

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BUILDING RELATIONS: ALASKA NATIVES, ANCSA AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

RAINA THIELE*

[F]or me as a young person, having grown up all over the state and also having exposure to Anchorage and the outlying locations, I had experience with The CIRI Foundation, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, the Heritage Center, and a variety of different tribal organizations, all of which were pushing a college education. Not only asking “How do you apply?” but also asking: “How do you pay for this? Where can you go? How do you work this process?” As I think about the forty-fifth anniversary of ANCSA, which is the theme of today’s conference, I can see a direct link between that law and where I am today. These institutions, many of them, are either the direct or indirect result of ANCSA. They have created this immense amount of information for Native people to draw on which helps us get to where we need to go. And of course there are different opinions about ANCSA, some positive, some negative. The economic impacts have been wonderful, but we also still continue to struggle to secure our rights to hunt and fish for subsistence purposes.

Copyright © 2016 by Raina Thiele.

* An Dena’ina Athabascan and Yup’ik, Raina Thiele worked in President Obama’s White House as Associate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, where she focused on tribal governments and advised on climate change, arctic, and energy issues. She was also a lead organizer of President Obama’s trip to Alaska in the fall of 2015. Previous to her role in the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, Ms. Thiele served for nearly five years in the White House Office of Management and Budget, where she worked on a wide variety of issues, including tribal legislation, international affairs, and energy. Ms. Thiele earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from Yale College and her Master in Public Policy degree from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Ms. Thiele was born and raised in Alaska in the Mat-Su Valley, Kenai Peninsula, Bristol Bay, and Alexander Creek. The above piece is an excerpt from Ms. Thiele’s full keynote address. Those wishing to find her full address may do so on the Alaska Law Review website (<http://alr.law.duke.edu/>).

We also struggle, as I have seen myself, with a lot of federal misinformation. A lot of folks at the federal level have a thin understanding of Alaska and who Alaskan Native people are. It is very difficult to try to understand the political and legal differences between our Alaska Native system versus the system of the lower forty-eight tribes. It is much simpler in the lower forty-eight in many ways. You have some treaty tribes, you have large tribes that are federally recognized, and they control the economic vibrancy in their communities. So it is easy to understand the governance and economic drivers as they are typically controlled by a single entity. Whereas here in Alaska, we have a much more complicated system. And it is not even necessarily the federal government's fault that folks do not understand this, but it can definitely get discouraging when you always have to explain and explain again. Because folks have a low base knowledge and the folks that are in government are not always really *in* government, for decades and decades. Instead, they tend to come and go and it is a full re-education process. I know this because I spent seven and a half years educating folks on ANCSA and on our situation in Alaska.

But that said, President Obama's administration has certainly made some pretty incredible strides when it comes to their work on Alaska. For instance, we currently have the Arctic Council Chairmanship. With that, President Obama signed an executive order on Arctic coordination that created a large interagency body called the Arctic Executive Steering Committee. It is headed by a friend of mine, former Ambassador Mark Brzezinski, who is essentially the person responsible for ensuring that the federal government is focusing appropriately on the Arctic. This is something that has never existed before. It has been incredible to see the work that has come out of that process. The GLACIER Conference was part of that process. And the President's trip to Alaska can even be considered part of that process. It has definitely helped heighten Alaska's standing in the federal government and on a national scale. It has also helped us share the issues that we are experiencing here in the state, whether it is budget issues or issues with climate change, a huge concern for many folks across the state.

But as the President always says, we have a lot more to do. We really do. With the impacts of climate change especially it has become even more important that we as Alaska Natives have representation in Washington, D.C., and that we start to engage more in national politics, because times change and we cannot always rely on our congressional representatives to get past the finish line on policy that needs to be enacted. The President has seen this firsthand. He has had a Congress that hasn't been incredibly friendly to the administration over the past eight years. So he has had to be both innovative and creative when it comes to

what work they do on the administrative side. As the executive branch, when you cannot rely on federal legislation as an option to forge policy, you instead look inward. You need to decide what it is that we can do, and ask what authorities do we possess that we can use creatively to ensure that we can get some of this work done. That spans across multiple different issues, including climate change and immigration. Across the board, we have used the executive power in extremely creative ways, which has helped a lot of different people.

Many folks ask: how do we secure this national profile for Alaska and Alaska Natives? How do we ensure that we continue to have a seat at the table, that we are national players? It is a great question. It is also one I have thought about quite a bit, especially in my work for the Hillary campaign. It does not come naturally to every campaign or every federal official to think about Alaska. We are way up here and folks oftentimes have never made a trip up here. We are not always able to travel down to D.C. to advocate for the issues that we care about. And so our interests oftentimes tend to fall by the wayside. One of the several ways that we can help in this process is by being more coordinated. It is very difficult to do in many ways, more so because it is something we have been trying to do increasingly across different corporations and different tribal groups. What I often see in Washington, D.C. is that folks will come to the table on similar issues but with very differing views and opinions on what should happen.

The low levels of understanding and misinformation that already exist about Alaska among federal government staff helps to confuse the situation. On top of this, folks are even less likely to pay attention to our issues when we are not presenting a united front. The other issue I have seen over the past few months is that it is much more difficult for Alaska Native tribal interests and governments to lean in to national politics, things like fundraising and the like, because, unlike tribes in the lower forty-eight, especially those which have a strong economic base through gaming or other means, we do not have a federally recognized tribal entity that has a commercial mechanism. It is all vested in the corporations. And because they are corporations and not federally recognized tribes, they are not allowed to give to federal campaigns, because that's illegal. Our tribes mostly have federal and state money, and so, unlike tribes in the lower forty-eight that can give vast amounts to different campaigns, we get overshadowed because we do not have a mechanism to exercise our political power in campaigns. There are some ways to work around that, but some are more effective than others.

I think another thing that would be helpful would be to have more Alaskans in D.C. I know everybody goes to D.C. only when they have to, and no one likes to stay very long. I have many friends who have come to

D.C. and left and have come back and left. That being said, it is always great to have folks in D.C. for whatever period of time they are willing to stay. I cannot tell you how impactful it has been to be able to bring the Alaskan perspective to the White House. And that has had immense effects because it trickles down to the agencies and it becomes a part of the institutional knowledge of all the federal staff.

I am very proud of my time that I spent there, and I sincerely hope that we can get others to come to D.C. or work for the federal government here in Alaska because I cannot stress how important it is, especially as we struggle with climate change. We have villages that are falling into the ocean, the President flew over one of these villages, Kivalina, when he was up here last year. We continue to be at the frontline of climate change impacts and we need to seriously think about how to ensure that we continue to advocate in a powerful way. In the President's final tribal nations conference remarks, he stressed the importance of continuing to press on as Native peoples. He said lasting progress depends on all of us. It depends on our willingness to organize and mobilize and keep pushing for our communities. That especially resonates with me because none of the work the Obama administration has accomplished for Native peoples would have been remotely possible, not even a fraction of it, had we not had the active cooperation of tribal peoples and governments from across this country. My hope is that, as this administration comes to a close and the next administration comes to fruition, we will continue to have that outsized impact and continue to fight for our Native peoples.