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“With visit, Obama reaches out to Native Americans”

In first trip to a reservation as president, he touts works his administration has done to help Indians and looks to new initiatives

by Katie Zezima

CANNON BALL, N.D. — This isolated town nestled in the undulating prairie of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation is so small, its only formal sign is a boulder spray-painted with “C. Ball.” But Friday afternoon, it briefly became the center of the American political world when President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama visited.

It was Obama’s first stop as president on an Indian reservation, where he touted the strides his administration has made with Native Americans, unveiled new tribal education and economic measures, and touched on the difficult work that remains to pull many Indians out of crippling poverty and endemic unemployment.

“My administration is determined to partner with tribes,” Obama said. “It takes place every day on just about every issue that touches your lives.”

The president met with Native American children ahead of the tribe’s annual Flag Day powwow. Groups of tribal dancers clad in vibrantly colored costumes performed a traditional dance for him.

The administration announced plans to reform the Bureau of Indian Education to better educate native children and increase tribal control of schools. The White House also plans to remove regulatory barriers to infrastructure and energy development, encourage the use of tax-exempt bonds for economic development and increase the number of veterans that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services hire.

Many tribal leaders say Obama has done more in six years for Native Americans than all of his predecessors combined. The administration has given land back to tribes and worked one-on-one with tribal governments, and it is cracking down on crime in Indian Country.

“The best thing that’s happened to Indian Country has been President Obama being elected,” said Dave Archambault II, chairman of Standing Rock.

But many Native Americans also retain deep distrust of a federal government that historically has reneged on agreements and, many believe, treated Native Americans as an afterthought for generations.

“There’s been a bad track record. Our fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers have gone to Washington, and there’s been no promises made and no promises kept. That’s why we’ve not trusted the federal government,” said Tex “Red Tipped Arrow” Hall, tribal chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation in North Dakota.

Here on Standing Rock, where cows graze on the Cannon Ball River and a casino is the main economic driver, the statistics paint a bleak picture: 40 percent of the residents live in poverty and two-thirds are unemployed. Sexual assault and violence have long been problems on the reservation, which stretches down into South Dakota and is roughly the size of Connecticut. Rates of suicide and alcoholism are high and at least half of high school students drop out.

“It’s kind of a poor town. There’s no money,” said resident Paul Red-Dogg, who stood outside Cannon Ball’s small post office on Friday waiting for it to open. He is unemployed and his options are limited because he cannot afford a car.

Despite such realities, Archambault said he remains optimistic, in part because of Obama’s outreach to Native Americans.

Obama has hosted annual conferences for tribal leaders in Washington, where native officials discussed issues facing their communities with White House and administration staffers. Obama’s senior policy adviser for Native American Affairs, Jodi Gillette, grew up on Standing Rock.

“The fact that tribal leaders can annually go sit down with the president, this is something that has rarely ever occurred,” said Eddie Brown, a professor and director of American Indian Studies at Arizona State University.

Obama has also made it easier for Native American nations to receive disaster assistance by allowing them to directly contact the Federal Emergency Management Agency and streamlined permitting for economic development projects.

“It’s taken out that step of having to go to the governor. That is just such a boost to our sovereignty,” said Cynthia Iyall, leader of the Nisqually Indian tribe in Washington state.

The administration agreed to pay \$3.4 billion to settle a decades-long class-action lawsuit against the government for mismanaging native land-trust royalties. The payments, however, [have been delayed](#) because thousands of people who were deemed ineligible are appealing. Montana senators have formally complained that the process is shrouded in secrecy.

The government also established a [land buy-back program](#), which pays owners who voluntarily sold their land.

Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. has made improving safety in Indian Country a top priority, creating a task force that has been conducting hearings across the country since December.

The group is examining disparities in criminal sentencing for Native Americans. It established a permanent office of tribal justice and proposed language in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act that allows tribal courts to prosecute non-Indians who assault native women on tribal lands. The law, which Obama signed last year, does not go into effect until 2015, but the Justice Department chose three tribes to begin enforcing the law a year ahead of the country's other 563 federally recognized tribes.

Despite the recent efforts, the deep scars on Indian Country remain, and many worry that the initiatives, which will take years to come to fruition, may stall after Obama leaves office.

"We've made promises we frankly haven't met to provide education and other services to Indian people," said Kevin Washburn, assistant secretary for Indian affairs at the Interior Department and an enrolled member of the Chickasaw nation in Oklahoma. "It's a tough legacy to live down."

Many Native American leaders from Montana to Oklahoma are vehemently opposed to the Keystone XL pipeline, which the Obama administration [again postponed a decision on in April](#).

Other Native American nations are fighting for the right to take part in the oil boom in North Dakota. Hall said the layers of bureaucracy that Native Americans must go through to receive drilling permits make working on Indian lands undesirable for energy companies.

"If you contract for an oil rig for \$30,000 a day, you're not going to wait for a year. You're going to go off the reservation," he said. "You're going to have a donut hole around the Indian nations."

Archambault said he and other tribal members have spent the last week giddily anticipating the president's trip. Obama is the first president to visit Native American land since Bill Clinton in 1999; before him it was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Obama also visited the Crow Nation in Montana during his 2008 campaign.

"I know what the president is making is not going to solve all of our problems overnight. I know that it's not going to undo all the wrongs that have been done to Native Americans or to Indian Country, but it's going to inspire a lot of people," Archambault said. "If it brings some hope to one individual, if it helps one single mother, if a veteran feels pride, it's worth it."

Sari Horwitz contributed to this report.