Media Contact: Office of the Secretary
For Immediate Release: July 4, 1968
Print PDF

Chairman Nakai, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is exciting to represent the Department of the Interior on this occasion. An event such as this can only happen once in a lifetime, and I am very pleased to share it with you. I have looked forward to the opportunity to become better acquainted.

I believe a Navajo must have originated the saying: "The first hundred years are the hardest." Nowhere in the United States ... and perhaps nowhere else in the world -- have a people faced challenge more energetically than have the Navajo in the years since 1868.

We are here to observe the One Hundredth Anniversary of the signing of a treaty between the Navajo Nation and the United States Government. Events prior to the treaty could have left the Navajos forever in despair. But you did not despair, you turned misfortune into a triumph of will to survive and grow.

What we are really observing here today is victory -- Navajo victory over adversity. Today you number more than 100,000 -- ten times or more than in 1868. Along with your growth today your lands are producing coal, oil, gas, uranium, crops and livestock, and supporting a flourishing and expanding tourist industry.

Irrigation has turned your desert areas green. Roads carrying school buses loaded with children wind through your valleys. Schools, hospitals, stores, motels, industries, new homes and growing communities dot the landscape. There are also the chapter houses, and in Window Rock, the seat of Navajo democratic government, the handsome Tribal Council building. Soon there is to be a tribal shopping center.

Horse-drawn wagons are almost gone, and pickup tracks are giving way to station wagons and passenger cars. Striking changes have taken place in the dress and self-assurance of the young adults. Your tribal leaders are forward-looking. They are educated and have an understanding both of the world and the needs of their people. I am greatly impressed with their earnestness and ability and the way they go about things.

You are mastering your own fate and shaping your own destiny. But how different it all was in the months and years immediately following the Iong Walk to Fort Sumner, where the treaty was signed a century ago.

In those days the relationships between the Federal Government and the Navajo people were more in the nature of supervisor and supervised, than the partnership that exists today. The lands of the reservation were stark and wild. There were no roads. There were no schools.

There were no hospitals or other medical services. There was no organized tribal political structure to help strengthen and unify the Navajo people. There were a few thousand people, and there were a few thousand head of sheep and that was about all.

Although the lean years followed, the Navajos not only survived, but grew stronger. Many of your young men joined the armed forces of the United States in wars against our national enemies.' ·More and more, the Navajos became linked with the growing American Nation, and today you are an important and prominent part of it.

The Navajos have seized upon one aspect of American life in particular. You have stressed the value of education. One Navajo leader of old said to his people:

"Education is the ladder. Climb it, my children."

The Navajo people have climbed high. In 1885 the Navajo agent reported a regular attendance of 33 pupils, an increase of nine over the preceding years Following World War II the Navajo Council sent a special delegation to see the Secretary of the Interior and Congressional committees in Washington to tell them that formal education was considered by the tribe to be its primary need.

The Navajos have been leaders among the Indian groups in their insistence upon educational opportunity for their children. Particularly in the Past 30 years, the demand for schools, and good ones, has been most insistent.

The Federal Government, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, responded with a vast program of school construction. Ten years ago there were thousands of Navajo youngsters who had no school to attend. Today this is no longer true. You have some of the finest schools to be found anywhere in this country. But fine buildings are not enough. We are now working with you to improve the quality of educational programs that will benefit the Navajo students.

We are greatly impressed with your Tribe's $10 million scholarship fund to help train future leaders, as well as your plans for a junior college.

Next to education, perhaps the most significant progress has been the building of roads for vehicular use in this vast area. Not too many years ago the best travel was over little more than trails by horse and wagon.

As a result of the Anderson-Udall Bill, paved roads were pushed across the reservation. Today the school bus, the Navajo driving his own car, the grocery delivery truck, and the visiting tourist are familiar sights.

President Johnson, this spring, sent a special message on Indian matters to Congress. He called attention to the still inadequate roads for the Navajo Reservation and asked Congress to appropriate more money. The new roads will help the Indian people keep their children at home instead of having to send them far away to boarding schools. New roads will also aid economic development of the area/and allow other citizens of this country to visit your reservation. There are many good things that other Americans can learn from you, the richness of your past your love of beauty and nature, your arts, your steadfastness and tranquility.

Within the next few years the Navajos will face a new challenge, not only to themselves but to all the people in the southwest. This reservation is the very hub of the Four Corners area, which has been singled out for economic development through Federal assistance. The Navajo Reservation within this region can become the prime area for industrial, commercial, agricultural and social achievement.

Some of the groundwork already has been laid for such growth, in the establishment of vast tribal enterprises such as the Navajo Tribal Utilities Authority and the Navajo Forest Products Industries. The latter enterprise, I understand, has turned back a large sum into the tribal coffer this year. This is real progress -- and I am sure it is only the beginning.

The Navajo Tribe has also established industrial parks at Shiprock, and Fort Defiance. No less than 12 major private industries -- chiefly producers of coal, oil, gas and uranium -- are already contributing to the economic growth and sufficiency of the tribe.

But still there is high unemployment across the reservation. Even though several thousand jobs have been created by new industries, still there is poverty and the average educational level is lower than it is for the Nation as a whole. Resources are producing less revenue for the tribe than they might if they were more fully developed.

We are all interested in helping you make a better life for yourselves and your children. This administration believes that .you must be free to choose your own path of development, to find your own most satisfactory way of life with dignity and self-respect. We are pledged to help without coercion.

Today as we hail this One Hundredth Anniversary, we can look forward to another century of even greater progress, with more benefits to all of the Navajo population.

The ability to shape future events rather than rely on achievements is the quality that enables a race or a Nation to survive be able to adjust to change, to grow with charge, is the quality that distinguishes the "doers" from the followers." Americans are confident that the Navajo will continue to make new history. It is with deep respect and admiration that I salute you on your 100th Anniversary.