

Donald Trump's Long History of Clashes with Native Americans

Washington Post

By Shawn Boburg

July 25, 2016

Donald Trump claimed that Indian reservations had fallen under mob control. He secretly paid for more than \$1 million in ads that portrayed members of a tribe in Upstate New York as cocaine traffickers and career criminals. And he suggested in testimony and in media appearances that dark-skinned Native Americans in Connecticut were faking their ancestry.

“I think I might have more Indian blood than a lot of the so-called Indians that are trying to open up the reservations,” Trump said during a 1993 radio interview with shock jock Don Imus.

Trump's harsh rhetoric on Native Americans was part of his aggressive war on the expanding Native American casino industry during the 1990s, which posed a threat to his gambling empire. The racially tinged remarks and broad-brush characterizations that Trump employed against Indian tribes for over a decade provided an early glimpse of the kind of incendiary language that he would use about racial and ethnic groups in the 2016 presidential campaign.

The GOP nominee has portrayed Mexican immigrants as rapists and murderers, accused a Latino federal judge of bias because of his ancestry, and suggested that most American Muslims are harboring terrorists. As for Native Americans, the Republican nominee has repeatedly mocked Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren's claim of Cherokee ancestry by referring to her as “Pocahontas” while some of his rally crowds have erupted in war whoops.

At a town hall in Roanoke, Va., on Monday, Trump called her “Pocahontas” again and said that Warren “hasn't done anything. She is the worst senator in the U.S. Senate. You know, she's got a fresh mouth, other than that she's got nothing going. She has done nothing in the U.S. Senate.”

His battles with Indian casinos also reveal Trump's contradictions: Even as he was bashing the industry publicly, Trump was quietly trying to strike partnerships with some tribes, records show. In one case, he lobbied a California tribe in person in an unsuccessful attempt to win the right to manage its planned casino.

A Trump spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment about his history with Native Americans.

Native Americans take offense

When Trump began clashing with Native American tribes, the stakes for him were huge. He had benefited from Atlantic City's near-monopoly on East Coast gambling until a change in federal law in 1988 opened the door to more tribal casinos. Trump owned two casinos and opened a

third in 1990. In the early 1990s, just as the casinos were emerging from bankruptcy, federal lawmakers were working out how to regulate the fledgling Indian gaming industry.

In response, Trump undertook a massive lobbying effort against Indian gaming — complete with a litany of explosive and unfounded allegations.

During the June 18, 1993, interview with Imus, for example, the host opened the program by asking about plans by a “bunch of these drunken injuns” to open a casino in New Jersey.

“A lot of these reservations are being, in some people’s opinion, at least to a certain extent, run by organized crime and organized crime elements,” Trump responded. “There’s no protection. There’s no anything. And it’s become a joke.”

Imus mentioned a Connecticut tribe that had opened the successful Foxwoods casino in 1991, saying that their members looked like black basketball star Michael Jordan.

“I think if you’ve ever been up there, you would truly say that these are not Indians,” Trump responded. “One of them was telling me his name is Chief Running Water Sitting Bull, and I said, ‘That’s a long name.’ He said, ‘Well, just call me Ricky Sanders.’”

The comments offended Native Americans across the country, said Rick Hill, who at the time was chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association, a nonprofit group that lobbied government officials on behalf of tribes.

“The same thing goes through my head now when I hear him,” Hill said. “It’s just not appropriate; it’s demeaning and it’s racist.”

Hill’s group filed a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission shortly after the 1993 interview asking for an investigation into what it called “obscene, indecent and profane racial slurs against Native Americans and African Americans,” FCC records show. The FCC declined to take action because its authority to regulate speech was limited, “as deplorable or offensive as certain remarks may be,” an official wrote in a letter to the group.

What Trump did not mention during the Imus interview was that he had been trying to partner with a tribe near Palm Springs, Calif. Trump personally called the chairman of the Agua Caliente band of the Cahuilla Indians and visited the tribe’s administrative offices in an unsuccessful attempt to manage the tribe’s proposed casino, according to a statement the chairman later gave to federal lawmakers. The tribe chose to partner with another casino operator.

‘He fears nothing’

Later that year, Trump was joined by his longtime lobbyist and adviser Roger Stone on a trip to Capitol Hill, where the mogul was set to testify on Indian gaming.

“We’re in the car on the way and he says, ‘You know, these people sure don’t look like Indians to me,’ ” Stone recalled in an interview.

“I really wouldn’t say that at the hearing,” Stone recalled telling Trump in the car. “I think it would be counterproductive.”

“Got it,” Trump replied, according to Stone.

Trump had arrived late to the hearing. The chamber was packed with people, including a class of first-graders whose school was built with Indian casino revenues. Trump stood at the back of Room 1324 of the Longworth House Building, scribbling in the margins of a seven-page speech, as top officials from the FBI and Department of Justice shot down one of his previous statements.

“The Department of Justice believes to date there has not been widespread or successful effort by organized crime to infiltrate Indian gaming operations,” said Laurence A. Urgenson, an acting deputy assistant attorney general.

Gay Kingman-Wapato, an Indian gaming proponent who attended the hearing, was watching Trump closely.

“I could see his face getting redder and redder,” she recalled.

When it was Trump’s turn to speak, he abandoned his script, telling lawmakers that he had decided that it was “very boring” and “politically correct.” His speech had included conciliatory language and professed uncertainty about the mob’s alleged infiltration.

Instead, Trump told lawmakers that organized crime “is rampant — I don’t mean a little bit — is rampant on Indian reservations.” He predicted “one of the biggest scandals since Al Capone.” Then came the line that many Native Americans would remember for decades: that the federally recognized Connecticut tribe that owned Foxwoods — the Mashantucket Pequots — did not look like real Indians.

“The air came out of the room,” said former New Jersey senator Robert Torricelli, a Democrat who had invited Trump to testify and was sitting next to him. “I think Donald was defending his industry. The cause was appropriate. But his use of language was not necessarily appropriate. It is very similar to what we are seeing today.”

George Miller, a Democratic congressman from California who sparred with Trump during the hearing, said in an interview that it was the most “irresponsible” testimony he had heard during his 40 years in Congress.

To get federal recognition, a tribe must submit extensive documentation to the Bureau of Indian Affairs showing that it meets seven criteria. Those include evidence that the group has

maintained political influence over its members as an autonomous group since historical times and that members descend from a historical Indian tribe. The process can take decades.

In explaining Trump's remark, Stone noted that many Eastern tribes have intermarried with African Americans going back generations. "The people you meet are Native Americans, but they're also black," he said.

Trump knew the reaction he would get, Stone said. So why did Trump say it?

"Because first of all, he's bold," Stone said. "He's brazen. He fears nothing. And it's how he really felt."

Secret anti-Indian ad campaign

In 2000, when New York was considering expanding Native American casinos in the Catskill Mountains, a series of TV, newspaper and radio ads popped up in the state accusing the Mohawk Indian tribe of having long criminal records and ties to the mob. The ads showed pictures of cocaine lines and syringes and asked: "Are these the new neighbors we want?"

As far as the public knew, the ads were sponsored by a newly formed group called the Institute for Law and Safety. The group claimed that it was funded by 12,000 "grass-roots, pro-family" donors.

But in reality, it was bankrolled by Trump's casino company. Stone asked a friend to pose as the group's leader, but Stone designed the ads and Trump signed off on them. "Roger, this could be good!" Trump scrawled on a proof of the ad with the cocaine lines and syringes, according to documents first reported last month by the Los Angeles Times. Another ad warned of the ills that casino gambling would bring to the community: "increased crime, broken families, bankruptcies, and in the case of the Mohawks, violence." Trump paid more than \$1 million for the campaign.

Trump and Stone never reported the ad spending as a lobbying effort, as state law required, and acknowledged their role only after regulators launched an investigation. In a deposition, Stone told regulators that the only reason the organization was set up was to hide Trump's involvement because a "pro-family" group would have more credibility with the public. The state lobbying commission imposed its largest-ever civil penalty — a \$250,000 fine — and Trump and his associates agreed to issue a public apology.

Even as he was warning of the dangers of Indian gambling in Upstate New York, Trump pushed for an Indian casino in nearby Connecticut, according to court records. Trump had a stake in the project, having struck a partnership with the Paucatuck Indians — a tribe that had not been recognized by the federal government.

Under a 1997 pact, Trump had agreed to pay for the costly process of documenting the tribe's lineage so it could get the federal approval needed to operate a casino. In exchange, the tribe agreed to give Trump a management fee based on a percentage of the future casino's revenues.

Agnes Cuna, who was chairwoman of the tribe, said she was aware of Trump's prior statements about Native Americans.

"It doesn't bother me," she said, adding that she came away liking Trump after their limited interaction. "If I held everyone accountable for every word they said, I wouldn't have a life."

The tribe won recognition in 2002, but there was a hitch. The BIA ruled that the Paucatucks were part of another Connecticut tribe, the Eastern Pequots, also seeking recognition. The Eastern Pequots had their own plans for a casino with a different builder. The federal ruling meant that the combined tribal leadership had to choose between Trump and the other developer.

Among those casting a vote was Joseph Perry, a former high-ranking state police commander in Connecticut and a member of the Eastern Pequots. In 1992, Perry had become the first nonwhite officer to lead the Connecticut State Police. He retired and has been on the Eastern Pequot tribal council since 1997.

When it came time to choose a developer in 2002, Perry remembered Trump's comments before Congress nearly a decade earlier. "It was a factor in my mind," Perry said. "What do Native Americans look like? . . . Some are dark-skinned like myself. We don't all look alike." The combined council voted to go with the other developer.

Trump sued the tribe, and they reached an out-of-court settlement. Perry would not disclose the details other than to say that it involved no payments to Trump. The tribe's casino deal stalled because the federal government reversed its decision on recognition in 2005 after an appeal.

Trump, meanwhile, was slow paying the lobbyists he hired to get the tribe's recognition before the deal fell through. Lobbyist Ronald Platt said he visited him shortly after the tribe initially got recognition to collect more than \$600,000 due to the firm.

"It should be so prestigious to represent me that you should do it for free," Trump responded, according to Platt.

Platt answered with an expletive. Trump then picked up a yellow legal pad, slammed it onto a table and stormed out of the room, Platt said. Platt held firm and eventually left the office with a check that he deposited as soon as could — before Trump could change his mind.

Trump said later that he did not remember Platt, but he told the New York Times: "If I held back payment, it was probably because he did a lousy job."

Source: Washingtonpost.com