

Bush pledges to uphold sovereignty

Posted: August 30, 2000 - 12:00am EST

by: Brenda Norrell / Today Staff / Indian Country Today

MESILLA, N.M. - Presidential candidate George W. Bush vowed to uphold American Indian sovereignty and the United States' trust responsibility to American Indian tribes during a meeting with Pueblo, Navajo and Apache tribal leaders.

Pledging to work with American Indians to obtain the American dream, Bush said, "I will strengthen Indian self-determination by respecting tribal sovereignty, which has improved the quality of life for many Native Americans.

"I believe the federal government should allow tribes greater control over their lives, land and destiny."

He further pledged to strengthen Native American self-determination by encouraging economic development on reservations and Indian lands, and working with Native Americans to reorganize the BIA and the Indian Health Service to better serve their needs.

Bush met privately here with 21 Indian leaders, 18 Pueblo officials, Navajo President Kelsey Begaye, Mescalero Apache President Sarah Misquez and Stan Pino, chairman of the All Indian Pueblo.

"We wanted to make him clarify that he will uphold tribal sovereignty if elected president of the United States," Zuni Pueblo Gov. Malcolm Bowekaty said.

"Bush was trying to affirm trust commitment and clearly define tribal sovereignty and assure us that those will be emphasized."

Bush told news reporters during the day's events, "I will uphold the unique government-to-government relationship between the tribes and the United States and honor our nation's obligations."

During a public rally attracting several thousand people, Bush promised, if elected, to spend \$928 million in the first year of his presidential administration to repair or rebuild dilapidated American Indian schools.

"Today I'm announcing a new initiative to ensure that Indian schools are repaired and maintained, so that all children can learn and thrive."

Launching his education initiative near Las Cruces in southern New Mexico, Bush said American Indian schools are a priority.

"Throughout history, Native Americans have seen many promises broken and forgotten. The latest of these can be seen in the shabby, deteriorating schools where their children are expected to learn."

He pledged to spend \$802 million to repair schools on Indian lands and \$126 million to replace six Indian schools in Arizona, New Mexico and Washington state. He said he would "immediately replace" the BIA's crumbling Zia Day School in Albuquerque, Baca Consolidated School in Thoreau and Wingate Elementary School in Fort Wingate.

Bush said the federal government had "sadly neglected" its responsibility to educate more than 50,000 Native American children in 185 schools managed by the BIA.

Pojoaque Pueblo Gov. Jake Viarrial said he was pleased with Bush's pledge to build and repair Indian schools. "It's about time that one of the candidates came in front of a group of Indian leaders."

In New Mexico, Pojoaque and other tribes await a federal court ruling on whether they will have to pay state-mandated revenue sharing of casino profits.

Bush told tribal leaders that he "was going to respect the court orders that had bound the states to casino compacts."

Bowekaty said during the private meeting Bush pledged to acknowledge pueblo governments which predate the arrival of Spaniards and Mexicans and the later establishment of the United States.

"We wanted to emphasize that sovereignty is not a loose term."

Bush confirmed that he would consult with Pueblos and Indian tribes and expressed a preference to meet with tribal members on a regional basis.

Bowekaty acknowledged that partisan politics are at play as Democrats and Republicans seek American Indian votes. The latest polls show that Al Gore and Bush are running a close race in New Mexico, which voted Democrat during the Clinton elections.

"They are jockeying for position," Bowekaty said.

He credits Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colo., with convincing Bush to meet with American Indian leaders. The senators joined Bush during the southern New Mexico visit that included a Republican fund-raiser with the goal of \$200,000.

Bowekaty said Bush had attempted to negate effects of his infamous New York statement that states' rights have precedence over American Indian rights.

"Too little, too late," said Pearl Capoeman-Baller, chairwoman of the Quinault Nation in Taholah, Wash., reflecting on Bush's comments in Las Cruces. His New York statement, "Contradicted more than 200 years of constitutional law," she said.

"While suggesting that he would support greater funding for Indian education, Bush didn't mention that the Clinton-Gore administration has already proposed the largest budget increase for Native American programs in history - including hundreds of millions of dollars to repair crumbling Indian schools and build new ones."

Capoeman-Baller went on to recall that Bush had supported ending affirmative action for college-bound students in Texas.

She also took exception with the Republican's talk of diversity at their convention, "but there were no major speakers at the podium, and Native American delegates were virtually absent." More important, she said, was the fact the "Republican agenda offers virtually nothing to Native Americans."

She said many tribal leaders found Bush's concern for Indian education mind-boggling "given his overall inattention to Native American issues. Bush has not demonstrated even a basic grasp of the issues facing our community."

Republicans across the nation are rebounding from Indian country's swift response to a Washington state Republican resolution calling for termination of non-Republican forms of American Indian governments.

Among Southwest tribes, both Gore and Bush are criticized for failing to respond to an invitation to address American Indians during a proposed Indian Town Hall meeting in Phoenix.

In New Mexico, Bush told reporters that he met with Indian leaders to demonstrate "that should I become the president, I was going to be the president of everybody."

Michael Lombardi, consultant for California Indian tribes, said the Republicans' sudden interest in Indian support in New Mexico is an obvious response to the success of the Native American Caucus at the Democratic National Convention.

"For the first time in history, Democrats and Republicans are seriously competing with one another for the support of American Indian voters."

Bush's meeting with Indian tribes came two days after the conclusion of the Democratic convention. Also, on Monday following the convention, California Senate Republican leader James Brulte created a new position and appointed David Quintana as Senate Republican Liaison to Native Americans.

[NativeNews] Indian Issues Find A Place In GOP Platform

Indian Issues Find A Place In GOP Platform

By Susan Haigh

Published on 8/2/2000

AP

Philadelphia — Pledges to “strengthen Native American self-determination” and work with tribes to reorganize the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs are part of the Republican Party platform unveiled this week — the political framework for Texas Gov. George W. Bush’s bid for the White House.

The short reference to American Indians in the 73-page document approved Monday by delegates at the Republican National Convention was drafted by John Guevremont, a member of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe.

Guevremont, a convention delegate representing Connecticut’s 2nd Congressional District, oversees the tribe’s Washington, D.C., office. He said he believes it is important that the platform recognize American Indians’ rights to sovereignty and self-determination as well as their right to carry on government-to-government relations with state and federal entities.

“I just took it on my initiative,” said Guevremont, the Connecticut delegation’s only American Indian. “At least someone from the Native American community contributed to the platform.”

The GOP has included references to Indians in previous platforms. Guevremont said the new language is more specific and more consistent with the rest of the platform.

The document also alludes to the notion of taxing Indian casino gambling revenues. According to the party, “high taxes and unreasonable regulations stifle new and expanded businesses and thwart the creation of job opportunities and prosperity.”

Guevremont said Indian gaming is a governmental function and should not be taxed by the federal government, just as the proceeds of state lotteries are not taxed by Washington.

While the platform mentions working with tribes to “reorganize” the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service, there is no elaboration. It contains no reference to criticisms regarding the BIA’s granting of federal recognition, such as in the case of the Eastern Pequots and Paucatuck Eastern Pequots in North Stonington.

Officials from North Stonington, Ledyard and Preston are challenging the BIA’s preliminary approval of the tribes’ bids for federal recognition.

“That’s a local issue and I don’t think that belongs in a platform,” Guevremont said.

Rather, he said the reference to the BIA pertains to the problems tribes have had with the federal agency over the years. He said it is not to be taken as a commentary or negative attack on the BIA’s present administration.

“The BIA has had some systematic organizational problems for a long time,” he said. “They just need to be resolved.”

Santa Mendoza of West Hartford, one of two Connecticut delegates assigned to the convention’s platform committee, said there was little discussion of the section pertaining to American Indians during the group’s meetings, and therefore little interest in revamping the language submitted by Guevremont. Abortion and family planning were the committee’s top issues, she said.

“The platform just sets out broad goals and objectives,” Mendoza said. “Obviously, from Connecticut’s point of view, there has got to be more detail provided on how this (federal recognition) process can be made fair to those affected by those (land) claims.”

Mendoza said the section primarily reflects the Republican Party’s overall philosophy that claims on ancestral land should receive the respect of the federal government.

According to the passage, Republicans believe the federal government has a special responsibility, ethical and legal, to make the American dream accessible to American Indians.

“Unfortunately, the resources that the United States holds in trust for them, financial and otherwise, have been misused and abused,” the document reads. “While many tribes have become energetic participants in the mainstream of American life, the serious social ills afflicting some reservations have been worsened by decades of mismanagement from Washington.”

In contrast, Republicans offered four “guiding principals” regarding Indian policy:

- Tribal governments are best situated to gauge the needs of their communities.
- Political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency are twin pillars of an effective Indian policy.
- Private sector initiatives, rather than public assistance, can best improve material conditions in Indian communities.
- High taxes and unreasonable regulations stifle business and thwart job growth.

Christopher Healy of Glastonbury, Connecticut’s other member of the platform committee, said some tribes were worried Republicans might want to tax gambling revenues by estimates of up to 35 percent. He said he questions whether that would have ever happened, considering the party’s stance on taxes.

Healy said that entire section of the platform was left purposely broad in order to avoid tying the hands of Bush if he becomes the next president. Rather, the section is an opportunity to present a “big picture” of the party’s positions.

“We believe in the sovereign rights of these nations,” Healy said. “As a general rule, Republicans favor the ability of people to empower themselves.”

According to the platform, Republicans also support efforts to ensure that American Indians, Native Alaskans and Native Hawaiians are able to have equitable participation in federal programs in order to preserve their cultures and languages.

“We uphold the unique government-to-government relationship between the tribes and the United States and honor our nation’s trust obligation to them,” the section reads.

Gov. John G. Rowland, whose administration faces the prospect of working with several more federally recognized tribes in the future, said he doesn’t believe the controversial topic of tribal sovereignty has much to do with Republicans or Democrats.

“It’s not really a partisan issue,” he said. “I think it’s very different because (different states) have to deal with Indian issues differently.”

© 1998-2000 The Day Publishing Co.