at Wal-Mart.”

A new stereotype of the wealthy casino Indian is emerging. Though few tribally owned casinos enjoy enormous financial success, and even fewer make per capita payments to their citizens, a great deal of media attention has been focused on the wealthy tribes who distribute some of their casino revenue through per capita payments. The per capita issue and as well as the general issue of tribal casinos has generated a great deal of debate. And the debate about gaming is not always external. In some cases, the internal tribal debate over gaming enterprises has created deep division. While the casinos give tribal governments unprecedented economic and political power and generate much needed income for schools, scholarships, health care, housing and other desperately needed services, the debate about the long-term impact of casinos on the social and cultural web of the community continues. Similar debates occur in the larger society when state governments develop lotteries and approve the development of riverboat gambling operations.

As discussed earlier, protecting tribal sovereignty is a universal priority for all tribal governments. Another very common concern of great importance is the development of projects designed to maintain traditional knowledge systems, culture and language. Tribal traditional knowledge and stories give Native people a sense of continuity and knowing their place in the world. The culture of Native people is not only important for tribal survival, it holds many potential gifts for the world. Because so much of this knowledge is passed down from generation to generation through stories, when a traditional elder passes on, they take with them thousands of years of unique knowledge. One of the most important challenges of our time is to develop practical models to capture, maintain and pass traditional knowledge on to future generations.

What do I mean by tribal culture and life ways, and why is it important to maintain them? Some people describe indigenous cultural attributes as language, others as medicine or songs and ceremony, or the relationship to the land. The response to the question of what constitutes tribal culture will vary from community to community and individual to individual, though there is probably general agreement about the importance of family, community and nation. Native people, because they still live in tribal societies, are interdependent and have a sense of responsibility for one another.

I always feel so fortunate that I was born Cherokee; that my life has evolved within a set of reciprocal relationships. I am responsible for others in my community and they are responsible

for me. Reciprocity and living according to a certain set of core values is an important attribute of tribal culture. While it is not possible for all tribal people to speak their own Native language or participate in a set of seasonal ceremonies, traditional values can be maintained by anyone, even if one lives in an urban area. I have had the privilege of meeting a number of young Native people who work for Wall Street firms. They have retained their ties to their homelands and people as well as a strong sense of tribal identity and values even working in the very competitive financial services industry.

In dozens of tradition-oriented Cherokee communities in Eastern Oklahoma traditional values are evident in a widespread self-help housing movement, which is often characterized as a return to the time when Cherokee people were responsible for one another and helped one another. Recently I asked Leroy Backwater, a traditional Cherokee elder, what it means to be a good Cherokee, to which he replied, "A good Cherokee is respectful to others, always keeps his word and helps other people."

When Cherokee people lived in our old country in the Southeast, there was little ambiguity about what it meant to be a good person. A good person was prudent in relationships with others and conducted his or her affairs with honor, respect and dignity. Everyone had clearly defined roles, and the rules of conduct governing right and correct actions were understood. Cherokee people gathered once a year for the recitation of ancient laws given to them by the Creator. These laws, sometimes memorialized on wampum belts, gave people guidance on how to properly live their lives.

Every year a ceremony was conducted in each settlement in for the purpose of rekindling relationships, requesting forgiveness for inappropriate conduct during the previous year, and cleansing the mind of negative thoughts towards others. Everyone who participated in the ceremony was forgiven for past offenses. And participants could never again speak of the offense. It was erased. Therefore, no one left the ceremony with grudges or animosity toward one another. A symbolic but very important feature of this ceremony was that each house in the village put out their home fires and relit them from a central ceremonial fire. A very high premium was placed on restoring harmony and balance in the community and encouraging Cherokee people to keep a good clean mind.

One can detect elements of the value of keeping a good mind in contemporary Cherokee life when Cherokee Elder Crosslin Smith, recites the following traditional prayer at the beginning of a gathering: "First, let us remove all negative thoughts from our minds so we can come together as one. The primary goal of this prayer is to promote a sense of oneness and unity so every can focus on the task at hand. There is also an underlying belief that thousands of negative, hateful, revengeful or jealous thoughts, left unchecked permeates the being and will ultimately result in violent action.

While the pervasive influence of American popular culture has had a dramatic impact on Native communities over time, it would be folly to draw conclusions about the degree of assimilation in these communities based primarily on external appearances and the fact that Native people. Outsiders can sometimes draw erroneous conclusions about the degree of assimilation in a given community based on the fact that young people use I-Pods, cell phones and watch MTV and older people tune use computers and tune in to CNN for the nightly news. The difference is that the tribal people filter their experiences and the information they receive through their own tribal view of the world, which may vary greatly from the view of non-tribal people. LaDonna Harris, a Comanche leader, says that when she lived in Washington, D.C. and entertained political leaders as the wife of Senator Fred Harris, she performed many of the same functions as other Senate

wives but she engaged in the dialogue from the perspective of a Comanche woman. She said, “Whether I was having dinner with the King of Sweden or another dignitary, I always filtered what was being discussed through my Comanche values. I never felt I lived in two worlds. I am Comanche.” No matter where LaDonna lived or what kind of situation she found herself in, she was always a Comanche woman, and not just a situational Comanche.

If you understand just one thing about tribal culture, it is probably most important to know that just because Native people dress in a similar way, live in similar houses and similar cars, it does not necessarily mean that they view the world in the same way.

The culture and knowledge base of tribal people has rarely been acknowledged or appreciated by the United States government, which is reflected in several hundreds years of policies designed to assimilate Native people into the larger American culture. When my family was relocated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs from Oklahoma to San Francisco in the late 1950s, the purpose was to mainstream us into the larger American culture. But what exactly are the attributes of American culture they wanted us to adopt? Many of the most ardent proponents of assimilation for Native Americans are hard pressed to define American culture. Even with the rapidly changing racial composition of the population in the United States, a preoccupation with European culture remains. The larger society around us seems to promote the value that material wealth determines one's worth, that individual achievement is more important than the common good, and that kindness can be perceived as weakness. Those values don't hold much appeal to most tradition-oriented Native people.

In response to the almost universal concern about tribal cultures slipping away, some communities have initiated aggressive projects to preserve tribal language, culture and heritage. The Blackfeet in Montana have started a number of highly successful language immersion programs and schools; the Onondaga School teaches tribal history and language; the Hopi Foundation works to protect ancient structures, and the Cherokee language is taught in Head Start Programs and history and language is taught in many communities, and even on the Internet.

There are many encouraging signs that tribal governments are preparing their citizens for the future. Many tribal governments are using the revenue generated from successful gaming enterprises to develop impressive health and education programs. Others are providing financial literacy programs for tribal members and establishing partnerships with the business and financial community to diversify tribal businesses.

More and more, tribal people are trusting their own thinking again and looking within their own communities for solutions to entrenched problems. Tribal communities and governments are running their own enterprises, health clinics, hospitals, certifying their own foster homes, handling their own adoptions, negotiating their own water rights settlements and leases, and taking charge of their future. Native journalists, filmmakers, museum curators, historians, professors and secondary school educators are changing the public perception of Native people.

I am often asked why I remain optimistic about the future of Native Nations given the daunting set of problems and challenges they face each day. My response to that question is: “As always, to see our future, you need only look back to the past.” We have endured war, removal, loss of life, land, resources and rights and wholesale attempts to assimilate us. But we are still standing and we continue to have strong viable Native communities. If we have managed to hold onto a robust sense of who we are, despite the staggering amount of adversity we have faced, how can we not be optimistic about the future? After every major tribal upheaval, we have almost had to reinvent ourselves as a people but we have never given up our sense of family, of community, of

clan, of nation.

On this beautiful fall evening, during a time of seasonal change and renewal, despite all the problems and issues, we can still rejoice in the knowledge that the ceremonies given to us by the Creator continue, the original languages are still spoken, and our governments remain strong.

We acknowledge the hardships of the past without dwelling on them. Instead, we look to the future with the same faith that has kept us together thus far. The Mohawk speak for all of us when they recite my favorite proverb, "It is hard to see the future with tears in your eyes." So let me leave you with that proverb and add that I hope that my being here at the University of Oregon has erased any stereotype you may have had about what a tribal Chief looks like.

Thank you.