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INDIAN COUNTRY – THE NEED FOR A MARSHALL PLAN

Democratic 2020 presidential candidates have spoken passionately about the issue of reparations and how it is a moral imperative. Some have suggested that Native Americans should be included in that conversation, but none have raised the issue of “Reconstruction for Indian Country.” Reparations isn’t reconstruction, and the African-American experience is not the Native American experience. The United States commits billions of dollars to reconstruction in countries it has waged war upon, the latest being Afghanistan and Iraq. In respect to military conflict, the United States was engaged with the Great Sioux Nation for 36-years, twice as long as the current conflict in Afghanistan. That is but one example of many. The economies and vital infrastructures of tribal nations subject to war with the US were either destroyed or devastated, and yet not one dollar has been invested in reconstruction of these tribal nations by the US. Infrastructure in Indian Country does not need incremental repair, Indian Country needs a functional infrastructure, which has failed to materialize post the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act.

Every aspect of vital infrastructure is lacking in Indian Country. An ad-hoc approach to a systemic, multi-generational crisis merely creates a cycle of failure; failure in federal administration and assistance, and a failure to serve tribal citizens. Tribal nations face endemic poverty, unemployment rates that commonly exceed over 50% of a tribe’s workforce, underfunded healthcare provisions, the lowest life expectancy of any ethnic group in the Western Hemisphere outside Haiti, and levels of disease that double and triple the national average. Communities that endure this and are concurrently afflicted by the highest rate of teen suicide among any ethnic group in the US and endure the highest rate of infant mortality, need more than individual ideas to address the challenges. Random federal actions that are few and far between and focus on one problem at a time in isolation don’t even rise to the level of a strategic Band-aid. What is required is vision – the Einstein approach, not the bureaucratic incremental procedure - an entire concept with a central meaning: A Marshall Plan for Indian Country. Of the 55,000 miles of highways that run through Indian lands, more than half are dirt.

You can fix the roads but where do they lead? 55,000 miles of paved highway needs to lead somewhere for Indian Country; the roads need to be an artery in the body of viable tribal infrastructures.

“Consider the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of a people who were also divided and conquered. They were restored and the US was very prominent in that restoration. Germany was restored and the same principles should apply to the Great Sioux Nation,” said revered Lakota elder, Johnson Holy Rock, before he passed. Holy Rock was President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe during JFK’s administration. The late-Vine Deloria, Jr., one of the great indigenous scholars, authors and academics identified by *Time Magazine* as one of the “greatest thinkers of the 20th Century,” spoke of reconstruction in terms of “a reform movement,” examining the impact of not only wars waged on tribal nations, but the subsequent devastation of the Allotment Act. “It should be possible to put together all the facts and figures and negotiate in Congress for rehabilitation for what the government has done, and you could very easily take other parts of federal policy in to demonstrate what the cost has been in human lives and suffering,” Deloria proposed. “I think that would be a first step in a reform movement. Then you could go in on land consolidation and propose that instead of all this litigation. It would be simpler to have Congress set up a bill resulting in reconstruction, with consolidation being turned over to tribes.”

The Trump Administration’s 2018 budget for Indian Affairs was \$2.5 billion. The US has spent \$117.2 billion on reconstruction in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the US committed a minimum \$60 billion, which by some reports has risen in excess of \$90 billion. When adjusted for inflation, Afghanistan exceeds and Iraq approaches what the US invested in the Marshall Plan. Post-World War II, the Marshall Plan - the European Recovery Program – provided approximately \$12 billion to reconstruct war-torn Europe through a visionary four-year plan. A Marshall Plan for Indian Country would not incur the blowback of contributing to foment the Cold war, nor would it fracture from the socio-political demographics of Afghanistan or Iraq, had a similar program been employed in either country.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, John Sopko, suggested that the reconstruction effort there was undermined by a failure to recognize the needs of the Afghans, as opposed to what the US thought they needed. “We can’t rebuild it into a little America. I think that was one of the problems,” he said. A Marshall Plan for Indian Country must be based upon empowerment not coercion, and not fall victim to the paradigms of liberation theology; the roots of oppression must be pulled, not simply cut to grow again in different guises. George C. Marshall, the architect of the post-WWII plan, described it as a vehicle to combat “hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos.” Were he alive today, Marshall might relate that objective to the needs of Indian Country.

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