

Chief RedCloud's Descendant Visits the Nation's Capital

My direct ancestor, Chief RedCloud, went to Washington, D.C. after signing the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 that settled RedCloud's War and established the Great Sioux Nation. Over the years, my other ancestors (Chief Jack RedCloud, Chief James RedCloud, Chief Edgar RedCloud and Chief Oliver RedCloud) also traveled to the Nation's capital to fight for the rights of Native Americans. Last week, I followed in the footsteps of my ancestors and met with federal government officials.

My ancestors fought for our sacred land, which remains an issue today, notwithstanding the 1868 Treaty. Yes, it may come as a surprise to most Americans that 150 years ago, after years of battles, the U.S. government settled the land disputes with the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota Sioux Tribes to ensure Tribal ownership of the Black Hills. No sooner was the ink dry on the Treaty, the Black Hills were taken from us and given to gold prospectors. Sorry for the digression, but our history with the United States government continues to haunt us.

In my meetings last week in Washington, D.C., I was struck by how welcoming and attentive people were to me. While I came in peace, my message was direct and forceful. Native Americans living in rural America are being left behind in today's digital age.

In the 1800s, my ancestors fought for land rights. Today, our battle is for the basic necessities of housing, food, education, communications and Internet access. It may surprise you to learn that the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is larger than the state of Rhode Island. Yet we have only a few cell towers to serve the entire reservation whereas Rhode Island has more than 1,000 cell towers.

Back home, Tribal residents suffer with no or spotty coverage on roads and homes and huddle around an Internet Library for the only free Wi-Fi service on our Reservation. As I walked around Congress, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and other areas of Washington, D.C. last week, I witnessed the digital age -- people glued to their phones and computers, presumably conducting business and communicating with loved ones. I thought, if only our people had the same access to information and communications, then maybe we would be able to realize the American dream and not suffer from chronic unemployment, devastating poverty and other third world living conditions. Surely, my message of inclusion and access to essential broadband services would be well received and supported by our Nation's leaders, right?

My first stop was the office of FCC Chairman Pai, who is the Nation's top communications leader. On the FCC web page, it prominently states "Bridging The Digital Divide For All Americans," which surely includes the Nation's first Americans, *e.g.*, Native Americans. In fact, Chairman Pai himself states, "My number one priority has been closing the digital divide and bringing the benefits of the Internet age for all Americans." I applaud Chairman Pai's message of inclusion and closing the digital divide, which is "wide" on many Tribal lands.

Chairman Pai has pursued an open market approach with regulatory incentives to broadband deployment. This approach has largely worked resulting in 93.5% of the population of the U.S. having access to fixed broadband service and 99.8% of the population of the U.S. having access to mobile broadband service. (*See FCC 2019 Broadband Deployment Report.*) At the same time, the FCC has recognized broadband service deployment "on certain Tribal lands lags deployment in other geographic areas." In fact, the data shows that only 45.4% of the population in rural Tribal lands have access to fixed and mobile broadband service. Can you imagine if that was the case in urban America? It would be a national crisis and likely result in the country spiraling into an economic crisis. Welcome to everyday life for many people in Indian country.

I am encouraged, however, by Chairman Pai's focus on the digital divide. I am also encouraged by the work being done on many Reservations to bridge the digital divide. My Pine Ridge Indian Reservation has an Internet Library and Technology Center that provides Tribal residents with free access to computers, the Internet and digital literacy training. This would not be possible but for the broadband regulatory policies of Chairman Pai and the FCC, which has allowed a company, like Native American Telecom – Pine Ridge, LLC, to serve the broadband and digital literacy needs of residents of the Pine Ridge Indian reservation.

I am committed to working with the FCC to ensure that "no Indian is left behind." I urge regulators and legislators to consult with each Tribe and implement the necessary laws, rules, and policies to bridge the digital divide in Indian Country. I also urge federal and state authorities to recognize that access is only one component of solving the digital divide. Equally important is affordability and the Lifeline program, which makes telephone and Internet service affordable for many residents of Tribal lands.

Recently, Tribal interested parties challenged an FCC Order in court that would have limited the availability of Lifeline service. We won this legal challenge, but our work is not done and we need to continue to work cooperatively to establish a Lifeline program that works for everyone. For example, I completely agree with Chairman Pai's efforts to eliminate fraud, waste and abuse within the Lifeline program and establish a National Verifier to ensure that only eligible consumers obtain valuable Lifeline discounts. But, I do not agree with implementing new rules, processes and procedures without regard for the impact on low-income consumers. A National Verifier that cannot verify because of lack of access to eligibility databases may eliminate fraud, waste and abuse but it does so at the expense of eligible residents of Tribal lands not having access to Lifeline service. Minimum standards for Lifeline service are important, but if the standards are too high or too burdensome, then the result may be less Lifeline service not better Lifeline service. Let's temporarily halt some of these Lifeline reforms and make sure we get everything right before blindly making changes that could harm the beneficiaries of the Lifeline program – low income consumers.

We can solve all of these problems – access to broadband service and affordability of service – by working together. Like my ancestors, I am willing to take the road less traveled to ensure that Native Americans have access to the same services available to all Americans and realize the American dream.

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