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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND CULTURAL CONFLICT

*Summary of Remarks by Peterson Zah, President of the Navajo Nation**

In this country, the Indian understands how to live with nature and realizes that there has to be harmony among all of the entities for the human race to continue to exist, Peterson Zah began. Raised in a very traditional family in which his mother never went to school and his father had a third-grade education, Zah nevertheless learned plenty from his parents about the environment and "how we are supposed to take care of the earth."

The Navajo people live off grazing, Zah explained. Sheep are very important, as the buffalo are to other Indian tribes. When Navajo butcher a sheep, they use every part of the sheep; they do not throw anything away. In traditional Navajo teaching, there is no such thing as waste, and it is up to each individual and family to get rid of what little waste they create. Living in harmony with nature and the world are highly sacred beliefs for the Navajo. Zah's grandfather used to tell him that the beautiful mountains "were brought forth by the Great Spirit so we can appreciate what beauty means." His grandfather always prayed when passing by one of the four holy mountains because he knew that the mountain was there so people would have a sense of beauty. He also used to tell Zah that a human being is made out of everything: "Your hair is dark, and therefore you should not be afraid of darkness because it is part of you. Your flesh comes from the earth. The blood in your veins is from the river. The beautiful nail is a white seashell. Your teeth come from the white corn. The force that you use to speak is from the thunder in the summertime. The white part around your eyes comes from the sun. The energy you use to walk and run and to use your arms comes from the wind. In the eyes of the Great Spirit you were made from everything. Therefore you must respect everything that you feel, see, touch, or hear - mother earth, the wind, the river - because they are all living things. Everything is on equal footing in the eyes of the Great Spirit." That teaching stuck with Zah.

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When people dump trash, they try to hide it away, and reservation land often becomes a target. For example, Farmington, New Mexico, did not know what to do with its toxic waste. Every time a site was identified, neighbors would protest. The town wanted to put the waste in Navajo Nation land because there were no people. It looked empty, but the proposed site was a holy place for the Navajo, a place "where the Great Spirit came down and where the Great Spirit left when it was time to leave." After a two-year lawsuit, the Navajos won the case. Closed military bases are another target for dumping toxic waste. This is of particular concern because approximately 200 bases will be closed in the next few years. Indian boarding schools also are being closed because Indian people now have schools back on the reservation; those lands are targets for toxic dumping grounds as well. Former Indian schools, former military bases, and Indian reservations have all become potential sites for disposing of toxic waste.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the United States government wanted to produce atomic bombs, continued Zah. One of the major ingredients in such bombs is uranium, which has been found on the Navajo Nation. Zah's people were employed by companies like Kerr-McGee. They were told to dig into the earth to extract uranium and help win the war. They did, because they are very patriotic, explained Zah. Little did they know that what they would be breathing would cause cancer. Thousands of Navajo men are dead of cancer today because of their work then. Zah has had to take care of their widows and children. Similar cases can be found today. The federal government considers Indian land empty and unused and therefore safe for burying nuclear waste. "If it is safe, bury it in your own yard," suggested Zah.

When Zah met with some University of Tulsa students, one asked him how he proposed to fight the storage of nuclear waste on an Indian reservation. "I told her a story," said Zah. In Gallup, New Mexico, Mobil Oil Company was extracting uranium from Navajo land. The company used water to wash and separate the sand from the uranium. It rained, and the dam holding the water used to wash the uranium broke. The water ran down river into the Navajo Nation, into the Little Colorado, and into the Colorado River. A young man at the time, Zah returned from Arizona State University to find the federal and state environmental protection agencies trying to convince the non-English-speaking Navajo that the contaminated water was safe for their sheep, cattle, and horses to drink. Zah brought a gallon of the water to the meeting and told the men from Washington to drink the water if it was really safe. They did not want to drink it. "You have to do things like that to prove your point," explained Zah. Eventually they received the needed assistance to develop an alternative water source for those communities. Students should not be afraid to take action, advised Zah, because their "ultimate responsibility is to the community. That is their moral obligation."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: As the president of a sovereign nation have you in the past or will you make foreign policy statements that challenge what the United States State

Department advocates concerning environmental situations or misconduct of people in other countries?

- A: The Navajo Nation has over 200,000 people, 16 million acres of land, and a big government. I work with eighty-eight council delegates and 330 chapter officers. Policy statements have to go through those bodies before they become tribal law. Over the last three years the Navajo Nation has initiated its own Navajo Environmental Protection Office, and it is now in a position to aggressively take care of Navajo air, water, and land, and to make that kind of policy statement. President Clinton recently issued an executive order calling for action on the part of all of the United States departments in trying to see where low-income populations are taking the brunt of waste disposal. He wants a report in the next fourteen months.
- Q: In the spring of 1993 I worked with Jim Thorpe's daughter in Yale, Oklahoma, on the placement of a monitored retrieval storage site for nuclear waste on Indian land. It seems that anemic economies are targeted and grant money is offered to entice people into taking storage-site proposals. Where can Indians turn for alternative economic development projects?
- A: Each tribe has its own resources. The Navajo are very lucky. We have an abundance of coal, oil, gas, uranium, the water of the Colorado River, timber. Other Indian tribes are not so lucky. Gaming activities, tourism, and other resources can bring in revenues. But the last thing I want as the Navajo President is to get involved in someone else's politics. They have to make their own decisions.
- Q: There has been criticism of the Pine Ridge Reservation for the environmental damage they are doing to their own community. Since much of the degradation is because of ignorance or the need for financial resources, do you think that criticism is fair?
- A: Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. I am facing the situation of a saw mill that employs about 500 Navajo people. There are also people who do not want any more of the big trees cut, especially in sacred areas. As president I must balance employment and the other concerns. Certainly the sacred sites ought to be protected, so we are working with the people making the environmental impact statement to make sure sacred sites are preserved. We are being asked by local people to be more diligent about what is happening to our own land.

