



Tribal Nations Presence Felt During 116th Congress Swearing-In

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

Over the course of the first week of the New Year, tribal leaders throughout Indian Country journeyed to our nation's capital to witness the swearing-in of the historic 116th Congress. For Indian Country, it could not be more monumental than the election of the first two Native American women in the Nation's history to serve in Congress. Representatives Debra Haaland (NM-1, Laguna Pueblo) and Sharice Davids (KS-3, Ho-Chunk Nation) will join Representatives Tom Cole (OK-4, Chickasaw Nation) and Markwayne Mullin (OK-2, Cherokee Nation) as the only enrolled tribal members serving in Congress.

Many Tribal leaders and representatives witnessed the swearing-in of our friends from the Senate and House. I met with newly-elected Senator Kevin Cramer (ND) shortly after his swearing-in, as well as incumbent Senator Jon Tester (MT). Tribal leaders traveled to Washington to meet, for the first time, the freshman class of the 116th Congress, including over 100 new members of the House of Representatives. We were able to provide a pertinent reminder of Native Americans' role in shaping this democracy and our growing presence on Capitol Hill.

The swearing-in events concluded with a special reception at National Indian Gaming Association's D.C. office honoring Representatives Haaland and Davids. Many tribal leaders in attendance stated that Indian Country stands ready to do the work necessary to protect our treaty rights and sovereignty. They also expressed the need for a continued partnership with the Administration and Congress, ending the day on an optimistic note with several Congressional visitors stating their intention to advance Indian Country's key issues this legislative term. Representatives Betty McCollum (MN-4), Gwen Moore (WI-4), Norma Torres (CA-35), and newly-elected Xochitl Torres Small (NM-2),



Indian Country came together to celebrate the first two Native American women, Representatives Debra Haaland (NM-1, Laguna Pueblo) and Sharice Davids (KS-3, Ho-Chunk Nation) in the Nation's history to serve in Congress at their reception at the Hyatt Regency in Washington, D.C. It was hosted by over 20 tribes and tribal organizations, including the National Indian Gaming Association.

attended the reception to congratulate their new colleagues.

A special thank you is owed to the Mescalero Apache and Poarch Band Creek of Indians who helped co-sponsor several events for Representatives Haaland and Davids, as well as the Emily's List reception at the National Indian Gaming Association, honoring these two Congresswomen.

The evening concluded with a celebratory reception for our Native Congresswomen and native veterans at the Hyatt Regency, hosted by over 20 tribes and tribal organizations, including the National Indian Gaming Association. Of the celebrities sighted, Mark Ruffalo, an advocate for Indian Country, expressed his excitement and gratitude for being invited to take part in the night's festivities with all of the tribal citizens and advocates present. Other presenters included Senator Chuck Schumer (NY) and Speaker Nancy Pelosi (CA-12) who joined their colleagues voicing support for the continuing collaboration between political parties to reach common ground on pressing tribal concerns.

On January 4th, the National Indian Gaming Association

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hosted a one-day meeting on the topics of tribal sovereignty and trust responsibility, taxation, and economic development in the 116th Congress. This important meeting was held at a time when many federal agencies serving Indian Country were shut down due to the 2019 Budget impasse.

The meeting was opened with a message of unity and hope. Indian Country has never been more poised to have our voices heard now that we have four Native Americans serving in Congress. Already, tribal issues are receiving unprecedented mainstream media coverage due to the election of our Indian sisters, Deb Haaland, and Sharice Davids. Tribal leaders in attendance joined with me to deliver messages to those in attendance. While there are many economic challenges ahead,

our friends in the Senate and House will keep their attention on protecting federally funded tribal programs and respecting the federal trust relationship.

As Indian Country begins the 116th Congress, we have never been more united and poised to implement much-needed policy changes at the federal level. Tribal leaders departed D.C. knowing that the newly-elected Representatives to the 116th Congress will be strong advocates on behalf of Indian Country. ♣

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