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# "TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY IS A SACRED TRUST": AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CONFERENCE

*Wilma Mankiller\**

Dear Friends:

I deeply regret my inability to join you for this important conference. My health is precarious and unpredictable. Yet I remain hopeful that I will ultimately regain reasonably good health again.

I have looked forward to this conference for months. I have been involved in tribal rights and sovereignty issues for almost 30 years and have observed enormous changes in both the public perception of tribal sovereignty and changes in how the judicial system views tribal sovereignty. The only constant I have seen during the past thirty years is a continual attempt to erode the strength of tribal governments by the legislature and by the courts. Tribal communities and governments were under siege at the turn of the century and they remain under siege as we approach the millennium.

When I began working on tribal sovereignty, we were mostly concerned with issues involving land, water rights and fishing rights. When visionaries like Richard Oaks, Oren Lyons and Tom Porter spoke of sovereignty, they always reminded us that our ancestors had fought very hard for us to remain together as distinct tribal groups, as Indian Nations. Protecting tribal sovereignty then became a sacred trust of each generation.

The tribe that I worked for in the late 1960s took the position that they did not need federal recognition because they did not recognize the United States. They were a part of the international community of governments. Therefore, many of us were surprised when various Indian lawyers initiated litigation conceding that the U.S. Congress had plenary power over Indian nations. Now, unfortunately the notion that Congress has plenary power over tribes is accepted as conventional wisdom. And we find ourselves facing a Congress that is increasingly hostile to tribal governments.

It is imperative that Indian nations collectively develop a proactive strategy to protect tribal governments. It is not enough to wait to see where the next attack will come from. Indian nations have to initiate measures that will strengthen and support tribal governments.

Finally, let me repeat what I was told decades ago: "tribal sovereignty is a sacred trust." Our ancestors who spoke so eloquently of our history and culture are gone now. Their voices have been lost in time. They can no longer speak for themselves or the people. It then is our duty as Indian people to always remember our responsibility to speak for those who cannot speak

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\*Former Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation.

for themselves. We have given up way too much . . . from this day forward we must pledge not allow any more of our rights to be eroded, we must not to be moved a single inch, not a single inch.

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*Wilma P. Mankiller*