



NAVAJO NATION PRESIDENT JOE SHIRLEY, JR. INAUGURAL ADDRESS

JANUARY 9, 2007

Vice President Shelly, Mr. Chief Justice, Delegates of the 21st Navajo Nation Council, leaders and dignitaries, from near and far, my Navajo relatives, *Ya'at'eeb*...

One hundred sixty years ago, as the United States bridged a continent and laid claim to everything within two distant shores, Navajos were known as a proud, fierce and independent people.

We were self-sufficient, raising and hunting all that sustained us, making all we used, traveling within our Four Sacred Mountains as we pleased, praying and healing ourselves as our ancestors and the Holy Ones had instructed us.

We had aggressive enemies, fought many wars, but had never been conquered. When threatened, we defended ourselves, and our reputation as warriors – which we carry to this day – preceded us. Our greatest leaders, known both as warriors and peacemakers, come from that period in our history, and are remembered with reverence by our people today.

Two of those great leaders were Narbona and his son-in-law Manuelito. Neither sought to lead, as leaders must today. Instead, circumstance had thrust them to the forefront of their times, and ushered in a change when the entire Navajo people were to be led by one man and a handful of skilled speakers and thinkers around him.

With heaviness in our hearts even now, history tells us that after a frail, 83-year-old Narbona negotiated peace with the American soldiers, he was shot and killed over a horse. The peace Narbona sought would not come soon but instead our people were plunged into 15 more years of fear and dread, culminating in the holocaust of the Navajo people, and known to the world as The Long Walk.

The independence we had always known, and always loved, had been torn from our lives. Even with the Treaty of 1868 and the return of our freedom, from the moment of our release from Fort Sumner, our independence was replaced with dependence.



As a people, we had little choice but to accept it. New rules and laws were imposed on us. Through force, starvation, and injustice, we came to understand that the survival of our children, and of our people, meant acceptance of the foreigners' terms.

Navajos have endured much historical and emotional trauma that systematically reinforced our dependence on an outside power, leaving us scarred as a people. Among these traumas since the Long Walk were livestock reduction, boarding schools, relocation, the Bennett Freeze, and the inevitable result, impoverishment.

Individual injustices are too numerous to count. Although we became American citizens in 1924, we were not allowed to vote, we had no voices of our own on school boards, in state legislatures, or in the halls of Congress.

Although education was meant to improve our lives, we were told becoming doctors and lawyers was beyond our reach, and that we were better suited to manual labor because we were better with our hands than with our minds.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a history of our grandparents and great-grandparents. Many of us here today remember being told as children that our language should never be spoken, that our culture was uncivilized, and that our spiritual beliefs are untrue.

Laws meant to protect us, instead hobbled our economy for the past century. Today, we see the result of that in the tremendous growth on our borders, and hundreds of miles of economic silence in between. We became a dependent people, but never because we chose dependence for ourselves.

Despite all the Navajo people have lived through, despite all our people have suffered, and despite all the need that continues to exist across our land, no law, no trustee, no outside government, no one but ourselves can deliver us from this legacy. That has always been our teaching. That has always been our way.

Today, we, as a Nation, stand at a point where the independence we lost long ago is again within our sight. Through time, we have grown tremendously in number. Our homeland is established and expanding. We have embraced education. We have asserted our sovereign right to make our own laws and to live by them, to seek the respect of other governments and receive it, and to confer with the leaders of other jurisdictions as equals and as partners.

Our children go to college by the thousands, becoming professionals while still rooted in their Navajo world. A generation ago, our high school athletes were overlooked as inferior. Today, Navajo fans overflow in every arena, and our teams bring home every championship they seek.

A generation ago, one Navajo attorney working for our Nation was a source of immense pride. Today, law firms everywhere, and our own Department of Justice, are brimming with bright, young Navajo lawyers. Today, we meet the friends we had at boarding school who now hold master's degrees and doctorates.



Within a few years, the Navajo Nation will see the result of all its planning and action in increased revenues and jobs. Through the financial independence that will come, our sovereignty will flourish, and our dependency will end.

History now favors us for our perseverance, for holding on to that which has always made us distinctly Navajo. The prayers spoken for our salvation before the Long Walk, and down through the decades, are now returning to us as a people.

Although politics in the chapter house, in the Council Chambers or at the ballot box may separate us, that is only temporary. Throughout time, there has always been more that unites us as Navajos than divides us, and it will always be so.

Some of us may live in cities and greatly miss back home. Others may tend to sheep and earn a humble living weaving rugs. In between are the many who drive hours to jobs right here on Navajoland, living urban lives in a remote place.

We may disagree on what is best. But beyond our differences, we are all Navajos. We all have clans. We all hold the same land sacred. We all respect those who came before and the teachings that they gave us. And we all feel the same emotion when we raise our voice to say, "I am proud to be Navajo!"

Against great odds, the Navajo people continue to be. Against great odds, our language and our songs continue to be. Against great odds, our teachings, our culture, and our way of life all continue to be despite what was done to try to extinguish them.

That's because we are resilient. We are strong. We are determined. We are intelligent, and we are visionary. My prayer today is that 100 years from now, 500 years from now, and, yes, 1,000 years from now, the Diné will continue to be. Even then, a Navajo will proclaim to the Holy People, "I am here!"

From this point forward, there is no limit to what we can imagine. There is no limit to what we can achieve. We want our people and our land to thrive. We know that for a culture to be rich and real, people must want it, and Navajos always have.

As I look around me at the gathering of leaders here, and before me to thousands of Navajo faces, I am filled with a great pride. I thank the Creator for making me a Navajo, and for placing me among such a people. I wish I could speak to all the Navajos who ever were to let them know we are still here today. I want to tell them that I see the day when the world will again acknowledge us as a people who are Proud, Fierce and Independent, and we are forever known as The Great Navajo Nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.