



## BARACK OBAMA: FIGHTING FOR FIRST AMERICANS

The hundreds of Indian tribes in America face a unique set of challenges. Issues like sovereignty, health care, and education—issues that are central to tribes' future prosperity and embedded in the federal government's responsibility—are often neglected. Barack Obama is committed to tribal nation building and enforcing the federal government's obligations.

### BARACK OBAMA'S PRINCIPLES FOR STRONGER TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

#### SOVEREIGNTY AND TRIBAL-FEDERAL RELATIONS

American Indian tribal nations are sovereign, self-governing political entities much like states, and are engaged in a government-to-government relationship with the United States federal government.

**Self-Determination:** Barack Obama supports enhancing tribal self-determination, with recognition that the federal government must honor its treaty obligations and fully enable tribal self-governance. Obama supported efforts by Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI) to achieve Native Hawaiian government self-determination.

#### HEALTH CARE

The Indian Health Service estimates that it receives only 55 percent of the federal funding it requires. Nevada, for example, has been without a single Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital since 1985. Federal per-capita funding for Indian health care amounts to about half of the federal per capita health funding for federal prisoners. Indians are the most at-risk minority group for health problems like diabetes, which they suffer from at a rate 249 percent higher than the national average. Moreover, Indians have the nation's highest death rates for tuberculosis and suicide. After Haiti, men on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations in South Dakota have the lowest life expectancy in the Western Hemisphere.

**Indian Health Services:** Obama voted to provide an additional \$1 billion for IHS to address these disparities. Additionally, he was an original cosponsor of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 2007. Obama opposed a federal land acquisition program that would have diverted funds from the Special Diabetes Program for Indians and the Alcohol and Substance Abuse program. Obama supports sufficient funding for IHS and proper staffing and maintenance for IHS facilities.

#### EDUCATION

Education is the key to improving the lives of American Indians and empowering tribal nations to build a better future. While educational policies in the 1970s attempted to reverse past federal policies aimed at eradicating American Indian languages and cultures, there is still much work to be done. Unfortunately, American Indians suffer from some of the lowest high school graduation and college matriculation rates in the nation. We must continue to honor our obligations to the first Americans by providing tribes with the educational resources promised by treaty and federal law.

**Indian Language Education:** Tribes are struggling to preserve their languages. It is estimated that by 2050 only 20

of the over 500 Native languages once spoken will remain. Research shows that instruction in tribal language increases American Indian academic performance in other areas like math and science. Barack Obama supports funding for Native language immersion and preservation programs.

**No Child Left Behind:** The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act is the right one – ensuring that all children meet high education standards – but the law has significant flaws that need to be addressed, including in Indian country. Unfulfilled promises, ineffective implementation, and shortcomings in the design of the law itself have created countless obstacles for tribal educators. Barack Obama would fund No Child Left Behind and reform the law to better incorporate Title VII, the law’s Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaskan education provision. Obama’s plan would provide greater flexibility in integrating Native languages, cultures, and communities into school programs in a manner consistent with principles of tribal sovereignty.

**Early Childhood Education:** Research shows that half of low-income children start school up to two years behind their peers in preschool skills and that these early achievement gaps continue throughout elementary school. Barack Obama supports increasing funding for the Head Start program, including the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Programs, to provide American Indian preschool children with critically important learning skills, and supports the necessary role of parental involvement in the success of Head Start. Obama has called on states to replicate the Illinois model of Preschool for All. Tribes should also be given the opportunity to implement culturally appropriate versions of this program.

**Indian School Construction:** Many government-funded Indian schools are dilapidated, and many are simply too small to meet the needs of growing Indian populations. A safe, comfortable place to learn is critical to receiving a proper education. Barack Obama is committed to repairing and building Indian schools.

**Tribal Colleges:** Tribal colleges have played a critical role in improving the lives of American Indians. Obama supports adequate funding for operations and facility construction, as well as removing bureaucratic impediments so tribal colleges can thrive.

## **ECONOMIC & INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

American Indians experience some of the most severe socioeconomic conditions in the United States. Poverty and its effects are pervasive, with more than quarter of all American Indians living in poverty and unemployment rates reaching 80 percent on some reservations. Obama’s experience as a community organizer working in poor neighborhoods plagued by high unemployment has taught him that there is no single solution to community poverty. Therefore, he supports using a comprehensive approach that includes investment in physical, human and institutional infrastructure, increased access to capital, the removal of barriers to development, and above all, authentic government-to-government relationships between the federal government and tribes.

**Living Wage:** Barack Obama believes that people who work full time should not live in poverty. Before the Democrats took back Congress, the minimum wage had not changed in 10 years. Even though the minimum wage will rise to \$7.25 an hour by 2009, the minimum wage’s real purchasing power will still be below what it was in 1968. As president, Obama will further raise the minimum wage to \$9.50 an hour by 2011, index it to inflation and increase the Earned Income Tax Credit to make sure that full-time workers can earn a living wage that allows them to raise their families and pay for basic needs such as food, transportation, and housing – things so many people take for granted.

**Housing:** The federal government has a moral and legal responsibility to assist tribes in providing housing. Yet, American Indians suffer from some of the worst housing conditions in the nation. Some 14 percent of all reservation homes have no electricity, and on some reservations, as many as 20 individuals are forced to live in a single-family home. Barack Obama supports providing adequate levels of funding for the Indian Housing Block Grant and other Indian housing programs as well as increasing the effectiveness of these programs.

**Gaming:** The Supreme Court has upheld the right of tribes, as sovereign entities, to operate gaming operations on Indian reservations. A total of 225 of the 558 federally recognized Indian tribes operate gaming facilities, creating

670,000 jobs nationwide and paying \$11 billion to the federal and state governments through taxes and other revenue. The vast majority of Indian gaming operations are small enterprises providing jobs to tribal members. Because most tribes continue to suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment, Barack Obama believes that gaming revenues are important tribal resources for funding education, healthcare, law enforcement, and other essential government functions.

**Energy:** Tribal nations have joined in America's quest for alternative, renewable energy. Because of their rural land bases and access to natural resources, many tribes have made great strides in economic development in the energy sector. Tribes have successful operations producing gas, solar, and wind energy. In addition to harnessing and producing energy, tribes have an interest in energy rights-of-way. Obama encourages energy companies and Indian tribes to negotiate in good faith to ensure tribes receive just compensation and in furtherance of carrying sustainable energy to all communities.

### **WOMEN'S HEALTH**

Indians are often subject to unusually harsh conditions when it comes to women's health. A recent study by Amnesty International details the alarming rates at which Native women are subject to violence. The report states that one in three American Indian women will be raped in their lifetime, and they are more than three times as likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than other women in America.

**Reproductive Health:** In the past, IHS has been criticized for performing forced sterilizations of Indian women. More recently, many Native women have been pushed to receive one type of contraception instead of more suitable alternatives. Although these women often have no alternative to IHS, the program often does not provide them with adequate reproductive health care, and many women are often denied equal access to birth control, and prenatal care. Barack Obama supports the reproductive health rights of American Indian women, and supports ensuring that they receive equal opportunities to make healthy reproductive choices.

**Violence Against Women:** Violence in Indian country is committed at alarmingly high rates, and all too often Indian women are the victims. Medical facilities are few and far between, and are often not adequately prepared to deal with assault victims. Also, because of the unique jurisdictional scheme on reservations, law enforcement can be slow and difficult to come by. If the victim or the perpetrator is non-Indian, then the tribe does not have jurisdiction over the crime. This is alarming when more than 86 percent of assaults against Indian women are committed by non-Indians. State and federal law enforcement officials are often far removed from the situation, and the tribes are left without the authority to protect their people. Obama encourages a reexamination of the legal framework that allows such injustices, and supports empowering tribes to combat violence against Native women.

**Law Enforcement:** Barack Obama also supports fully funding the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program that many tribal law enforcement agencies have come to rely upon.

### **METHAMPHETAMINES**

**A Growing Problem:** In a 2006 survey, 74 percent of tribal law enforcement officials reported methamphetamines to be the leading threat to their tribes' livelihood. The same survey reported dramatic increases in cases of domestic violence, child neglect, sex crimes, and weapons charges.

**Combat Meth Act of 2005:** Barack Obama supported the Combat Meth Act of 2005, major parts of which became law in 2006. The act puts federal funds into the fight against methamphetamine, provides assistance to children affected by meth abuse, and places restrictions on the sale of the ingredients used to make the drug. Medicines containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine (decongestants and asthma medication, for example) must now be kept behind pharmaceutical counters, and consumers must provide proof of age to make a purchase.

**A Proven Record in Illinois:** Illinois has had some success combating use of methamphetamines thanks to the Southern Illinois Enforcement Group, a program paid for in part by federal Byrne Justice Assistance Grants. The Byrne grants helped this 31-county task force pay five of its 12 agents. The Bush Administration proposed eliminating the grant program from the FY 2006 budget. Barack Obama supported an amendment to the Justice

Department spending bill that increased funding for the Byrne program from \$625.5 million to \$900 million for 2006.

**Precursor Chemicals:** Drug enforcement experts have long believed that methamphetamines can be best fought by striking at the source: the factories that produce its precursor chemicals. Unlike cocaine and marijuana, drugs that are derived from widespread, easily grown plants, methamphetamines are based on legally-manufactured chemicals produced in only nine factories worldwide (one in Germany, one in the Czech Republic, two in China, and five in India). Restricting global imports of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine according to national pharmaceutical demand could help cut off drug labs. Mexico, for example, imported 224 tons of precursor chemicals in 2004—an amount twice the estimated national need.

**Mexican Cartels:** The United States' aggressive lab seizures and restrictions on over-the-counter sale of ephedrine- and pseudoephedrine-based products have compelled Mexican drug cartels to move their operations south of the border. Today, 65 percent of methamphetamines in the United States come from Mexican cartels. When the State Department began working with the Mexican government to restrict precursor imports, the cartels moved manufacturing operations to Latin America and began importing freshly manufactured methamphetamines from Asia. Obama believes that the role of Mexican drug cartels and their global network must be thoroughly addressed by the international community.

### **VETERANS AFFAIRS**

American Indians serve in the armed forces at a higher rate than any other minority group in America. American Indians have served in every war, and their special place in American military history is widely recognized. The first woman to die in combat in the Iraq war was a young American Indian woman. World War II's Codetalkers are the most celebrated examples of how Indians have been critical to the success of American efforts overseas. As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Obama supports several Veteran measures, including the sheltering and rehabilitation of homeless veterans, securing veterans' benefits, and easing service members' transition back into society.

### **HUNTING AND FISHING**

Hunting and fishing are important to many tribes' diet, culture, and spirituality. Protecting hunting and fishing rights ensures that tribes are able to carry on those aspects of their traditional way of life.

**Fishing Rights:** The fishing rights of Indian tribes are guaranteed not only by 150 year-old treaties but by the Supreme Court's Boldt decision as well. It is our shared duty to uphold these obligations and protect fisheries in such a manner that allows tribal and non-tribal fishing to continue into the future.

The path to equitable fishery management is paved with good science. Barack Obama supports initiatives to improve the science and our understanding of our nation's fish stocks. Through improved science, we can better guide decisions about how to protect the health of fish stocks, and, in turn, ensure a better, more secure and predictable future for our nation's fishermen.

**Speak up. Tell Barack your story by emailing: [FirstAmericans@BarackObama.com](mailto:FirstAmericans@BarackObama.com)**