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INDIAN TRIBES SAY AID COMES ONLY TO THOSE WHO DONATE TO DEMOCRATS

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By Don Van Natta Jr.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 16— Centuries of hardscrabble history have taught some American Indians that the Federal Government will always take more than it gives. In recent weeks, however, those suspicions have been at least partly turned on their head.

Leaders of impoverished tribes now say they believe the Government will help Indians -- but only those Indians who have helped the Democratic Party, preferably in the form of six-figure campaign contributions.

"If you have money, you get a meeting and you get what you want," said George Newago, the chairman of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, one of the poorer tribes whose proposal for a casino was rejected by the Interior Department in 1995. "If you don't have any money, you might as well hit the pavement and start walking."

Last week, Attorney General Janet Reno began a 90-day inquiry of Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt's role in denying the Chippewa's Wisconsin casino application because tribes who successfully opposed the gambling hall hired lobbyists, who met with Clinton Administration officials and later gave \$286,000 in contributions to the Democratic Party.

The facts of the much-publicized case have resonated all over Indian country, where many leaders say they have concluded that political donations buy more than mere access. Now, the leaders suspect that the most sinister reasons lurk behind Government decisions that have gone against them.

For example, a Washington state tribe has accused the Interior Department of approving a casino application for a rival tribe because, they say, the development company has close ties to a Boston developer who is a friend of President Clinton.

The developer, Richard Friedman, had invited Mr. Clinton to stay at his 20-acre estate on Martha's Vineyard last summer, as he had in some previous summers. While the First Family was staying at Mr. Friedman's house, Mr. Babbitt approved an application by the Kalispel Tribe to develop a casino on a site off its reservation in metropolitan Spokane, Wash.

The timing was not a coincidence, according to the leaders of the Spokane tribe, who say they believe Mr. Babbitt approved the proposal because Mr. Friedman is a partner with the casino's developer, Carnival Hotels and Casinos, in another Indian casino proposed in Massachusetts.

In a recent letter to Attorney General Janet Reno, a leader of the Spokane tribe asked the Justice Department to investigate "improper political influence" in the case. "Frankly, the Tribe is alarmed at the evidence that political influence may play such a heavy role in the Interior Department's processing of applications," David C. Wynecoop Jr., tribal council member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians, wrote in the Nov. 6 letter to Ms. Reno.

There is no evidence, however, that Mr. Friedman is a partner in the Kalispels' casino project. A spokeswoman for Carnival adamantly denied that Mr. Friedman is a partner in its proposed casino on the Kalispel reservation.

Mr. Friedman, who was unavailable for comment, is the developer of another proposed Carnival casino with a tribe in Massachusetts, the spokeswoman said. And Interior Department spokespeople denied that political connections had anything to do with its decision in Washington state.

Although most of the attention in the 1996 campaign finance investigations focused on the Democrats' aggressive effort to raise political donations from Asian Americans, the Democratic Party also had a little-known, well-coordinated plan that raised \$2 million from Indian tribes flush with gaming profits and often in need of help from the Clinton Administration.

In an interview, the new chief of the Bureau of Indian Affairs acknowledged that many Indians suspect that contributions have bought favorable results from the Clinton Administration.

"And I think that is too bad," said Kevin Gover, a New Mexico lawyer who was sworn in last Wednesday as assistant Interior Secretary for Indian Affairs. "But I don't think it is true."

Each of the five tribes that contributed the most to the Democrats in 1995 and 1996 had sought a favorable ruling from the Administration. In some cases, their requests were granted, though Government officials say that the contributions had nothing to do with any official decision.

Dozens of tribes have sought permission to open casinos, but only the Interior Department and the governors of states can grant that.

America's wealthiest tribe, the Mashantucket Pequot Nation of southeastern Connecticut, was granted permission to take 165 acres into trust to expand the parking lot at the Foxwoods Resort Casino. Despite vehement opposition from three local towns, the Interior Department approved the Pequots' application on May 22, 1996.

Six days later, the Pequots gave \$75,000 to the Democratic National Committee. And in the subsequent six months, the tribe gave an additional \$130,000 to Democratic committees.

Asked if there was a link between the tribe's campaign contributions and the Interior Department decision, Arthur Henick, the tribal spokesman, said, "Absolutely not." Mr. Henick said that representatives in the tribe's Washington office discussed the tribe's application with "a number of Administration officials," but he said he did not know which ones.

In 1996, the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribe of Oklahoma gave \$107,000 to the Democrats in hopes that the support would persuade the Government to return 7,000 acres of the tribe's sacred land. The contribution bought two tribal leaders a lunch with President Clinton in the Blue Room, but they are still waiting for their land to be returned.

"In 1994 and 1995, we made two dozen trips to Washington, but no one listened to us," said Rick Grellner, the tribe's lawyer. "But after we gave \$100,000, we sat down for lunch with the President. We were led to believe that if you participated in a positive fashion, your issues would be heard."

Mr. Grellner said that the tribe made a mistake by wiring \$87,671.74, the entire tribal welfare fund that was to be used for heating bills and burial plots, to the Democratic National Committee in one lump sum.

"In order to get what you want, you don't empty the bank vault after the first meeting just because you felt good about it," he said. "It was everything they had. That was the tribe's mistake. You have to keep feeding the beast."

Indians have always been loyal Democratic supporters, but for years they could only deliver votes, not campaign contributions. Since the multibillion-dollar Indian gaming boom began in the late 1980's, though, some tribes have given six-figure campaign contributions to the Democrats and Republicans, playing the big-time Washington political game with skill.

Richard A. Hayward, the chairman of the Mashantucket Pequots in Connecticut, turned up on President Clinton's telephone call list in October 1994. Mr. Hayward, whose tribe's Foxwoods Resort Casino grosses \$1 million a day, spoke for 12 minutes with Mr. Clinton, who had called seeking campaign contributions from the White House residential quarters.

Just as the fund-raiser John Huang was hired by the Democratic committee to solicit contributions from Asian-Americans, several other Democratic committee officials spent a majority of their time raising money from Indians and bringing their concerns directly to senior Administration officials.

The generous contributions helped tribal leaders from the wealthiest, most generous tribes win access to the Administration. The leaders attended numerous meetings in Washington with Administration officials, including Mr. Babbitt and the White House deputy chief of staff, Harold M. Ickes. Much of it was coordinated by the Democratic National Committee's finance division.

According to a series of memos obtained by The New York Times, the agenda of the tribes was discussed by White House political aides and Democratic campaign officials. In 1995 and 1996, Administration officials, including Mr. Babbitt and Mr. Ickes, and Democratic Party leaders courted wealthy tribal leaders at White House coffees and intimate meetings. President Clinton was the host of a coffee on Feb. 20, 1996, that was attended by leaders from four Indian tribes that had contributed generously to the Democrats.

Throughout the campaign, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Donald L. Fowler, was an active advocate for the Indian tribes that had contributed generously to the Democrats. Mr. Fowler wrote letters and placed calls to Administration officials on behalf of several generous Indian tribes that were seeking favorable decisions from the Government. He also received numerous memos from finance staff members at the party, outlining the needs and priorities of tribal leaders.

For example, on April 8, 1996, Mr. Fowler wrote to Robert E. Rubin, Secretary of Treasury, asking his department to reconsider its decision that employees of Indian tribes are ineligible to participate in Section 401(k) retirement savings programs.

The letter clearly made aides to Mr. Rubin nervous, according to an internal Treasury Department memo. The aides decided it would be more appropriate for Mr. Rubin's chief of staff to respond to an inquiry from the Democratic Party chairman. They told Mr. Fowler that the matter was under review.

In an interview, Mr. Fowler said, "At no time did I ever do anything on behalf of a tribe as a condition of receiving a contribution."

Mr. Fowler acknowledged that he fought hard for the interests of Indians. "I am guilty of being interested in how Native Americans voted in 1996," he said. To that end, Mr. Fowler continued, "requests were made on behalf of contributors."

"But that is an entirely different matter," he said. "That does not mean we were doing any of this as a condition of a contribution."

But Michael C. Copperthite, a campaign consultant and former Democratic fund-raiser who has advised several poor Indian tribes, said that the Democrats purposefully too aim at tribes, making promises at times that they knew they could not keep.

"What the Democrats did was totally offensive," Mr. Copperthite said. "I believe that operatives within the Clinton-Gore re-election committee and the D.N.C. took advantage of many poverty stricken American Indians who have been shut out of the process for so long. Even if they did not deliver, they gave a wink and a nod and made them believe they would. Either way, it's wrong."

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