

## SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/186171\\_bushtribes13.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/186171_bushtribes13.html)

### Bush's comment on tribal sovereignty creates a buzz

Friday, August 13, 2004

By LEWIS KAMB

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

One word caused the most stir.

A five-letter word that George W. Bush uttered 3,000 miles away, one week ago today, at a gathering of minority journalists.

A word that has since raised eyebrows across Indian country, and one that, almost immediately after leaving the president's lips, had Democrats licking theirs:

*Given.*

Speaking at the Unity: Journalists of Color convention in Washington, D.C., last Friday, President Bush, responding to a question about what tribal sovereignty meant in the 21st century, said: "Tribal sovereignty means just that; it's sovereign. You're a -- you've been given sovereignty, and you're viewed as a sovereign entity."

To many Native Americans -- and Democrats, alike -- the president's answer spoke volumes about what they see as his ignorance of Indian issues. And to many, the operative word in Bush's response was the verb "given."

As the continent's first societies, American Indian tribes hold their status as sovereign nations with an almost sacred reverence; an inherent standing as self-governing, independent bodies dating back millennia, something that's always existed.

Sovereignty is "the nearest and dearest, No. 1 issue in Indian Country," said Jacqueline Johnson, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Congress of American Indians. "It's not something that was given to us. As tribes, we see

#### WHAT BUSH SAID

Last week at the Unity: Journalists of Color conference in Washington, D.C., Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Page Editor Mark Trahan, a Shoshone-Bannock Indian, asked President Bush his views on what tribal sovereignty meant.

Here's the transcript:

**Question:** What do you think tribal sovereignty means in the 21st century, and how do we resolve conflicts between tribes and the federal and the state governments?

**President Bush:** Tribal sovereignty means that; it's sovereign. You're a -- you've been given sovereignty, and you're viewed as a sovereign entity. And, therefore, the relationship between the federal government and tribes is one between sovereign entities.

Now, the federal government has got a responsibility on matters like

sovereignty as something we've always had."

As both campaigns swing into the Northwest today, with Bush speaking at a Medina fund-raiser this evening, they are "putting a lot of focus on Indian country and the Native vote," said Alyssa Burhans, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs in Oregon and the Native Americans organizing director for National Voice, a non-partisan get-out-the-vote project.

And for good reason. In recent elections, the Indian vote, which political observers say traditionally has gone to Democrats, has been credited with deciding several prominent elections.

In Washington's U.S. Senate race in 2000, Slade Gorton arguably lost his re-election bid due to Indian voters and those sympathetic to issues affecting them -- thanks in large part to a negative ad campaign against Gorton run by the First American Education Project, an Olympia-based political advocacy group founded by several prominent tribal leaders.

And in South Dakota in 2002, Tim Johnson squeaked out a 524-vote victory for a U.S. Senate seat -- a win he has since credited to the strong voter turnout among that state's prominent Indian population.

This week, both Bush and Democratic challenger John Kerry campaigned in Southwestern states, with Kerry meeting tribal leaders in Arizona and New Mexico and Bush touting his Indian housing and health care policies in New Mexico, where about 9.5 percent of the state's population is Indian.

To prospective Indian voters, sovereignty is an issue steeped in legal meaning that drives Native American stances on public policy, court cases and tribes' core "government-to-government" dealings with the United States. And it's a status that many indigenous people see as falling increasingly under attack.

With the erosion of tribal sovereignty, some say, so too comes the weakening of tribal rights, traditions and customs, and essentially, the American Indian's way of life.

So, unsurprisingly, the president's view that sovereignty was something "given" to tribes -- and conversely, some fear, is something that could be taken away -- carried much weight in Indian Country.

And now, against the backdrop of a tight presidential race, some see Bush's statements as a potential factor in the election's outcome -- particularly in coveted swing states with significant Indian populations.

"There's a huge potential that the Native vote can really make a difference this election," Burhans said.

education and security to help, and health care. And it's a solemn duty. And from this perspective, we must continue to uphold that duty. I think that one of the most promising areas of all is to help with economic development. And that means helping people understand what it means to start a business. That's why the Small Business Administration has increased loans. It means, obviously, encouraging capital flows. But none of that will happen unless the education systems flourish and are strong, and that's why I told you we've spent \$1.1 billion in the reconstruction of Native American schools.

"It's hard to predict if this one statement will have an impact, but I think it will make many people, particularly tribal leaders, stop and think."

After Bush's statements last week, Democrats quickly seized an opportunity to woo the hotly contested Indian vote in this year's campaign -- and to emphasize differences between Kerry and the president. Washington state Democrats immediately issued a press release chastising Bush's "lack of understanding" of Native issues.

Likewise, Kerry campaigners in Washington and elsewhere quickly distributed press announcements of key Native American endorsements of Kerry that also detailed his "plan to strengthen Indian Country." The release also made reference to Bush's statements at Unity.

Simply put, said J.B. Tengco, spokesman for the Kerry Campaign in Washington, "At least we know what sovereignty means."

It's statements like that that have the Bush campaign fuming that Team Kerry is simply "making personal attacks," said Sharon Castillo, a Bush campaign spokeswoman. "The president understands clearly the unique legal relationship between tribes and the federal government," she said.

Castillo added that the president recently drafted an executive order to improve Indian education by developing strategies with tribal leaders to meet "No Child Left Behind" goals, as well as created an advisory board to advance Native higher education.

"He has a strong record," Castillo said. "I think Native Americans are going to make their decisions based on the issues."

Can one word really have that much of an impact on Indians? At the very least, both Johnson and Burhans agreed, Bush's recent statements have created a buzz.

The president's words likely will strengthen individual Indian voters' support of the candidate they already support, said Ron Allen, longtime chairman of the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, and a Republican who opposes the president.

"It was disappointing to hear his statements," said Allen, who also serves as NCAI's treasurer. "It was clear to us that he didn't know what he was talking about."

More so than anything, Allen said, the president's statements only underscore what he and many others see as the Bush administration's poor record on Native American issues.

To Bruce Whalen, an Oglala Sioux Indian in South Dakota and a Republican activist, Bush opponents are quibbling over "one or two words, and not seeing the full record."

"Democrats will inflate anything to protect their turf -- and Indian Country is their traditional turf," said Whalen, who later this month will attend the Republican National Convention as an alternate delegate.

While Whalen agrees most Indian voters now overwhelmingly vote for Democrats, he added, "I think there are a lot of Native Americans who are Republicans, they just don't know it yet."

The Republican platform on issues such as abortion and No Child Left Behind are "values that align better with Native Americans than Democratic values do," Whalen said.

"As our sacred ways and traditions are coming back, we're recognizing that tribes and Republicans are a lot alike," Whalen said. "I don't think a few words here or there can change that."

John Gonzales, a San Ildefonso Pueblo tribal member in New Mexico, and a Republican delegate, agreed. "If Native Americans do their own research and make up their own minds, they'll find that yes, President Bush is in touch with Native America," Gonzales said.

It has been Republican -- not Democratic -- policies that have long been the most beneficial to Indians, Gonzales added. The Nixon administration's Indian Self Determination Act promoted tribal self-governance, he said. Likewise, Gonzales said, Bush's Indian policies have lifted tribal communities. He noted that, lost in all the fallout from Bush's statements on sovereignty, were statements he made later about his administration's substantial increase to Indian education funding.

But it's the failure of America's education system that continues to ignore Native culture and history, said state Rep. John McCoy, D-Tulalip and a Tulalip Indian.

He said the president's statements can only be viewed as part of that "systemic problem." "If the leader of this nation doesn't understand the most important issue to Native Americans, we have a lot more work to do," he said.

---

*P-I reporter Lewis Kamb can be reached at 206-448-8336 or [lewiskamb@seattlepi.com](mailto:lewiskamb@seattlepi.com)*

**© 1998-2004 Seattle Post-Intelligencer**