



COALITION OF LARGE TRIBES

Blackfeet Nation • Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe • Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation of Oregon
Crow Nation • Eastern Shoshone Tribe • Fort Belknap Indian Community • Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara Nation
Muscogee (Creek) Nation • Navajo Nation • Northern Arapaho Tribe • Oglala Sioux Tribe • Rosebud Sioux Tribe
San Carlos Apache Tribe • Shoshone-Bannock Tribes • Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation
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COLT Welcomes President Biden’s Boarding Schools Apology, Looks Forward to Healing Commitments

October 25, 2024

LAVEEN, ARIZONA - The Coalition of Large Tribes, an intertribal organization representing the interests of the more than 50 tribes with reservations of 100,000 acres or more, encompassing more than 95% of the Indian Country lands and more than half the Native American population, welcomes President Biden’s sincere apology today, recognizing the wrong and painful history of federal Indian boarding schools. For a century, hundreds of such schools took Indian children away from their families and robbed tribal communities of generations—all under the United States’ assimilationist policies that aimed to strip tribes of our land, language and culture. President Biden disavowed those policies and shared that the Biden-Harris Administration is committed to supporting Indian Country’s path to healing from those grave injustices.

COLT Vice Chairman Tracy “Ching” King observed, “Indigenous communities have been subjected to trauma at every scale and dimension imaginable - individual, collective, historical, intergenerational, and more - with physical, mental, spiritual and systemic violence intending to destroy us as tribal nations by taking our children and their beliefs, culture, and relationships with the natural world. This trauma feels very fresh, but President Biden’s apology is a start to our healing.”

“The purpose of the Indian Boarding School Policy was to assimilate American Indians and Alaska Natives and dispossess us of our lands. The lands wrongfully taken from tribal nations in support of Indian Boarding Schools are valuable and should be returned to help us address the many intergenerational social ills from which we still suffer caused by the Indian Boarding Schools,” said **COLT Executive Director OJ Semans**. “The Department of the Interior’s own reports recognize that land back is a key foundation for healing. COLT calls for enforcement of early 20th Century federal statutes which require reversion of lands no longer used for missionary purposes.”

Semans explained that, “Even 100 years ago, Congress recognized abuses by churches were ongoing and enacted laws to undo their land-grabs of many thousands of acres of reservations. The Indian Boarding Schools and associated mass dispossession of lands were tools of assimilation policies that the United States has disavowed and must remediate. Enforcement of the federal land reversion statutes is long overdue.”

“As I, and other COLT leaders have shared on the floor of the United Nations in New York and Geneva, restoring our tribal lands is the foundation of our cultural and spiritual healing,” said



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COLT Treasurer Lisa White Pipe, Vice President of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. “The Rapid City Indian Boarding School is vitally important and would be an ideal first step in land reversion enforcement because it has its own specific reversion statute, in addition to the generally applicable ones Congress enacted, and those lands were intended to benefit Lakota tribal nations in common. Reversion of the Rapid City Indian Boarding School parcels into Trust with the Department of the Interior would fulfill Congress’s vision and begin the intensive healing our people need.”

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton attended the Biden apology event in person, along with other COLT leaders. She applauded President Biden’s words, and looked ahead to the Administration’s actions to support trauma healing, “Indigenous cultural knowledge and practices should be made available for trauma healing and mental health services should be indigenous lead, with peer learning and support spaces, and be provided with tailored training for practitioners and communities.”

Vice Chairman King said, “The United States can help us heal by giving back what boarding schools took from Indians—land, dignity, language and culture.” COLT’s recommendations for actions to address the legacy of Indian boarding schools and support the healing of tribal communities include:

1. Enforce Federal Land Reversion Statutes and Advance International Relationships as Recommended by DOI:ⁱ

5. Return Former Federal Indian Boarding School Sites. The Department should conduct reviews, upon request of Tribes, of property and title documents for former Indian boarding school sites, including land patents provided to religious institutions and organizations or states, including during territorial status. When required by patent, deed, statute, or other law, including reversionary clause activation, the Department should work to facilitate the return of those Indian boarding school sites to U.S. Government or Tribal ownership. This includes reversionary clauses under the Indian Appropriation act of September 21, 1922, 42 Stat. 994, 995 (“1922 Act”) and Tribal-specific legislation. Where former boarding school sites revert to U.S. Government ownership or remain in U.S. Government ownership, the Department should engage with Indian



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Tribes in government-to-government consultation when asked, to address the ownership and management of those sites, including the protection of burial sites and cultural resources.

- 2. Support Restored Dignity for Native Americans by Repudiating Other Historic Wrongs, and Revoke All Wounded Knee Medals of Honor.** On December 28, 1890, the U.S. Army intercepted the band of Miniconjou Lakota, mainly women and children, on their way to Pine Ridge Reservation. As the military called together the Sioux men to confiscate their weapons, soldiers began indiscriminately shooting. They killed the mostly unarmed Native men, as well as the women and children who were in a separate section of camp and began fleeing the site. The total death toll may be as high as 300, with women and children making up over-two thirds of the dead. Despite this brutality, U.S. soldiers were awarded approximately 20 individual Medals of Honor.

COLT requests President Biden keep his campaign promise from his letter on January 15, 2020:

Do you support the revocation of the Medals of Honor for the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre? Yes. The Congressional Medal of Honor is our Nation's highest award for gallantry in combat, in defense of our Nation's highest ideals and principles. That this medal was awarded for the massacre of hundreds of unarmed Native Americans, including women and children, is abhorrent to those very ideals and lessens what the award represents in integrity and personal sacrifice for all others who have received it.

- 3. Begin Intensive Investments in Trauma Healing Policy and Programs.** COLT calls for dramatic investments in direct funding to tribes and organizations to implement culturally-informed healing modalities to maximize the trauma healing resources available in tribal communities. Adequate mental and behavioral health services are not available in tribal communities and when such services are available, they often do not recognize cultural knowledge and practices; as a result, current mental health services remain ineffective in reaching Indigenous people to resolve our individual and collective trauma. We urge support H.R. 7227 and S. 1723, the Truth and Healing Commission



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on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, and any other Federal act or policy that would provide trauma healing resources to address the inter-generational impacts of Indian Board Schools.

4. “Meaningfully Address Revitalization of Tribal Languages and Tribal Education.”ⁱⁱ

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ⁱ And also note the recommendation at p. 104, which COLT strongly supports, in addition to implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the doctrine of Free, Prior and Informed Consent:

8. Advance International Relationships. The U.S. Government could strengthen engagement with other countries with their own histories of boarding schools or other assimilationist policies, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to exchange best practices for healing and redress between Federal governments and Indigenous governments for Indigenous child removal through boarding schools and predatory foster care and adoption practices. To further this goal, the U.S. should expand capacity, including through the Department’s Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), to support engagement on international Indigenous issues. To strengthen the U.S. Government’s expertise on Indigenous issues globally and connections with other countries, the U.S. Government should establish an ambassador position focused on engagement on international Indigenous issues.

The rights of federally-recognized tribes have global implications that must be respected in the realms of human rights, religious freedoms, water, climate change, repatriation, and remedies for Indian Boarding Schools. In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to adopt the UNDRIP, recognizing baseline rights of tribal nations and others in the realms of self-determination, equality, property, religion, culture, economic wellbeing, freedom from violence, and others. The United States declared support for the UNDRIP in 2010 and, in 2014, the United States committed to “take measures... to achieve the ends of the Declaration.” However, progress has been slow in the U.S., as compared to other countries that are developing national action plans and other actions to implement the UNDRIP. To change this, COLT recommends the Platform call on the next Administration to:



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- (1) Develop a national action plan for achieving the ends of UNDRIP and apply it to US law and policy, including an immediate call for all federal departments and agencies to issue policies and internal guidance to achieve the ends of UNDRIP, and to report annually on their progress;
- (2) Appoint an Ambassador (or Special Envoy) for Global Indigenous Affairs to serve as head of mission and coordinate all international engagements by the United States in matters regarding Indigenous Affairs, including at the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with other national governments;
- (3) Support the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, through their own tribal nations, in all United Nations bodies, including but not limited to the General Assembly, Human Rights Council, UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Health Organization, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other international and regional forums, including the Organization of American States.
- (4) Protect Indigenous Peoples' traditional plant knowledge, medicines, and economic innovation from theft by taking immediate measures to conform US intellectual property policy and law with the World Intellectual Property Organization's new Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge, GRATK/DC/7 (May 24, 2024); sign and ratify the GRATK treaty; and ensure that Indigenous Peoples' rights are protected in WIPO's upcoming treaty negotiations on Indigenous Peoples' traditional cultural expressions and traditional knowledge.

ⁱⁱ COLT would like to see a combined \$100 million between DOI Living Language Grant, ANA Esther Martínez Grants, and Department of Education Native American Language grant program at \$33.3 million each. Further, COLT supports funding for Tribal Colleges and Universities commensurate with the \$500 million invested in HBCUs. This is a matter of equity.