

Native American Heritage Month – how we honor Indigenous people matters!

In 1990 that President George H W Bush signed a joint resolution designating the entire month of November as the first, then named National American Indian Heritage Month, expanding the original Ford admiration's Native American Week (1976).

Native American Heritage Month is set aside to celebrate Indigenous peoples past and present and to rededicate ourselves to honoring Tribal sovereignty, promote Tribal self-determination, and uphold the United States' solemn trust and treaty responsibilities to those nations.

It's no secret that the US has failed in this arena over centuries. From seizure of lands occupied by these tribes, forcing whole peoples onto reservations that served more as ghettos, to breaking apart families by placing children in residential schools meant to "Americanize" the first Americans, our history in this area is bleak. Through it all, Indigenous peoples, their governments, and their communities persevere and flourish. We've noted a few of the writers and artists a few weeks ago, and note that countless teachers, scholars, scientists and more have made immeasurable contributions to US progress.

Sadly, a case is being heard in the US Supreme Court this month that could prove devastating to the family culture of Indigenous peoples. Oral arguments on *Haaland v. Brackeen* were already heard in the SCOTUS halls this month. This case seeks to overturn the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) which gave tribal nations a say in child welfare cases involving children who are members of a federally recognized tribe or eligible for membership. It also establishes placement preferences for when a Native child is up for adoption, giving first priority to the child's extended family, then other members of the child's tribe, then other native families. A white couple from Texas is trying to counter this law, who had already been granted adoption of a Navajo boy they had been fostering, are arguing that ICWA had placed them "last in line" and therefore were discriminated against (even though they won adoption over a Navajo family).

The implications of this case would be that Native child would be "up for grabs" with no protections of tribal sovereignty nor for children's identity and protections granted as Native persons. A law that was in place as a response to systemic harms should not be dismantled. Children forbidden to speak their native languages, stripped of their cultures, and alarming incidences of deaths in boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries still ring loudly in the memories of tribes across the country. And, tribes dispute the notion that preferences outlined in ICWA amount to racial discrimination and SCOTUS agreed. In 1974, a decision was rendered that such preferences weren't discriminatory but rather "reasonably designed to further the cause of Indian self-government."

A complicated, emotional issue for certain. But reasonable people can agree that culture and sovereignty of native people is paramount and this right should be upheld for the most vulnerable, at the risk of undermining a sacred trust America owes the first peoples.

Please pray with me:

Great Creator, who fashioned this land upon which we stand, who blessed it with the abundance that was nurtured by the first peoples to walk upon it, grant safety and security to indigenous peoples the world over. And open hearts and minds of those who occupy these lands and seek to exercise their power over those on the margins. Let peace prevail on the earth, and all her peoples live free. Amen.