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"Native America in the 21st Century:
Out of the Mist and Beyond Myth"

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When I am the beneficiary of such gracious introductions, I am reminded of a story. It has the Pope, resplendent in white robes, and a Washington lawyer, which I was for much of my professional life, equally resplendent in elegantly tailored blue pinstripes complete with an appropriately dazzling power tie, arriving at the pearly gates at the same time. St. Peter ushers both in and indicates that he will see each to his respective heavenly abode. They reach the Washington lawyer's house first, and it turns out to be a splendid 45-room manse that sits on 20 meticulously manicured acres. This revelation raises the Pope's sights considerably. He thus is staggered when St. Peter directs him, a bit farther down the road, to a two-bedroom bungalow. Aghast, the Pope sputters, "But with all due respect, how can this be?" Responds St. Peter with great earnestness, utter sincerity, and perhaps complete truth, "I'm terribly sorry, but you must understand that, when a Washington lawyer arrives, we must treat him especially well - because so few of them ever make it up here."

So now I have made full disclosure, and you are suitably

forewarned about the likes of who is speaking to you this afternoon. I must say, however, that, notwithstanding the reputation we poor abused and unappreciated lawyers have these days, I have met a few museum directors who could be substituted for that Washington attorney without missing a beat.

In working our way into my topic, "Native America in the 21st Century: Out of the Mists and Beyond Myth," I feel a need to talk retrospectively before I talk prospectively. In other words, in order to understand the future of Indian America more perfectly, we must appreciate first, at least to some degree, the past - the multiple stereotypes and untruths, the myths shrouded in the mists of history. So before I speculate about Indian America in the twenty-first century, I want to begin by talking with you about the path we have traveled in arriving at the future of the first citizens of this Hemisphere.

In thinking about how to describe the Native past, I always remember a quotation that long has been engraved on my Cheyenne psyche lest I forget the challenges history brings us. The quotation is from a book entitled American History: A Survey, by Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Alan Brinkley, distinguished American historians all. Here is what they wrote approximately a decade ago:

For thousands of centuries, centuries in which human races were evolving, forming communities, and building the beginnings of national civilizations in Africa, Asia, and Europe - the continents we know as the

Americas stood empty of mankind and its works.
. . . The story of this new world . . . is a
story of the creation of a civilization where
none existed.

This statement, frankly, represents the most unfortunate kind of Eurocentric cultural myopia, and it should trouble not only those of us who are excluded from history by it, but, for that matter, anyone who values the discipline of history as an indispensable tool to a more accurate understanding of the past - and I would have hoped that distinguished American historians would know better.

The historical reality is that when Europeans arrived in this Hemisphere, it already was the home of remarkable civilizations and cultural achievements. Alvin Josephy, Jr., in his Introduction to America In 1492: The World of the Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus, has emphasized precisely this fact:

That image . . . perpetuates the myth of Euroamerican superiority. It says nothing of the challenges met and overcome by the Indians as the original pioneers . . . of the many marvelous innovations, inventions, and adaptations of their societies and civilizations that enabled the Indians to live and govern themselves in America's different environments, of the distinctiveness, diversity, and complexity of their numerous cultures, developed without benefit of Western European advice and assistance
[Original emphasis]

As the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, I am surprised constantly by what people do not know about the Native cultural past in the Americas. The demographic

statistics of this Hemisphere alone, for example, would surprise many people in this room today. Specifically, demographers estimate that in 1492, approximately 75 million people lived in the Americas, with some 6 to 9 million occupying what is now known as the United States and most of the balance residing in Central and South America, many of them in the great urban civilizations of Mesoamerica. Demographers further have concluded that, of the 10 most populated cities in the world in the year A.D. 1000, two were located in the Western Hemisphere.

I also believe that the achievements of the Native peoples who lived right here in what is now the United States continue to be little understood and grossly undervalued. While many people have at least a basic comprehension of the notable accomplishments of the pre-contact cultures of Central and South America, how many appreciate the contemporaneous accomplishments of the Hopewellian culture in what is now the Ohio Valley? Its Newark earthworks, each of which covers literally thousands of square feet and which stretch across miles, reflect a highly advanced understanding of geometry and astronomy. Indeed, this knowledge is fully as sophisticated as anything the Mayans knew at the apex of their civilization. These earthworks, which are comprised of geometrically perfect octagons and circles, are lunar in orientation, as reflected in their meticulous and correct alignment with the movement of the moon. The better known and nearby serpent mound, also an earthwork monument of the Ohio

Valley, again embodies a sophisticated appreciation of astronomy. In this case, however, the orientation is solar, as reflected in the mound's perfect alignment with the movement of the sun.

I believe we also should know that some three thousand years ago, near what is now Poverty Point, Louisiana, another sun-aligned settlement existed that was seven times the size of its contemporary, Stonehenge, in England. The Poverty Point settlement was established, developed, and prospered while its contemporary, Rome, was quite literally nothing more than a minor, largely rural village.

I think we should know that during what Western historians call the Middle Ages in Europe, an urban settlement we now call Cahokia existed near St. Louis, Missouri that had a population estimated at some 30,000 to 50,000 people. The urban landscape of Cahokia was characterized by vast ceremonial centers, plazas, and monumental earthen pyramids that rose some twelve stories high. To give you a horizontal time reference and comparison, this metropolis of the Americas was considerably more populous than London, England at the same time.

I also cannot leave the subject of Cahokia without noting the sad reality of why we sometimes know so relatively little about these vast pre-contact, cultural achievements here in North America. Specifically, in the mid-nineteenth century, these vast earthworks, which dominated large portions of what is now America's Midwest, became subjects of great fascination to the

non-Native settlers who were beginning to populate the area in larger numbers. Few, however, would believe that these monuments had been created by Indians, and the "lost race" and "extraterrestrial aliens" theories abounded for almost a generation. These fanciful speculations finally were thoroughly debunked by none other than John Wesley Powell of the Smithsonian Institution, and it became clear that the great earthworks were created by the ancestors of Indians. At that point these splendid memorials to indigenous achievements of the past, which at one time probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands, were systematically destroyed in the space of mere decades.

This anecdote actually brings me to the next subject I want to discuss in our journey through Native American time and space this afternoon - namely, the impact of European contact on the Native life and civilization I have just described. Without browbeating anyone or belaboring the point, the results of European contact for the Native peoples of this Hemisphere were, in a word, devastating.

Entire orders of civilizations and communities that had a time depth of thousands of years were destroyed and eliminated, quite literally wiped out, in a generation through disease and military action. At the time Columbus sailed into our waters, historians and anthropologists estimate that the Americas were populated by literally thousands of distinct Native communities differentiated by language and cultural practices, with some 600

to 700 of them here in what is now the United States. Within less than two generations, that order of cultural diversity had been reduced by more than 50 percent. In the same period of time, the Native population in Mesoamerica, the most densely settled and urbanized area of the Hemisphere, experienced a decline estimated at up to 75 percent. Here in the United States, when the first census that included Indians was taken in 1900, their number was estimated at approximately 250,000, a decline of more than 95 percent from the pre-contact figure of 6 to 9 million that I mentioned a few moments ago. Similarly, the number of tribes here in the United States had been reduced to approximately 300.

This quantitative approach to describing Native history in the Americas admittedly does not capture the qualitative devastation that accompanied the numbers or, indeed, caused them. Speaking for my own community, the Cheyenne, the nineteenth century fundamentally ended life and culture as we had known them. We were nomadic buffalo-hunters, the "Spartans of the Plains," as my Cheyenne father delighted in referring to us. Our systematic confinement to reservations in the nineteenth century and the destruction of the buffalo herds, which once had numbered in the tens of millions, thoroughly disrupted our cultural and ceremonial life.

Federal policy during this period also expressly outlawed the continuation and practice of traditional Cheyenne life. The Sun Dance Ceremony, which represents the apotheosis of our religious

practice was forbidden by federal regulation, a regulation, I might add, that technically still sits on the books, although it has been ignored in practice for a generation or more. My father, at age four, was removed from his home by officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and he remained in federal boarding schools for the next twenty years. There his long hair was cut, he was not permitted to speak Cheyenne, he saw his parents infrequently, and he dressed in military uniform and marched to drill at 5:00 A.M. every morning.

In the face of all of the foregoing, I do not wonder that the state of Indian affairs, from a socio-economic standpoint has been so dismal. I remember a time, as a young attorney, coming across something that captured in a few words this devastation and that left me sitting there, stunned and transfixed, for a very long time. What I read appeared in the report of the United States concerning its compliance with the international human rights accords, and here is what it said:

Native Americans, on the average, have the lowest per capita income, the highest unemployment rate, the lowest level of educational attainment, the shortest lives, the worst health and housing conditions and the highest suicide rate in the United States.

The poverty among Indian families is nearly three times greater than the rate for non-Indian families and Native people collectively rank at the bottom of every social and economic statistical indicator.

Notwithstanding this disheartening final note, I now want to

turn to the future of Indian America in the twenty-first century - and I begin by emphasizing explicitly that, as a Native person, I am not discouraged by what I see. This position does not ignore the economic and social duress that stresses contemporary Native communities and continues today to destroy lives. Those hard realities will continue to be an aspect of Native America well into this century.

I am saying categorically, however, that, from a cultural standpoint, a seminal and historic shift has occurred in the thinking and perceptions of Native peoples about their future. In this regard, the point I wish most to leave with you today bespeaks for Native America not ultimate cultural destruction but, instead, tenacity, a will to survive, a capacity for continuance, an insistence by the Native peoples of this Hemisphere on a cultural future. Indeed, Native communities across the United States and elsewhere are experiencing a cultural renaissance that is unprecedented in their history. We have determined, finally, in terms of our own self-image and cultural self-perceptions, and notwithstanding the legacies of the past five hundred years, that ours, in the end, represents a truly worthy system of cultural values and ways of life.

I remember reading a passage in the Introduction to James Clifford's book, Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art that captures the essence of the point I want to make. Professor Clifford is an anthropologist, a

somewhat unorthodox and unconventional one by my reading, and here is what he said:

Throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of 'progress' The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts. If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive. It used to be assumed, for example, that conversion to Christianity in . . . colonial Massachusetts would lead to the extinction of indigenous cultures rather than to their transformation. Something more ambiguous and historically complex has occurred, requiring that we perceive both the end of certain orders of diversity and the creation or translation of others
[Original emphasis]

Simplifying this somewhat dense if meaty academic prose, I believe that Professor Clifford is telling us that the Native peoples of this Hemisphere are still here. However stressed and, in some cases, deeply affected their cultures may be, they retain a continuing resiliency, vitality, and dynamism that is astonishing considering what has come their way for the past five hundred years. They admittedly have not remained culturally static. They have been influenced by non-Native cultural forces and have even adapted - indeed, brilliantly so, but "adaptation" is not to be confused with "assimilation." The essence of indigenous cultural values continues to exist and to evolve in dynamic and culturally significant ways.

I also remember the statement of an elder from the Fort Mohave Reservation in California that makes the same point in simple yet compelling terms. The statement appears in the National Park Service's report entitled Keepers of the Treasures: Protecting Historic Properties and Cultural Traditions on Indian Lands:

When we think of historical preservation, I suppose you think of something that is old, something that has happened in the past and that you want to put away on a shelf and bring it out and look at [it] every now and then. . . . I was so puzzled by the whole thing that I looked up 'historical' and it said 'a significant past event'. . . . In our way of thinking, everything is a significant event, and the past is as real to us as being here right now. We are all connected to the things that happened at the beginning of our existence. And those things live on as they are handed down to us.

Again, this statement eloquently confirms Native peoples as a contemporary cultural phenomenon that draws upon timeless traditions and values stretching back over thousands of years to respond to a vastly changed current environment and circumstances.

All of the above brings me to what I call my annual November or "Thanksgiving" contemplations - when I often am asked to make presentations just like the one you are experiencing now. In the end, my ultimate aspiration is not that you concede the worthiness of what Native America has contributed, over thousands of years, to what we call civilization, although I, of course, hope you will, nor even that I convince you of the fact that contemporary

Native peoples are intent on a cultural future, although we are.

What I aspire to most this afternoon, and on all similar occasions, both as a Cheyenne and most certainly as the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, is your appreciation, indeed, your more complete understanding, as you leave this place today, that this story represents a key and to date frequently misunderstood element of the collective history, the shared cultural heritage, of every person in this room, be he or she Native or non-Native. Even more important to me, this story offers guidance, in the form of philosophies, world views, and social and cultural values, that is relevant to the future of all of us as we make our way, together as we must, into the twenty-first century, where Western civilization, I believe, finally is willing to concede that it just may not have gotten everything exactly right, where the relentless advance of technology, broadly defined, with its admittedly great advantages, nonetheless can threaten and, indeed, diminish life on this planet, in all its variety and wonder, as well as the humanistic values that undergird and define our respect for the sanctity of that life.

Let me illustrate this last point with a favorite story of mine. It is about a northern California basket-maker named Mrs. Matt, who was hired to teach basket-making at a local university. After three weeks, her students complained that all they had done was sing songs. When, they asked, were they going to learn to

make baskets? Mrs. Matt, somewhat taken aback, replied that they were learning to make baskets. She explained that the process starts with songs that are sung so as not to insult the plants when the materials for the baskets are picked. So her students learned the songs and went to pick the grasses and plants to make their baskets.

Upon their return to the classroom, however, the students again were dismayed when Mrs. Matt began to teach them yet more songs. This time she wanted them to learn the songs that must be sung as you soften the materials in your mouth before you start to weave. Exasperated, the students protested having to learn songs instead of learning to make baskets. Mrs. Matt, perhaps a bit exasperated herself at this point, thereupon patiently explained the obvious to them: "You're missing the point," she told them, "a basket is a song made visible."

I do not know whether Mrs. Matt's students went on to become exemplary basket-makers. What I do know is that her wonderfully poetic remark, which suggests the interconnectedness of everything, the fusion of the profoundly spiritual with the purely physical, the symbiosis of who we are and what we do, embodies a whole philosophy of Native life and culture that is fundamentally different from much of European or Western social and cultural thought, tradition, and practice.

The flip side of that cultural coin is that this capacity for seeing the world whole and all of the life that occupies it as

valued, integral, indeed, sacred, could have such salutary impact, in the new millennium, on broken families, fractured communities, riven societies, and threatened environments that seem to typify our times far more than they should. I also want to emphasize that Mrs. Matt's view of the world is not the mere figment of a romantic imagination - it is the way her forebears lived for the millennia, and it is the way she lives, right now, in the 21st century. Moreover, it is not idle philosophizing in the abstract, but, instead, has real, practical impact on how she and other Native families live, how their communities function, and how they respect the natural environment they feel blessed to be a part of.

Not long ago, at the end of one of those grinding, crunching, 12-hour Washington days, after everyone else had left the office, the telephones finally had stopped ringing, the fax machine had ceased its interminable chirping, and my pager and cellular telephone both had been turned off, I was sitting in relative quietude, thinking about the futures of the National Museum of the American Indian and, more particularly, of Native peoples. As I was ruminating, the words of a favorite poem came to me, and I leave you with it now as a small but precious gift. The poem is entitled "It Doesn't End, Of Course," by Simon Ortiz of the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. Simon, I believe, was writing of his own personal cultural survival and continuance, but, metaphorically, he well could have been speaking for all of Native cultural survival:

It doesn't end.
In all growing
from all earths
to all skies,
in all touching
all things,
in all soothing
the aches of
all years,
it doesn't end.

In the final analysis, I will not rest easily, as either a Cheyenne or the director of the National Museum of the American Indian until every person in this room, and those not here whom we represent, appreciate and understand that all of us, Native and non-Native, have a vital stake in the fact that "it doesn't end."

Thank you very much for your kind attention.