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My Voice: First Americans deserve a better shake

Written by

Marshall L. Matz,
lawyer and Lower Brule tribe ambassador

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We have much to celebrate on America's birthday 2011. We remain the shining light on the hill, and I remain optimistic about America. We have some very serious problems to face as a nation, and the extreme partisanship of Washington is making it more difficult to resolve them. But necessity is the mother of invention and, ultimately, they must be addressed.

America's first challenge, however, does not get enough attention: how to deal fairly with Native Americans, the Indian population and specifically those living on Indian reservations. The Indian reservations of South Dakota and all those in the Missouri River Valley, face a critical situation. When you look at the data for infant mortality, life expectancy, health profiles, education levels, drug use, alcoholism and other social indicators it simply does not reflect those of the U.S.

After spending 40 years in and around the reservations of South Dakota I am convinced that the only long-term solution is a full-scale attack on the unemployment rate. While we all struggle with a national unemployment rate of 9 percent, the

unemployment rate on many Indian reservations is far in excess of 50 percent and can reach an unemployment rate of 70 percent or higher. At that level, there is no possible way to address the social needs of the reservations.

We, the United States, destroyed a lifestyle, and it should be replaced by a stable economy. The tribes, for their part, must look beyond the treaties ... as important as they are ... and make a commitment to creating a private sector economy. The tribes near a major population center have used gaming to create an economy, but for rural tribes, the poorest tribes, gaming is not the answer.

So, what would it take to bring down the unemployment rate on Indian reservations?

Let's start with this list:

• Tax incentives to locate business on the Reservations;

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È Job training and education programs;

È Building up the infrastructure;

È Improving the judicial systems, including a reliable and consistent court system;

È Better health care services;

È The creation of private capital, with federal guarantees to reflect the trust status of land ownership;

È And a special effort to expand all the programs of the Department of Agriculture as they apply to the reservations, from Extension services to start-up grants and business loans for value-added products. Secretary Tom Vilsack and an excellent team at the Department of Agriculture are trying to do just that, but it will take legislation to get the job done.

This will not be a quick or easy process. It will take a generation or two of sustained commitment by all the stakeholders. The goal is to finally establish an economy that replaces the sustainable lifestyle that was Native American culture.

The nature of the human condition is to move forward. Tribes cannot move back to the way things were any more than we can or should turn back the clock of technology.

Tribes themselves have will have a critical role to play if this challenge is to be met. The treaties signed in the 1800s between

the United States and the tribes remain the central tenant of Native American law. They are the foundation for tribal sovereignty and the current government-to-government relationship between the United States and tribes. But the treaties are not an economic plan. Enforcing the treaties will not solve the unemployment rate or the social upheaval that results from having no jobs on the reservations.

Native American people are caught between choosing between their culture and family or a better life in the big cities. It is a terrible choice. It is not realistic to give back the land that was taken, but it is possible to devote the resources necessary to help create an economy that will give Native American people a sustainable and enjoyable American life style with the full benefits of citizenship.

The world might be flat (to use the phrase coined by Thomas Friedman), but not on America's Indian reservations. It is time to finally come up with an enduring solution to America's first national challenge.

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Since the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, the plight of the tribes has received greater visibility, but the reality on the ground has not changed. Let's make fixing the problem our promise to ourselves on this July Fourth.

My voice

Marshall L. Matz, 64, practices law in Washington, D.C., and in Lower Brule. He is ambassador to the U.S. from the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe

My Voice guest columns should be 500-700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photograph of the author. Authors also should include their full name, age, address, occupation and relevant organizational memberships.

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